

Houses that change the world

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This is a pre-publication version of this book. Editing and polishing will be done later. At this stage, I am kindly asking for informed and helpful input into this subject. Thank you very much for your involvement. Please do send your comments, critique or constructive ideas to one of the following contacts:

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“To be honest, I have given up on all those new church fads and Christian waves. But this thing about housechurches excites me deep down. I have hoped for this type of church to become a reality all my Christian life. I can’t believe it might come true! I am so excited I could cry.”

Computer Programmer, Switzerland

“This might actually work!”
Pharmacist, Switzerland

“Something simple, yet dynamic. That is what I have always hoped the church to be.”

Medical Doctor, Switzerland

“I have been 40 years in ministry. I feel I have climbed the ladder. Now I realize that it has been standing against the wrong wall.”

Mission leader, India

“This is exactly the type of church I have seen in action.”

Woman, Mongolia

“I am very excited about this type of housechurch.”

Pastor, Mongolia

Too good to be true?

Being brought up in “Christian” Germany with churches everywhere, I have always felt that there must be something exciting about the Church which Jesus started and about which I read in the New Testament - but somehow I have yet to discover what it is. I dreamed - together with many friends and colleagues, of a church, that is as simple as One-Two-Three, yet is dynamic; an explosive thing, able to turn the world and a neighbourhood upside down. The church as a supernatural invention; endowed with God’s gift of immortality; the way to disciple each other, and to transfer the life of Jesus to each other. An experience of grace and grapes, love and laughter, joy and jellybeans, forgiveness and fun, power and - yes, why not, paper. A church, which does not need much finances, rhetoric, control and manipulation, which can do without powerful and charismatic heroes, which is non-religious at heart, which can thrill people to the core, make them loose their head for joy, and simply teach us The Way to live. The church which not only has a message, but is the message; which spreads like an unstoppable virus, infects whatever it touches, and ultimately covers the Earth with the glory and knowledge of God. It’s power stems from it’s inventor, who has equipped it with the most genius spiritual genetical code - a sort of heavenly DNA, which allows it to transfer and reproduce Kingdom values from Heaven to Earth, and transform not only water into wine, but atheists into fascinated apostles, prostitutes into prophetesses, terrorists into teachers, pimps into pastors, and dignified village elders into beaming evangelists in the process. It is like a spiritual family - organic, not organized, relational, not formal; it has a persecution-proof structure, matures under tears, multiplies under pressure, grows under the carpet, flourishes in the desert, sees in the dark, and thrives on chaos. A church that can multiply like two fish and five breads in the Hands of Jesus, were the fathers turn their hearts to the sons and the

sons their hearts to the fathers, were it's people are it's resources, and which has only one name to brag about, the Lamb of God.

Why and for whom this book was written

This booklet is the product of many people in many countries, and draws on the learning experiences of a wide variety of servants of God. Not only have I physically been writing the notes for it over the last 2 years in Colombia, USA, Germany, Switzerland, England, Sudan, Egypt, Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Dubai, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Korea, China and Mongolia, but I have been able to discuss these issues with numerous Pastors and Missionaries and Christian Leaders. Most important of all, I wanted to listen intently to normal Christians and their dreams and experiences. I am thankful for all those inspiring moments, visits, listening to stories, having discussions, drinking tea. And I am also inspired by a host of valuable books and other materials; they are simply too numerous to mention.

Jesus has given us the commission to go and make disciples of all nations. It is the growing conviction of many Christians around the world, that this will only be ever achieved by having a church - the shopping window of God - in walking distance of every person on the globe. The church - the secret and powerful society of the redeemed - must again become the place where people can literally see the Body of Christ, where his glory is revealed in the most practical of all terms - hands on, down to earth, right next door, unable to overlook or ignore, living every day amongst us. The process to move towards the goal of whole nations - countries and people groups and regions - being discipled by a mass dispersion of the presence of Christ has come to be known as "Saturation Church Planting," the process which God seems to choose in nation after nation to mobilize all his people to work together towards that ultimate goal. The word saturation means to "fill to the brim", to make full of, to reach a critical mass. God is the God of Nations. You will quickly see that planting a few churches here and there is just not enough. What will it take to see whole nations discipled, with millions of inhabitants and tens of thousands of villages, with longstanding nonchristian - or worse - pseudochristian - traditions and customs and formidable spiritual forces of their own, with poverty and urbanisation and any conceivable difference of opinions, colours, castes and clans, tribes and language groups? Many have told me, often enough with tears in their eyes, that their nation will not truly change its values and be discipled by anything artificial, by being briefly touched for a fleeting moment by the abbreviated Gospel of a rather shortlived campaign or programme, by an evangelistic Blitzkrieg or even by the type of church that has been there for the last 5, 50 or 500 years. Nothing short of the very presence of the living Christ in every neighbourhood and village of every corner of the nation will do. He has come to live amongst us - and stay on. We therefore need to plant and water churchplanting movements that plant and water other churchplanting movements - until there is no space left for anyone to misunderstand, ignore or even escape the presence of Jesus in the form that he has chosen to take, while on Earth - the local church.

This book focusses on the question, *what type of church will it take to do just that?* And how do we plant those type of churches?

It is a *vision statement* in the sense that it tries to capture and express the visions, hopes and expectations of many Christians around the globe for a New Testament type church that will truly disciple - and not only fill - nations;

It is a *manifest* in the sense that it declares a threefold conviction: that without a return to the New Testament simplicity of housechurches; the empowering Five-Fold ministry to spawn a flood of quality housechurches; and the strategic process of saturation church planting as a united effort of the Body of Christ, we will continue to fall short of being obedient to the Great Commission. The number of people alive today - more than 6 billion - is more than all those in history combined. If ever we needed to recover a New Testament church to disciple the nations, now would be a good time.

It is a *churchplanting manual* in the sense that it will explain how to plant housechurches. As every company knows, it is best to develop a working prototype of a product first, and then head for mass production. If we know what type of church we want, we will also know how to plant and multiply it.

But most of all this book is intended to inspire, cheerlead and celebrate those Christians who will be God's instruments of gathering the harvest in this last leg of history. As many prophets tell us, it will be a generation of nobodies, without faces and titles who lead God's movement on Earth to fulfil its calling. They will do it under persecution or celebrated in talk shows (which one is worse?), under unspeakable difficulties or walking on red carpets, despised or adored, ridiculed or consulted, cheated or honoured, scorned or quoted, tortured or pampered, unknown or known, with frequent flyer cards or walking bare foot. In other words, this is a battle cry for ordinary followers of Christ, who, through their humble, selfdenying and obedient lives, will be made extraordinary in purpose and power, and therefore flood this earth with housechurches, the presence, knowledge and glory of Christ, like the waters cover the sea.

1. The Reinvention of Church

Bridging the church gap

It is an interesting phenomenon: never in the history has there been a phase with more significant and global growth of the Christian Church. Some statistics say that between 2.000 and 3.000 churches are planted every week. The worldwide evangelical church has grown from about 150 million in the year 1974 to about 650 million in 1998, and is today, according to C.Peter Wagner and Ralph Winter, the fastest growing minority on earth.

And yet, at this time of great excitement - and even triumph in some groups, the level of dissatisfaction and frustration with "church as we know it" has probably also reached global proportions. We read of many people "coming to Christ" every day, and we rejoice. But we usually do not hear much of those numbers entering membership rolls of local churches, and even less we hear about the silent exodus of people slipping out almost unnoticed of the back doors of churches again; they were attracted, but not contained; interested, but not inserted into an enveloping fellowship; harvested and cut, but not gathered into the barn; touched, but not transformed; turned to briefly look at The Way, then turned away, disappointed with what they saw.

God yes, church no

In a research done in the early 90's in Netherlands, Amsterdam, young people have been asked whether they were interested in God. 100% of them answered yes. Then they were asked whether they are interested in church, 1% said yes, 99% said no. I remember that most Pastors who heard this story used to indicate that something is seriously wrong with those Youth in Amsterdam, since everything - can it be any different - is right with the church. Today I reluctantly like to consider it the other way around. Maybe the Youth of Amsterdam has some lessons to teach the church which we have been rather unwilling to learn. Maybe we have fallen so much in love with our own traditions that we are almost unable to truly "hear and feel" the world from our safe and "holy" distance.

