

House churches are more satisfying to attendees than are conventional churches
Barna Report, January 8, 2007
Summary and reflections posted by Bob Young (December 2009)

It has been almost three years since the report with the above title was published by the Barna Group. The title suggests that the house church model provides a useful alternative for how we do church, and how we make an impact in our communities and in the lives of those who live next door to us in our neighborhoods.

Restoration churches have been slow to adopt any continuing house church model. Some church planting efforts have use house churches to develop interest and a core group in the early stages, but usually revert to a larger assembly model characterized by a “public launch”.

With the continuing growth of house churches across the country and around the world, it is imperative that we carefully analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the house church model and try to understand if it is a workable model under any circumstances, and how we might use it in our efforts to take Christ to a lost work.

House churches: What are we talking about?

According to the Barna research, the average size of a house church is 20 people; in the home churches that include children, there is an average of about seven children under the age of 18 involved. The rapid growth in house church activity is evident in the fact that half of the people (54%) currently engaged in an independent home fellowship have been participating for less than three months. In total, three out of every four house church participants (75%) have been active in their current gathering for a year or less. One out of every five adults has been in their house church for three years or more.

The research found that two types of people are attracted to house churches. The older participants, largely drawn from the Boomer population, are devout Christians who are seeking a deeper and more intense experience with God and other believers. The other substantial segment is young adults who are interested in faith and spirituality, but have little interest in the traditional forms of church. Their quest is largely one of escaping outdated structures and institutions.

What do House churches do: what do they look like?

The Barna research provided a profile of what takes place in the typical house church.

Most house churches (80%) meet every week, while 11% meet on a monthly basis. The most common meeting days are Wednesday (27%) and Sunday (25%), while one out of every five (20%) varies the days of the week on which they meet.

The typical house church gathering lasts for about two hours. Only 7% meet for less than an hour, on average, while only 9% usually stay together for more than three hours at a time.

While most conventional churches follow the same format week after week, four of every ten house churches (38%) say that the format they follow varies from meeting to meeting. House church gatherings report the following practices:

- 93% have spoken prayer during their meetings
- 90% read from the Bible
- 89% spend time serving people outside of their group
- 87% devote time to sharing personal needs or experiences
- 85% spend time eating and talking before or after the meeting
- 83% discuss the teaching provided
- 76% have a formal teaching time
- 70% incorporate music or singing
- 58% have presentation or special word delivered
- 52% take an offering from participants that is given to ministries
- 51% share communion
- 41% watch a video presentation as part of the learning experience

Most house churches are family-oriented. Two-thirds of house churches (64%) have children involved. Those churches are divided evenly between those who have the adults and children together throughout the meeting (41%) and those who keep them separated (38%). The remaining churches divide their time between having everyone together and having time when the children and adults are separated.

Why Churches of Christ Have Been Slow to Adopt the Model

We have defined “church” as assembly, often limited to or focused (almost exclusively) on Sunday morning assembly.

We have defined Christians as those who attend that assembly. Thus church attendance is the essence of Christianity and is all that is necessary to maintain good standing.

We have not understood how our model of church leadership would function in a house church model with multiple assemblies.

We have not understood who would provide leadership in the small groups.

We have not understood whether a group of house churches are independent churches or together comprise a larger “congregation”.

Levels of Satisfaction

Perhaps the most compelling insight from the national study was an evaluation of the levels of satisfaction of those who attend a house church compared with the views of adults who attend a conventional local church. Four aspects of people's church experience were gauged. Overall, people attending a house church were significantly more likely to be "completely satisfied" with their experience in each of the four dimensions examined.

Two-thirds of house church attenders (68%) were "completely satisfied" with the leadership of their church, compared to only half of those attending a conventional church (49%).

Two-thirds of the house church adherents (66%) were "completely satisfied" with the faith commitment of the people involved in their gathering. In contrast, only four out of ten people attending a conventional church (40%) were similarly satisfied with the faith commitment of the people in their congregation.

Three out of five house church adults (61%) were "completely satisfied" with the level of community and personal connectedness they experience, compared to only two out of five adults who are involved in a conventional church (41%).

A majority of those in a house (59%) said they were "completely satisfied" with the spiritual depth they experience in their house church setting. In contrast, a minority of the adults involved in a conventional church were "completely satisfied" (46%).

Still in Process

The survey also indicated that there is likely to be more change in the house church environment in the years to come. The ideas of worshipping in homes rather than church buildings, and being led by group members rather than religious professionals, are new to most Americans. The survey suggested that many people are just beginning to think about, and get comfortable with, the idea of homes being the dominant place for shared faith experiences. Currently, just four out of every ten regular house church attenders (42%) rely exclusively upon a house church as their primary "church" experience. Many of the others - including a large proportion that has been involved for just a few months - are checking out the approach before they shift their allegiance from a conventional to a house church - if they make the shift at all. Another indication of the nascent state of the house church movement in the U.S. is people's perception regarding the biblical grounds for meeting in homes. Among adults who consider themselves to be Christian and who do not attend a house church, six out of ten (57%) believe that attending a house church instead of a conventional church satisfies the biblical command to be part of a spiritual community that follows Jesus Christ. Overall, just one out of five conventionally-churched adults (19%) dismissed the house church approach as unbiblical.

Changing the Church

George Barna said that the results indicate that the biggest obstacle to the growth of the house church movement is not theological but cultural.

"Americans are emotionally open to belonging to a house church, and surprisingly few have any real objections to others joining such a community of faith," explained the author of three-dozen books on faith in America. "But the main deterrent to house church growth is that most people are spiritually complacent; they are not looking to upgrade their spiritual experience. Compared to conventional church attenders, house church adherents are much more likely to say that they have experienced faith-driven transformation, to prioritize their relationship with God, and to desire a more fulfilling community of faith.

"Those who attend a conventional church are generally content to show up and accept whatever their church has on the agenda; they place the responsibility for their spiritual growth on the shoulders of the church," according to Barna. "We found that most conventional churchgoers have no desire to help improve their congregation's ministry, nor do they feel a need to increase their personal spiritual responsibility.

"On the other hand," he continued, "the intimacy and shared responsibility found in most house churches requires each participant to be more serious about their faith development. Clearly, the house church experience is not for everyone."