Non-Baptized Believers

Another research conducted nearly a decade ago by Dr.Herbert E. Hoefler, former Director of Gurukul Theological College (Madras, India) reveals that more than 200,000 what Hoefler calls "Non Baptised believers in Christ" secretly exist in this city of 8 Million. This growing number would call themselves Christians, but do not go to church, for a variety of reasons. One reason they state, however, is that they are attracted to Jesus, but not attracted to the church as they have experienced it.

Ask almost anyone who is not yet a Christian what crosses his mind when he hears the word "evangelical Church." Chances are, you would not like what you will hear. It is amazing how well, many Christians are able to hide or brush over their own deep frustration with the church. "Look to Jesus, not to the church," they say. And we know deep down that something is desperately wrong with that statement.

There is a buzzing activity about the church and missions like never before today. But - also like never before - Pastors are swapping churches, dropping out of ministry or applying for “sabbaticals,” missionaries are burning out, and many ordinary Christians simply leave their churches without returning back. Countless Christians have told me that after trying this model of church, that recipe of revival, riding this wave and catching the spirit that way, attending this “lifechanging seminar” and that “anointed conference” their lives and their churches are still dreadfully the same, and they are prepared to give up or just hold on for dear life.

The crisis of Missions is a crisis of the Church

“I don’t like books on missions”, says Stephen Gaukroger, President of the Baptist Union of England and Wales, in the foreword to Patrick Johnstone’s book *“The Church is bigger than you think”*. *“They usually tell me what I already know and then make me feel guilty for not doing more about it!”* The traditional understanding of missions encourages churches or individual people to “go, give or send”. But many times this leaves a bad aftertaste, because we never know when we have gone, done, spent or sent *enough*. Patrick Johnstone says it this way: “We live in a time when our perception of what constitutes the structures of the Church has been molded by inadequate theology and distorted patterns inherited over the centuries. Few realize the impact of these distortions on congregational life. We soon find out that bashing congregations with a mission challenge or attempting to prick consciences in public meetings bears meagre fruit. We find that the church has inherited a mind-set or worldview which has excluded missions altogether”. It is no surprise to me that churches who are not built on apostolic and prophetic foundations (Eph. 2:20) have no apostolic and prophetic mind-set. This is to be expected. The crisis of traditional missions is a crisis of the church. If mission is the natural heartbeat of an apostolic church, it is an expression of God’s grace manifested in apostolic people, not a church trying to fulfill its mission quota. We need to take the “legalistic whip” out of mission, and I suggest we start at the very heart of missions, with our understanding of the church. I suggest that the whip is not only evident in missions, it is at home in the church as a result of a lack of grace and an overdose of legalism, which often creeps in where the apostolic and prophetic ministry are missing and are being replaced by dutiful teachers, beautiful pastors and daring evangelists.

But I intend to point out later that as church is reinvented, mission will be completely revived, too. *“When the church rejects its mission, the Church ceases to be the Church”*, says Donald Miller. But when the church again becomes the church and accepts its apostolic and prophetic nature, then it can become God’s instrument of transforming and discipling neighbourhoods and nations. And an individual church can be used by God, in the spirit of global partnership, to pour its oil on other peoples’ fire, so that the light increases and the world may see whom it has overlooked for all too long: Jesus Christ.

The Church-gap

“Jesus Christ is fantastic, but I do not like the church!”

Rockstar Mike Jagger of the Rolling Stones.

Many Pastors know and even say “that the church we preach about is very different than the church we preach to. That’s the very reason why we preach.”

If even pastors admit that, what about new Christians?

“In the days of coffee bar evangelism,” says English Churchplanter Terry Virgo, “there were conferences held on how to bridge the awful gulf between the coffee bar and the church. It was meant for new Christians to help them to cope with dead, irrelevant, formal church services. Once they were told that this cold, unchanging monotony was the people of God enjoying abundant life. Some, therefore, even suggested a half-way house, where people could be prepared for church life.”

In the original days of Willowcreek Community Church in Chicago, which has seeker-oriented worship services - worship experiences tailor-made for those seeking God, were not-yet believers are specifically made welcome and given a comfortable, nonembarrassing and “safe place for a dangerous message”, they were well aware of the “church-gap”, the fascination of people with the person of Jesus, and the dissatisfaction of many with the local church. At that time, however humorously, they suggested a sevenfold strategy of Evangelism: 1. Spend quality time with Non-Christians; 2. Protect them from the church. 3. Witness to those new friends about Jesus Christ. 4. Protect them from the church. 5. Lead them to Christ. 6. Protect them from the church. 7. When they have matured a bit and are ready even for a culture shock, introduce them to the church for the first time.

Who follows up whom?

A missionary told me about a church of about 200 attenders in Europe which wanted to invite Non-Christians for a “special event service”. With the help of a lot of advertising, 50 new people attended this special event. “Off course, very few of them actually came back to church. But we are following them up,” he said. I was amazed. If 50 non-believers attend a church service and go away fairly indifferent and not exactly thrilled with this experience, why is it that the church does not bear the consequences? Should it not be on its own knees trying to find out what has obviously desperately gone wrong with itself, that so many people can come in touch with it - and go rather untouched? Could it be that the church would much rather have to follow-up itself, than bothering unimpressed and indifferent one-time visitors with spiritual sales-techniques? After 1.700 years of post-Constantine Christendom, can we afford to still discuss how to change the world without being ready to changing ourselves? Maybe we all need to follow the advise of Rick Warren in his book “The Purpose driven church”, to “*stop asking God to bless what we are doing, and start doing what he is blessing*”.

The Third Reformation

German Church Growth researcher Christian A. Schwarz suggests that we are in the era of the Third Reformation. The first reformation happened in the 16th century, when Martin Luther rediscovered the core essence of the Gospel: salvation by faith, the importance of grace, and the centrality of scripture. It was *a reformation of theology*.

The second reformation occurred in the 18th century at the time of the Moravian and Wesleyan movements, where personal intimacy with Christ was rediscovered. It was, he says, *a reformation of spirituality*, which, born on passionate knees in front of a loving and personal Saviour, gave birth to a whole new era of enthusiastic missions and evangelism.

However, all of this was still very much pouring new wine into old wineskins, and sewing new patches onto old cloth. The Roman Catholic Church and Mass System was very close to the Old Testament temple-centred worship patterns, complete with frankincense, priests, sections for the lay people and clerics, and an altar. Luther did reform the content of the Gospel, but did not change the basic structure of the “worship service”. This reformed-Roman-Catholic-Jewish meeting-pattern was baptized by Baptists, anointed by Pentecostals, misused by Cults, renewed by Charismatic Christians, put into uniform by the Salvation Army, drycleaned by Quakers - but was never really radically changed. The “services” were still essentially performances, audience-oriented masses, usually formal and liturgical religious events, where many spectators and consumers observe a few very involved religious specialists performing for them and with them.

The third and last part of the Reformation is, therefore, a *reformation of structure*. It is not suggesting to make a few cosmetic changes or alterations here and there, but to build according to New Testament patterns altogether. If that means that we have to start all over again, then this is exactly what it means, and this will be what it will take.

Let me try to say this with a few illustrations and pictures:

Large cars during the Oil Crisis

During the oil crisis in the 70s was fairly difficult to sell large cars, because petrol was so costly. Carmakers were scratching their heads, looking at the heap of unsold cars in their godowns. This does remind me sometimes of the situation of the churches in a number of nations. Is the model of church we are offering simply too costly, too big? Does the market require another product?

Clogged assembly line

Along a similar line, I would liken the situation of churchplanting in a number of nations with a clogged assembly line. The product (new church) seems to be extremely hard to sell and sits figuratively on an assembly line clogging it up for lack of excited customers who want to buy that product. Result: The system shuts down, the work inches forward, people become more and more frustrated. Could it be that we have become specialists in reproducing assembly lines, but have failed to spend enough time in examining our prototype product?

Solving the Puzzle

Imagine a young boy, unwrapping a new puzzle and immediately trying to put together the pieces. He pulls out a piece of cardboard from the puzzle box, depicting a red race car (he loves red race cars!). All excited about this new toy, he tries to assemble the pieces according to the red race car blue print. But somehow or other the pieces do not seem to fit as they should. He manages to bend them and tear off an edge here and there in order to make them fit with a little “convincing force”, but something seems to be very wrong. Finally his father comes to his rescue. Dad immediately spots the problem, takes the beautiful cardboard with the red race car on

it - and turns it around. And lo and behold, on the “other” side is a beautiful tree, the “original” . The red race car was only the advertisement for another puzzle of the company! The boy sighed with relief, and tried to put together the pieces according to the new original - and within minutes he was done. What was wrong before? He had all the right pieces, but the wrong original. He had unquestionable and honest motives, but quite simply the wrong blue print.

Spiritual Xerox-machines

Could it be that this is, in short, the situation of a large part of Christendom today? We have all the right pieces. The word of God; People; houses; prayer; motivation; money. But could it be that we put them all together according to a wrong original? Our very own beloved red race car? Has the unthinkable happened that someone sinister has cunningly slipped us an unpractical blueprint? And could it be that here we stand, transfixed in front of our spiritual Xerox-copy machines (translate bible schools, publishing houses, seminaries or leadership-producing programs), and keep hitting that green button which says “Copy” and wait for it to make copies of what we are convinced to be a biblical, canonized, unquestionable Bible- and history proven first-hand “original.”

I can imagine Satan, the enemy of the Church, having no problem with even the most frantic evangelistic or mission activities and programs - as long as it is all about making copies of “red race cars”, of a pattern of Church which is not seriously endangering his satanic claims on mankind. Maybe it is time for us to stop scratching the surface of humanity and allow God to re-invent and recreate Church in all of us. It might start with us re-examining our blueprints and turning around our originals.

Stop starting with the church

Most of us will have grown up or decided to be part of one Christian denomination or another, and we will usually see and interpret Christianity - and even the Bible - through reading glasses of our own familiar tradition, “our way of belief and practise”. Which tradition is right? As Argentinian Evangelist Juan Carlos Ortiz once pointed out: “There are more than 22.000 denominations in the world. How lucky are you, that you happen to be just in the right one!” Since then, not only has the number of denominations risen to between 24.000 and 30.000, but many start to understand that most problems of today's churches do not lie so much outside the system, but inside the system, that is, inside our inherited, learned and dear patterns of belief and practice, the way we “do church.”

Who is to blame?

“Our bookshelves are full of Christian books and videos. We have churches on every major street, more staff people than ever before, large Sunday school departments, cell systems, mega- and meta-church seminars. We have Christian bumper stickers, political action groups, huge parachurch ministries - and in the midst of it all, we have lost every major city in North America”, says Ted Haggard of New Life Church in Colorado Springs in his book “Primary purpose - Making it hard for people to go to hell from your city”. He goes on to say: “Rather than rethinking our methods and challenging our own effectiveness, we try to escape responsibility for the eternal damnation of those in our communities by blaming others for our own spiritual ineffectiveness.”

The traditional church - biggest barrier to belief

In a study in 1994 under the title “Barriers to Belief” in Scotland, says Rev. John Campbell, *“many have indicated that one of the greatest barriers to belief in God is the Church itself.”* If the problem is the system, then even our best solution is part of the problem. That leaves even the most dedicated, visionary, passionate and revived Christians trapped in a system which is sucking their very energy and is simply overpowering. The way forward, therefore, may not be hidden in slight changes and adaptations to some new forms in “Church as we know it”, but in a much more radical rediscovery of the very nature of Church itself. The quickest way to “Church the unchurched” may very well be to “unchurch the Church.” Bob Hopkins, one of the initiators of the Anglican Church Planting Initiative in England, has therefore recommended to “stop starting with the Church”. What this implies is that we might want to stop taking today's Churches and its “worship patterns” for absolutely granted. It seems, after all, that God has been waiting for a long time throughout history, ready to give the right answers to those asking the right questions. Housechurches, in other words, are the missing link between spirituality and society, between Jesus and his Body, between heaven and earth.

A stumbling block or a treasure

Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a man who finds a treasure while ploughing a field (Mt 13:44) and then goes on to sell all his possessions to buy the field - and the treasure. What first looks like a stumbling block, a misplaced rock, interrupting the daily routine and initially annoys and upsets the fixed agenda of "ploughing the fields day by day" even in traditional church life, may turn out to be the greatest find of a person's life. Let me forewarn you a bit: This may happen to you too, as God speaks to you about housechurches in His own ways. Maybe the answers to the questions of so many of us are hidden, but close, waiting to be stumbled upon, locked behind a forbidden door other people do not even think exists. We may find it out of unbearably agony with the status quo, because we seriously search and then find, or as a result of a simply accident. But at this point, housechurches may yet be something completely unthinkable, literally unheard of, something which even sounds almost heretical in the beginning, but becomes clearer and clearer as we move on through the fog of tradition and reread our bibles. However, take a piece of advice from the parable of the hidden treasure. As you discover it, do not go to town and make a big announcement on the market place. Hide it again in the field, go and sell all what you have, and then go buy it and do whatever God shows you to do.

"Reconstructing" the Church

Many Churches who are desperate for renewal - or at least change - tend to overlook that you cannot produce a new quality in the Church by changing the structures. Management-Guru Tom Peters says, renewal and reformation is out - revolution is in; a company does not really need a CEO- a Chief Executive Officer, but a CDO - a Chief Destruction Officer, regularly dismantling blocking traditions, because it is so much easier to rebuild according to a new pattern than to restore and renew an outdated one. Changing a church by changing some outward forms is as futile as trying to change your mentality by putting on another dress or walking backwards from now on to stop you from going to cinemas. Adding a new mission statement or any other cosmetic alterations without a radical genetic reformation of the church will only lead to frustration - like sewing a patch of new cloth onto old cloth, which, says Jesus, is bad advice. Revival and reformation truly starts with a complete rediscovery and reconstruction of the core essence of the church, with New Testament DNA, the genetical code of God, supernaturally empowered with growth potential from within (Mark 4:26). This spiritual seed material is, like any grain of wheat, equipped and able to develop its own appropriate structures from the inside-out, without instruction from outside; it simply unfolds itself according to a creational blueprint within, it unzips. Its soil is literally the soil of nations and peoplegroups. The result of this incarnation, at least in New Testament times, was a housechurch movement, that swept the city of Jerusalem like yeast in a dough, or like an unstoppable virus, in maybe less than two years.

Biotic principles

Allmost life forms are based on the multiplication of organic cells. Unlimited growth is against creational principles. Multiplication is. My friend Christian Schwarz has studied what he calls "biotic" principles, patterns that operate within God's created order of organic life. This led him to develop what he calls "Natural Church Growth". Many insights are drawn from agricultural and biological contexts where growth is definitely according to the divine pattern and method, and not like the humanly-devised artificial patterns of mechanical production and growth. These biotic principles stand in stark contrast to the "technocratic" methods which govern machines. They are as different from each other as a robot is from a human being. One is a machine while the other is an organism. The "machine" or "robot" model functions very well in the world of technology but fails in the world of biotic, organic growth. When we understand that the church is a creation of God, a "biotic" organism, we must look for God's natural, organic principles to understand how it grows. Biotic principles utilize the minimum amount of energy to produce the maximum results, an effective "all-by-itself" development. This avoids the church to become manufactured, but allows it to be recreated by the Spirit of God according to God's creational patterns. We simply labour in vain if we follow only man-made patterns or formulas, even if they are handed to us in the form of good and cherished traditions. Some biotic principles are

Structured interdependence, meaning that the way the parts of an organism are inter-related are more important than the parts themselves. All organic cells arrange themselves not in a chaos guided by chance, but according to a creational and inbuilt pattern where each cell or organ is linked with others. In terms of church multiplication this means that no issue or topic or aspect should be seen or even treated in isolation of all the other aspects and parts.

Multiplication. Unlimited growth is not the ideal - multiplication is. The fruit of an apple tree is not an apple, but another apple tree. The fruit of a church is not a convert, but other churches that plant other churches.

Energy transformation. This is the principle that observes how existing forces (even contrary ones) can be used positively towards a desired goal. This is also how an organism fights a virus; not in a head-on collision, but using much of the energy of the intruder to defeat the intruder. Through a vaccination process former health-destroying energies are transformed into health promoting ones. Many churches use the boxer-approach to life

instead, using energy to reduce an outside “attack” to zero, and then, in a second strike, deliver it’s own message.

How to break the “20-Barrier”

I have read a book written by Bill M. Sullivan, titled “Ten Steps to breaking the 200-barrier”. The very healthy intention of Sullivan fits ideologically into the mainstream of the Church Growth movement of the 70s and 80s: Good churches grow big, and very good churches grow very big. Anything that stops a “healthy” church from growing is a barrier, and those barriers are bad and must therefore go. The idea of the “200-Barrier” is simple. Statistically most churches stop to grow somewhere between 100 and 300 people, on average at about 200. There are good cultural, sociological and even architectural reasons for that. One is structural, an inbuilt problem of the traditional One-Pastor-church: There are only so many people (in the USA: 200) a Pastor can personally and effectively care for. He may have a lot of space in his agenda, but a quite limited space in his heart; and people realize that. Result: The growth grinds to a halt, the church hits an invisible ceiling, the “200 Barrier”. However, I suggest there is a much more important barrier to overcome: the “20-Barrier”. How do we break it?

The invisible line: from organic to organisational

As any family get-together will teach us, we can accomplish the goal of fellowship without the need to be heavily structured. Families can get along quite well without a master of ceremony, a word of introduction, a special song, a sermon by father and a vote of thanks by mother. These things happen at weddings and other festivals, but not in everyday life. Church, however, is not an artificial performance, it is for everyday life, because it is a way of life. There is, in each culture, a very important numerical line we can cross: from the organic to the organized, from the informal to the formal, from spontaneous to liturgical. I call this most important line the 20-barrier, because in many cultures 20 is a maximum number where people still feel “family”, organic and informal, without the need to get formal or organized. Organisms are structured, too, and I am not advocating a total absence of order and structure. But, different to an organised series of meetings which which are typically structured from outside, organisms are usually structured from within. The nature of a meeting defines and therefore limits the size of a meeting. If we cross the “20-barrier”, the group stops to be organic, and starts to become formal, and even feel the need to follow a set agenda. Effectiveness in relationship and mutual communication goes down, and the need for someone to coach and led the meeting goes up. As a result, the housechurch loses it’s main original attractions, changes it’s values, and starts to develop totally different dynamics. It often simply stops functioning by itself, spontaneous and lively, lead invisibly and unobtrusively through the inbuilt family mechanisms of fathering and mothering, and needs to be literally “run”, organised, and visibly lead into a new and organized life form - if there is such a thing. The original organism is then a thing of the past, still alive, but trapped into a formal structure that chokes it, conditions it, and ultimately could prevent relational and spontaneous fellowship in the name of organized fellowship. Biblical *koinonia* means fellowship or sharing, giving generously and participating and sharing something with someone. One of the fatal aspects of this line-crossing is that the original organic form of fellowship usually loses it’s internal reproduction potential, and can only be cloned and copied or even literally manufactured and finally mass produced with huge effort from outside that greatly ignores and overrules it’s own inbuilt explosive growth potential. It is a fact of church history that it has always been a swift step from organised religion to institutionalism and fossilisation.

Person number 21

One of the most important decisions in terms of the structure and future of a church anyone can possibly make, therefore, is what you do when person number 21 walks through the door. Structurally, that brings the church into the red phase. You either continue growing upwards and become organized and loose your housechurch-dynamics, and may ultimately hit the 200-barrier, or you divide the housechurch into two or three units and multiply it, thus growing sideways. You may not even notice a 200-barrier this way.

A wedding a week?

Life in any culture has two aspects, the private and the public, everyday-life and the special events, celebrations of weddings, function and festivals, funerals and traditional happenings. Both aspects of life have their own and valid ways of expression. Everyday life is usually expressed in the family, the basic cell unit of every society and culture. Families are usually very organic, informal, relational and consist of whatever it takes to share lives. Weddings and other functions are extraordinary events, for which everyone duly prepare; they are usually formal, need heavy organisation and are often highly structured.

Imagine you would have to attend a wedding each week. It follows the same basic pattern, has even the same bridegroom and bride, and maybe even the food is the same. After some weeks the excitement would considerably wear down. You would know what to expect, and you know what's going to happen next. It still would remain a nice thing, a beautiful tradition, but it would feel odd to have the same type of festival each week.

We need to be careful not to do this with church. Jesus has shown us a way to live, not only a way to celebrate. Both aspects are necessary, both are good. But everyday life is not like a wedding, as any married couple can tell us. If we allow church to take on only "celebration structures", we will start celebrating "a wedding a week", and our behaviour will soon be far removed from real life and cease to make sense to ordinary people. It would become an artificial weekly event and performance. If church is a God-given way of community life, and if life takes place in the basic unit of a family living in a home, there is nothing more appropriate for the church to be a housechurch, to be the church based in simple, ordinary, everyday homes. Housechurches are not only a way for us humans to express community, *they are one of God's means to achieve community.*

Small churches may already be far too big

Creation itself teaches us that nothing healthy grows endlessly, but stops growing at a point and starts multiplying. Bigger is not necessarily better or more beautiful. Could it be that in this perspective - to grow a church bigger - everything is right - expect the direction in which we look? Could it be that the problem is not so much to break the 200-barrier on the way up, but the 20-barrier on the way down? If real church growth spells m-u-l-t-i-p-l-i-c-a-t-i-o-n, then growth may not be upwards at all, but sideways. Has all that talk about "big is beautiful" tricked our thinking? If yes, maybe we will have to cut out a Zero in our mindset: an average church would then be just 8, 10 or 12 people; a large church has 15, and a megachurch sports 21.

Could it be that the average "small church" of 25 or 45 people, which is trying to rent a hall, or sanction a building fund, just bought a pulpit and still saves for an overhead projector, is not at all too small, but already far too big? They have crossed the organism-organisation line long ago, trying "to grow up like all those other churches", not realizing that they already have become quite heavy and inflexible, structurally bloated and deformed, just like someone with a waterbelly suffering from his own weight, and only kept going and inching forward by the relentless activities of a busy "Pastor" or leader with his co-workers?

Worldwide the average size of churches is around 100. Only a very small percentage of churches become bigger than 200, and many are in the 40-60 bracket. The average Sunday-morning attendance of the Lutheran churches in Germany, for example, was 23,5 people in the year 1993.

Shrink in order to grow

Maybe it simply requires a true apostolic gifting - which is statistically speaking fairly rare - to transform any given church into a megachurch. For many churches it could be a liberation to be allowed to become what many of them already are: slightly overgrown housechurches struggling with their own size and the unspoken original they are trying to become. Would it not be much more practical for them to head the other way, and become smaller, to move into the direction of housechurches, to "grow down" rather than keep on striving to "grow up"?

Elton Trueblood once said: *"The church must be smaller before it can be substantially stronger."* I agree. But if we take this one step further, this would also mean that the church of the future will have to become much smaller, before it can become substantially bigger, by becoming much more numerous. Statistically, it will have to shrink in order to grow.

Swiss Prophets about Switzerland

A friend told me recently, that God had shown him a prophetic vision of the Thunersee, the "Lake Thun" near Interlaken. There he observed many small groups of Christians baptizing people. "The Lake Thun will be the biggest baptismal lake in Switzerland", God told him. "But why are those groups so small?" asked my friend. "They are housechurches," God told him.

Another senior friend of mine, now in his 70s, told me of a vision he had, whereby God had shown him in prayer that a new form of church will spread in Switzerland like wildfire: housechurches. As a result of this move of God there will be a large gathering of approximately 200.000 Christians at an open-air ground near the city of Luzern in the year 2.001, where those Christians will form themselves into a unity and speak collectively with one voice to Switzerland as a nation.

Pastor Mike Bickle from Kansas, USA, once told that God had "revealed to him that he is going to change the forms and expressions of church within one generation to the degree that it will not be recognizable any more."

That was in Cairo in the year 1982. The future will tell whether it was God or just a dream. Rick Joyner, a prophetic teacher from Charlotte, USA, says it this way: "I see such a sweeping return to Biblical Christianity coming, that the very understanding of Christianity, by both the world and the church, will be changed. This does not imply any kind of doctrinal changes as to what it means to be a Christian, but a change that causes us to live by the truths we proclaim. This will be reflected when we truly become known for our love for one another".

I do respect Amos 3: 7-8 and the biblical ministry of prophecy, and I am far from encouraging anyone to pick up stones of tradition and throw them at prophets. What if those visions - which are only part of a growing flood of voices amongst God's people today - are really from God? What would that mean for us as Christians? For our churches? Could we simply smile a bit about that nice - but surly absurd! - thought, turn the page, cut onions, water the garden, go out in the evening, finally order that overhead projector and carry on with "church as we know it?"

Cell - Congregation - Celebration

In church growth terminology we differentiate between three levels of church, 1. cell, 2. congregation/cathedral and 3. celebration.

The *cell* is typically housebased and sociologically small, between 3-20 people. Its purpose is relational fellowship, and it functions mostly organic, that is, members are often in direct contact with each other and therefore a natural part of each other's lives.

The *congregation/cathedral* is sociologically of medium size, usually between 20 and 200, and functions more formal, organized, usually has a Pastor, co-workers, a type of worship service, and various programs. It functions usually in a "sanctuary" of any type, a building specially used for religious purposes. Members do not have direct and natural contacts with each other, because the meeting is too large and not structured to allow for that.

The *celebration* is typically a large (200+) gathering of Christians of an area, expressing their unity in Christ, celebrating what God has done and will do for them, anticipating Christ's return, typically lead by Christians with apostolic and prophetic ministries. Celebrations can happen in the open air, in stadiums, conference centres or any other large area. People have no way of being in direct contact with all present, and are "happily lost in the crowd".

The Small and the Large

Biblically we find two of those structures or levels, the cell and the celebration. In the New Testament we read of the church regularly meeting in houses, that is in "cell-sized units", and meeting in Salomo's Temple court, or in the open air, in big numbers.

Of those two, the cell, that is the housebased church, was the natural habitat, the normal and most common form of Christians getting together. Once the Jerusalem Temple was declared out of bounds for followers of "The Way", they kept on meeting in homes. When the celebration was not possible, the cell lived on.

The risen Christ strongly identified with the church in the houses, and did not urge them anywhere to form "Christian synagogues" or build religious buildings. When Saul was persecuting the churches and broke into homes to drag out Christians, Jesus asked him in his Damaskus encounter: "*Saul, why do you persecute me?*"

During the first three centuries after Christ, church historians tell us that the housechurch was and remained the normal and natural way of Christians sharing their new lives together. There will be a more detailed account of the housechurches throughout the ages in the next chapter, so I can be very brief here. Only after Emperor Constantine in the 4th century was there a radical shift in terms of church structure. The congregation/cathedral-type church was introduced, the church became an audience, housechurches were marginalized and ultimately forbidden. No one could function as Christians privately, without the sanction of the state and its acknowledged and ordained "orthodox" church.

The mouse married the elephant

The result of this developments was a structural compromise, a marriage between the mouse (the cell) and the elephant (the celebration), giving birth to a most unusual creation, the congregational or cathedral-type church. It was, in many ways, a strongly professionalized church, with priests fit for a king. It developed its own specialized buildings for religious purposes, removing church from everyday life into relicts from the Old Testament religion, with priests, altars and heavily symbolic rituals, where most visitors were bound to become spectators, and could not really be participants any more.

As a result of this compromise the church lost two of its most powerful dynamics. The congregational church was basically an overgrown housechurch and an undergrown celebration, and therefore missed out on both very important aspects of the cell and the celebration. The cell provided family dynamics, a private and stable home and organic place of belonging and accountability to Christians, whereby the celebrations were places charged with a somewhat grandiose and truly public atmosphere, where the small housechurches reconnected with the big picture and each other, heard apostolic teaching and encountered prophetic vision. This often created an excited pull-effect drawing in more people on a public level, and such gatherings could literally shake a city or region.

Fellowship without fellowship

The congregational or cathedral type church with its semi-private atmosphere, its limited fellowship possibilities and its professional clergy was a political solution which suited the state and conveniently fitted into the religious “patterns of the world” at the same time. It was, in many ways, a triumph of the religious spirit, a return to the law and religious patterns of the Old Testament and even pagan religions, from which Jesus wanted to liberate mankind. Since this new congregational structure was powerfully enforced by the state and church laws, it forced its content - the quality - to adapt to the new structure. In the New Testament, the content defined the form, that is, the quality defined the structure. Now this process was reversed, and the form moulded the content, the structure defined the quality.

This meant that organic and natural Christian fellowship had to be adjusted and fit into a new container, the formal church building, and therefore had to be watered down to fill out the new bigger structure. Ultimately, fellowship was thinned out to almost homeopathical doses, and started to lose its impact on the Christians themselves as well as on society. The “fellowship without fellowship” was born.

The end of the Lords Supper

Another victim of this process was “the Lord’s Supper”. Since it is quite difficult to feed a cathedral full of people with real food, it degenerated into a religious and symbolic ritual, offering microscopic sips of wine and a small wafer, often enough only to the “clergy” while the masses looked on in pious amazement. This meant that the “Lords Supper” was a supper no more, and lost its powerful meaning of a redeemed species doing the unheard of: people, irrespective of classes and caste, revolutionarily sharing real food with a prophetic meaning, having dinner with God, expecting his physical presence at any time just like after the resurrection. It thus became “the Eucharist”, a pious and symbolic shell of the original meal of a tasty lamb that Jesus shared with his disciples. By AD 150 the eucharist and the love feast were two distinct parts of the Lord’s Supper. Biblical commentator William Barclay says it like this: *“The celebration of the Lord’s Supper in a Christian home in the first century and in a cathedral in the twentieth century cannot be more different, they bear no relationship to each other whatsoever.”*

Did Procrustes work over the church?

It reminds me of the famous giant Procrustes in Greece, who forcefully made travellers between Athens and Corinth to lay down on his big bed, and if they were found too short for his bed, they were cruelly stretched with ropes to fill the length of the bed, breaking their bones in the process. If they ever happened to be too long, they were unceremoniously cut down to fit the bed also.

The structural lie

Today, 1700 years after those developments, we have become so accustomed with the congregational-type church, that many find it hard to even imagine any other form of “real church life” or “worship services”. Those historical events created a powerful system, a uniformed pattern, a sanctioned and later even sanctified structure, which has moulded the experiences and the mindset of people over long centuries, and has created a distorted picture of church that is not any more true to its original. This whole process canonized and institutionalized a devastating mediocrity, a middle-of-the road-solution, simply functioning in religious and political correctness of the day. The congregational church became a “structural lie,” because it paints the right message in the wrong colours, casts the right material in wrong forms, fills the water of life into contaminated bottles, takes the redeemed sinners and forms them into a harmless species of nice churchgoers and program participants. It makes heavenly promises, but does not deliver them on earth.

In short, it became a selfdefeating structure, standing in its own way, hindering itself, creating the very problems it wants to solve, frustrating and breaking the hearts of millions of people who searched for God and found the congregational-type church, a caricature of God’s supernatural family on earth. Only true spiritual heroes and outstanding characters were ever able to rise their head above the polluted waters of this system and make a difference for some time, as we will see in the historical chapter. But whatever they changed, whatever

they pleaded for, whatever renewal, revival or reforms they proposed until this very day, was swallowed up soon enough by the unchanging system of Christendom, by the structure of church they did not dare to touch.

Five elements of a cathedral-church

American veteran missionary and author Bill Beckham, in his book “The Second Reformation,” describes a congregation- or cathedral-type church like this: “*Since the time of Constantine in the Fourth Century the church has functioned primarily as a ‘Cathedral’*. At least five important elements are identified with this “Cathedral” way of being the church:

1. A Building (a ‘Cathedral’ or ‘Church’);
2. A Special Day (Sunday);
3. A professional leadership (priest, clergyman, holy man);
4. A special service, performed for the people (ceremonies, services, interpretation of dogma, motivation) and
5. A way to maintain itself (tithes and offerings).

In spite of different types of church government, different architectural designs of buildings, different titles and clothes for leaders, different worship form, and different theologies, churches for the most part have functioned through this ‘Cathedral’ form. Whether Catholic or Baptist, Presbyterian or Pentecostal, ‘High Church’ or ‘Low Church,’ urban or rural, large or small, rich or poor, Western or Eastern, churches have been ‘Cathedral’ in nature. This ‘Cathedral’ system has survived political upheavals, rearrangement of world maps, great social changes, theological heresies, the Protestant Reformation, and numerous movements. It’s adaptability has been nothing short of amazing. Using a combination of the Roman governmental and feudal systems, Empror Constantine developed a church strucure that has lasted for seventeen centuries. The ‘Cathedral’ structure has had the capacity to absorb all major movements into its structure without changing its own basic form.”

Principles, not procedures

I am not proposing to revitalize and reinvent the New Testament church straight out of the book of Acts, faithfully copying all it’s cultural forms and expressions, because we are living in different times and places. Our cities look much more like Corinth than Jerusalem; many countries live in a postmodern and post-Christendom era; however, we can and should learn from New Testament principles, without copying all it’s time-specific and cultural procedures; we should take the New Testament quality of church very serious, but develop structures, methodologies and procedures for our own time and cultures and people groups.

From inherited to emerging mode

“The West has compressed celebration into congregation, and forgotten the homes,” says Rev. Bob Hopkins of the Anglican Church Planting Network in England, and goes on to ask: “Is congregation the concrete in which our view of church is set? Is this view captured by national pride and church culture?” Europe now boasts of a strong residue of Christian history and structures, but the church has largely lost the people.” That is why Anglican, Robert Warren speaks of the “inherited mode of church” and an “emerging mode”, a new - or possible very old - form of church reemerging according to New Testament patterns.

In order to point out some of the differences between the congregational churches and the New Testament house churches, here is a selective list of key areas were they differ greatly. I am sure this list could be prolonged further:

<u>Congregational Church</u>	<u>The New Testament</u>
<u>Church</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place • structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meets in sanctuaries organisation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> moves from house to house organism

• Main	Pastors, Teachers	Apostles, Prophets,
• functionaries	Evangelists	Elders
• finances	tithes and offering	sharing all they have
• lifestyle	individual	community lifestyle
• sharing	2-4 hours time a week	life
• Evangelism	outreach, action, programs, specialists	natural discipling of neighbours; multiplying itself
• battle cry	getting people into the church	getting the church into peoples homes
• Size	big, impersonal groups	small, intimate groups
• format	formal	spontaneous
• Activities	weekly services	daily fellowship
• Relationships	limited, self-help	intimate, helping each other
• Discipleship	Teacher with class of students	person to person; role model
• teaching style	static, sermon- centred	kinetic, discussion-style
• most important task of pastor	lead the church program; preach good sermons; housevisits etc.	equip each believer for doing the ministry themselves
• task of believers	be present, participate in program	serve others
• centre	worship service in a religious building	the ordinary house is the centre
• Keyword	become a member!	Go and make disciples!
• spiritual gifts	few gifts used by few members	everyone regularly participates
• Maturity- Test	How much do you know?	How good do you serve others?
• Ministry	performance oriented	equipping oriented
• Mission	sending specialized missionaries	church sends itself as a multipliable unit

Cell church, BEC, Housechurch

Today there are three main movements, each advocating in different ways a return to a “cell-based” housecentred church. Most of those movements would say: “You can do with cell and celebration, but the congregation is quite dispensable.”

The three different streams are 1. The classic “Cell church” advocated for example by Ralph Neighbour, William Beckham, or Yonggi Cho. 2. The Base-Ecclesial Community, mostly within the Roman Catholic Church; and 3. the Housechurch Movement, maybe best known today from China and Vietnam.

While the cell church looks and sounds almost the same as the housechurch movement, it is not. There are very significant and vital differences, which I will point out later. The Base-Ecclesial Community is a longlasting small group experiment within the Roman Catholic church, and might very well develop into a cell church structure within that church. This book focusses on housechurches.

Advantages of housechurches over traditional churches

I am aware of at least twelve advantages of a cell-based housechurch movement over a traditional congregational-style church:

1. *Discipled multiplication*

Housechurch is a model centred on multiplication and discipleship with huge growth potential, because the “cell” is the multipliable unit itself. Mentoring, multiplication and discipleship is the heart of the concept. Congregation is not by definition a discipleship model and structurally tends to prevent mentoring and discipleship. Discipleship never really is only “one-on-one”, it is a function of community. Next to the Holy spirit, peer pressure may be the strongest teacher on earth, as any parents of teenagers will agree. The housechurches allow for a redeemed use of peer pressure, living out a healthy and loving accountability with each other, learning a new kingdom value from each other and, being friends and family with each other, helping

each other to be collective doers of a new paradigm, were no one is left to individual and secret struggles, and therefore quickly matures.

2. *Persecution-proof structure*

Through its small and flexible way of life and its “persecution-proof spirit”, housechurches can develop into an almost “persecution-proof structure”, as opposed to the very visible and immovable traditional “church with a cross on its steeple.”

3. *Free from Church Growth barriers*

Once careful attention is given to prevent housechurches from moving from an organic to an organisational mode, housechurches can be multiplied through mitosis, an organic cell-reproduction process, and the overall growth of a movement is virtually free from “church growth barriers.”

4. *Involves many more people more efficiently*

Congregations are often program based, whereby most programmes are organized at the congregational level. They have proven to be quite inefficient and resource hungry, usually involving 20% of exhausted members of the church doing the work for the other, more passive, 80%. In the housechurch, almost everyone can be easily and naturally involved, and “dead wood is cut out”. Since involved people are fulfilled and therefore happy people, the overall quality - and efficiency - of the church grows.

5. *Breaks the pastoral care-dilemma*

The housechurch model breaks the pastoral care dilemma - a known and selfdefeating problem of the congregational church: as numbers grow, the pastoral quality usually goes down, because the Pastor cannot tend to all his sheep any more.

6. *Provides a place of life transformation and accountability*

The housechurch is an ideal setting to change values, transfer life and therefore transform lifestyles. An analysis of the western church shows that the congregational model is almost totally ineffective at changing basic values and lifestyles. Many Christians end up with the same lifestyle of people around, and therefore become indistinguishable from society and lose their prophetic edge. Housechurches provide a place of radical transformation of values, reordering life, offering mutual and organic accountability, where even a redeemed peer pressure, “the most powerful teacher after Jesus himself”, is made to function for good, and not for bad.

7. *The house is a most effective place for new Christians*

Much has been written about the inward looking mentality of the congregational church, whereby the church and its programs is the center, and everything else is rotating around this hub. This structure traditionally resents new people coming in, “messing up the order and the situation.” The congregation is, statistically speaking, a most unfriendly zone for new Christians, also accounting for unbelievable large drop-out rates of up to 99% in so-called “evangelistic-follow-up programs”. In contrast, the “cell” or housechurch is a most effective, natural and welcoming zone for new people to come and stay in touch with the Christian community. It provides spiritual fathers and mothers, not teachers and paper. It also reverses the general direction of the perspective of Christians: instead of getting people to the church, they are getting the church to the people.

8. *Solves the leadership crisis*

Housechurch-leaders are Elders, and they are just that: older than most, without necessarily being “elderly”. Elders do not have to be skilled Masters of Ceremony and learned teachers, but modest and authentic fathers and mothers with obedient children will do nicely to start with. They are by then already many years into living a maturing life and passing the test of time, not freshlings from a seminary able to perform some religious functions. This leadership is easy to find and develop anywhere without time-consuming schools for religious specialists. It depends on initial and ongoing apostolic and prophetic input and support, ministries, which in themselves can be multiplied and therefore match and grow exponentially with a multiplying housechurch movement. Traditional Sunday- or Bible Schools and seminaries are mostly static and addition-based leadership development systems which grow linear, at best. They are an informational system, not a transformational system, as Beckham rightly points out. Therefore they cannot match a multiplying movement of housechurches with an exponentially growing need for elders.

9. *Overcomes the clergy-laity division*

“Nowhere in the New Testament do we find references to a pastor leading a congregation”, says Barney Coombes. The housechurch does not need a Pastor in the traditional sense at all, because elders, functioning together with the corporate giftedness of the housechurch to maintain and multiply the life of the church. This therefore breaks the curse of the clergy-laity division, which the congregational system reinforces.

10. *It is more biblical*

We cannot afford to ignore biblical revelation for too long and get away with it. Tradition is a strong teacher, but God’s word is more reliable and simply better. Even in an age of Postmodernism and relativity, the Bible still teaches absolutes. However, the Bible absolutely does not teach us to call a holy crowd gathering on a holy day at a holy hour in a holy sanctuary to participate in a holy ritual performed by holy men in holy clothes against a holy fee to be the New Testament church. God’s work done God’s way still attracts God’s blessing. Even in Moses’ time God exhorted him to build “according to the pattern”. It is worth to struggle even with our own trusted tradition for the purpose of regaining biblical truth, because it is not tradition which sets us free, but the truth of God’s word.

11. *Undeniable cheaper*

The congregational church can be defined as “plot plus building plus priest plus salary plus programmes”. The housechurch is “people plus ordinary houses plus faith plus shared life”, which is undeniably cheaper. As congregational or cathedral-type churches cost enormous sums of money to establish them, and more money to maintain or even propagate the system, the cells and housechurches literally make money, because they produce more than they consume. In an age where there seems to be an endless battle cry for more money for “the church work”, we should not overlook alternatives and be good stewards of God’s financial talents he gives us.

12. *It resurrects the City church*

The church in the New Testament was named according to it’s location, not denomination. With a new wave of housechurches, this also opens up a way back to the “city church,” literally the church of the city, all Christians of a city or region together, meeting regularly or irregularly in city-wide celebrations, where the cities most gifted Christians and humble servants of the Lamb

forget all the titles and politics, and in a new maturity sacrifice their own name, denominationalism, reputation and singlehanded success to the single advancement of the Kingdom of only one King, the Lamb of God. Imagine the thrill of the public when this collective city-based and authentic leadership regularly casts prophetic vision, teaches apostolic standards, stands united, blesses each other and speaks to the world with one voice. What the devil has tried hard to prevent at any cost will again come true: that “the Romans,” “the Ephesians,” “the Corinthians,” “the Church of Jerusalem”, Vienna, Singapore, Bagdad, Khartoum or Montevideo will reconnect with each other, form itself into one supernatural corporate identity and movement under one single lord and master, and speak with a collective and powerful voice to their city and nation. What happens at the small level of housechurches will eventually spill over on a larger city-scale, where the church will “excel at the small and therefore excel at the large”. Instead of Christians being regularly excited top-down through imported motivators and speakers at artificial conferences based on names and topics, the healthy, authentic and infectious joy and excitement at the houselevel will bubble up and express itself citywide, where no one can overhear it any more, and people will repeat the statement made first in Jerusalem: “You have filled our city with your teaching!” And if ever God should choose to repeat instances like at Pentecost, where 120 upper room Christians suddenly face the challenge to accomodate 3.000 converts in one day, they would be prepared, because the flexible structure of multiplying housechurches would already be in place.

2. Housechurches in History

Rediscovery through the valley of the Dark Ages

The New Testament church was a growing church, says Dr. Alan Kreider, and from history we know that it kept growing for quite some time. According to an Epistle to Diognetus written in the late second-century “Christians, day by day increase more and more.” In the middle of the third century Origen exclaimed: “Multitudes of people are coming to faith”. Ramsay MacMullen, ancient historian in Yale, has estimated that in each generation some 500.000 people were added to the church up until the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 312, until the church finally made up between 5 and 8 percent of the population of the Roman empire.

Multiplying housechurches

The Christians during the New Testament times and immediately after that were literally meeting in house churches, usually in the largest rooms of its members. Church Historians agree that they could have rarely been more than fifteen or twenty people. Once a housechurch grew bigger than that, it usually multiplied by simply starting another housechurch nearby. If not, this growth immediately caused problems. Origen, preaching in a home in Ceasarea, once complained that “some have hidden in remotest corners of the house to occupy themselves with profane stories.”

Join the candidates for death

Although Christians were not constantly persecuted, and times of relative freedom was interwoven with subtle or fierce persecutions, every Christian knew that persecution could break out at any moment, due to a local crisis, an imperial edict, or a “wolf” that had penetrated the lambs as a lying informer like Judas, about to betray the followers of Christ to the Herods of the day. This was what Paul calls “the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ”, as he writes from his prison cell to the Philippians (Phil 3:10). Tertullian writes: “We are besieged and attacked, they kept us prisoners in our own secret congregations.” Every Christian was, by definition, a candidate for death. If one wanted a soft life, or go ahead in respectable circles, one simply did not become a Christian. When a Christian, under pressure or interrogation, simply affirmed: “I am a Christian!”, it had a powerful ring of authority to it. People knew that this person was ready to die for this statement, and that caused awe or consternation. Persecution was so much part of the lives of the Early Christians, that it moulded their thinking - and their structure! In a separate chapter further down, “The Persecution proof church”, I will discuss this further.

History: more than propaganda written by the victors

There are two ways to read the Bible: we can read our experiences into it, and search for “confirmations” from the Bible to underline what we already “knew”; or we can read the Bible even against our experiences, which can be substantially more painful - but liberating in the process. The same way we can approach history. Either history will be, as a common communist slogan says, simply “propaganda written by the victors,” an interpretation of history to fit and justify the present rule or Status Quo; or history becomes the science to truly discover the facts of the past, even if they do not seem to fit the picture we have of our own history.

If we now look for reasons for the multiplying and growing housechurch movements in the New Testament and the first few centuries, we might be surprised to miss what we expect to be there, and startled to find some quite different dynamics.

No Evangelism

A case in point is Evangelism. If we are convinced, for example, that “Evangelism” is what we all need to do, we will soon start to see Evangelism literally on every page of the Bible, even if it is not there at all. Except for Philip (Acts 9) and the five-fold ministry (Eph. 4:11) there is almost no mentioning of “Evangelism as we know it” in the New Testament and the records of the Early Church at all. Alan Kreider speaks of a “telling silence of encouragement to ‘evangelize’”. The New Testament does not speak about evangelizing as a “plain preaching activity,” and Jesus is, in fact, outspoken against going “door to door” (Luke 10), a very common

“evangelistic method” in some countries. There is, however, much emphasis on the “making of disciples”. Arthur Darby Nock says that in the history of the Early Church “there was little, if any, direct preaching to the public masses; it was simply too dangerous.” The church not only had a message, it was the message. And because the church in itself was “good news”, there simply was no need for proclamation style Evangelism or going door to door. Only when the church as a structure became “bad news”, an ill-matching structure for an explosive message, did the need for special “good-news”-enterprises emerge. Evangelism without a functioning church model is Evangelism *because of the lack of a working church model*, which provides literally out-of-body experiences and even out-of-body conversions.

Many historians therefore disagree with English writer Michael Green, who states in his otherwise excellent book “Evangelism in the Early Church: *“There can be no doubt that ... open air evangelism continued through the first two centuries”*. The pagan Caecilius, a contemporary of the early church, reported that Christians were “*silent in public, but chattering in corners.*” This also meant that in times of illness or crisis their neighbours, who have learned to trust them, would feel free to turn to Christians for help. Baptist Mission Professor John Mark Terry, in his book “Evangelism, a concise history”, reflecting the thinking of our present time, sees Evangelism as something do-able, then re-interprets the Bible and history from that perspective and goes on record to say: “*Wherever Jesus went, he presented the gospel.*” The evangelism-worldview Terry describes is full of “evangelistic keywords” and methodology: touching, witnessing, sharing, ministering, preaching, telling the good news, and doing Evangelism; he even goes as far to say that “Jesus was using a number of different evangelistic methods”. Jesus, as well as His Body, the Church, did not only have a message, He *was* the message. He did not have the gospel, He was the gospel. The gospel is not a set of doctrines, but a redeemed lifestyle reflecting God’s qualities. What the early Christians did was not “life-style evangelism” true to a proven method, but their normal everyday life had powerful in-built evangelistic implications, true to a loving and compassionate God.

No Missions

Georg Kretschmar points out, that “*the recruitment to faith was never institutionalized, there was no organising the congregation for missions.*” The impact of the church as an entity was so strong, that most early Christians did not even pray for the conversions of pagans, but, according to Yves Congar, a Dominican scholar, they prayed for the prosperity and peace of the people. There is, says Norbert Brox, an “*astonishing absence of thinking and talking about missions.*” The reason for this “absence” is very much the same as for the “absence” of Evangelism: the church in itself was the mission. The “Missions Journeys” of Paul and his companions were not understood as “Missions as we know it” by Paul himself, but emerged as titles in the appendix of Bibles to handdrawn maps of the Mediterranean centuries later. Paul was simply doing apostolic and prophetic ministry, and so was the church that had been planted and emerged through these ministries. Since the church literally was the mission, it did not so much send out special “missionaries” - it literally sent out itself, in the form of multipliable units.

No attractive worship services

Although the church in Corinth was still open to outsiders, from the mid-first century onwards pagans were usually neither admitted to Christian meetings nor invited at all. After the persecution under Nero in the 60s of the first century, most Churches closed their doors to outsiders. One of the functions of the deacons even seemed to have been that of an “ecclesiastical bouncer”, the typically heavy set person who in today’s world stands at the door of private clubs and bars to evict, if necessary by force, unwanted elements. They had to screen the wolves from the lambs, as the “Testament of our Lord”, a mid-fourth century document describing the functions of the deacons, explains. Paul was warning the Galatians against “*false brothers, sneaking in to spy out our liberty in Christ*” (Gal 2:4). The fellowship meetings of the Christians were not meant at all to be attractive for outsiders, because they were not designed for them. Mid-third century Bishop Cyprian in Carthage compared the church with the “enclosed garden” of Songs of Solomon (4:12). Even a catechumen, someone in daily Bible training under an instructor/teacher was firmly dismissed before the Christians did their secret rites, the prayers, the Holy Kiss, baptisms and the Lord’s Supper. The Christians were very much what Celsus, a critic of the early church, called a “secret society.”

Worship in the New Testament is never mentioned to be the reason Christians gather together, and surely not consisting in singing a number of songs. It is an obedient and sacrificial lifestyle of a person which, yes, sometimes does sing, but does this because the whole life is living worship. Abraham knew this well, as he went up to Mount Morija to sacrifice his only son Isaak, he told to the waiting servants that he is going up “to worship” (Gen 22).

No mainstream

Christians in the early centuries often called themselves “paroikoi” (1. Peter 2:11), resident aliens, or “the alien next door”. The understanding they had of themselves was not to be settlers and dutiful citizens with a special religious persuasion, but to be “a colony of aliens”, at home everywhere, fully at home nowhere. When people became Christians they were “*converted to marginality*”, as Brazilian Eduardo Hoornaert said. Rather than being part of the main social establishment they were part of a “counter-culture”, an anti-society, secret and mysterious to many, loyal to “another king”, a distinctively different spiritual tribe. Paul describes himself to Felix: “*I admit that I am a follower of The Way, which they call a sect*” (Acts 24:14), and was known as the “*ringleader of a sect, a troublemaker*” (24:5).

How and why, then, did people become Christians?

If it was not for systematic evangelistic programmes, mission outreach and invitations to attractive worship services, how did people become Christians? And if becoming a Christian meant to join an outcast and secretive society, endanger their social success and potentially end up as a candidate for death, why did people want to become Christians?

As we will now look at some of the historic reasons for large numbers of people who decided to join the church then, we might find clues to similar developments now. Again we should not fall into the trap and copy historic methodologies and procedures from another time and space 1:1, but learn from the underlying principles and be highly creative and flexible in their outworking in today's cultures and people groups.

Beyond the fact that Christians lived in organic and easily multipliable housechurches, equipped and guided by the five-fold ministry (Eph. 4:11), some of the main reasons for people becoming Christians in ancient times, according to numerous historic studies done by Alan Kreider and others, include:

1. Curiosity

Quite opposite to many of today's churches which are trying to be attractive to the world, welcome visitors with sweets and visitors cards, display signs at the entrance reading “Everybody welcome!”, have outreach campaigns of any size and type, focussed on getting outsiders to come to church, and are generally trying to be at least seeker sensitive or even seeker driven, the early churches worked on very different dynamics. One of them was the insatiable curiosity of people. People are by nature adventurous and curious, seeking “to go where no one has gone before”. Many today wonder why the occult movements and secret circles and societies like the Freemasons are still flourishing. The answer is: they appeal to man's basic instinct to be a tribal being, with the strong need to be part of an exclusive family, group and tribe, for which humans are ready to undergo almost any sort of initiation process. Jesus knew this, and had something like a dual communication style, one for those “inside”, and another for those “outside”, “Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable.” (Mt 13:34). This pattern seems to continue in the church: preaching was for those outside, teaching for those inside the church. Jesus was very firm on this dual pattern: “*To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, in order that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand*” (Luke 8:10). Even his words about the “narrow gate” created a powerful curiosity and an almost feverish excitement amongst many to know the mysterious message and movement of Jesus. Do they know something we do not know? Jesus knew that the “Mystery of the Gospel” is not like “*pearls thrown before the pigs*”, but duly discovered, sought out, and only then found, quite by revelation.

People were not admitted to freely enter churches, and it only sparked and heightened their interest.

If I tell my four-year old son not to open that drawer under any circumstance once I leave the room, I prophetically know, which place he is almost magically and irresistibly drawn once I go out: that very forbidden drawer.

Today we are sometimes in the danger of pressing home answers to people who have not even asked the right questions, and prevent people from truly becoming curious. Jesus described himself as the Water of Life, and the disciples as the salt of the earth. If someone eats salt, it will make him thirsty, even when he has not been thirsty before. The dynamics behind it is this: If people are not thirsty for the Water of Life yet, feed them salt. Then they will become thirsty, and then they will drink.

2. Steadfastness in persecution and martyrdom

The first time that many people in the first centuries actually saw a “life-Christian” was when they saw one die. Many Christians were crucified, attacked by wild beasts, roasted on chairs of molten iron, or just burnt. Their humble and patient and often enough joyful endurance of those dreadful torments was medically inexplicable; their love for each other, giving each other the kiss of peace, a revolutionary sign of an

obvious secret society before they were killed, was transparent. Those who guarded the Christians on their way to their executions often said: "There is a power among them!" and the fact that they were ready to die for their belief made many secretly wish they had something so powerful to believe in. As a result, more people were fascinated, their curiosity level rose even more - and were attracted to the church. Many have repeated the true statement that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." A Christianity which has something to die for has a powerful attraction for the living.

3. Exorcism

When Jesus exercised authority over evil spirits and then told his disciples to "drive out demons" (Mt. 10:8), his early followers listened carefully - and did as they were told. In the early centuries, described by many as "an age of bondage, life-disfiguring addictions and compulsions," - which does not seem to be much different from today - the freedom and fullness of life in Christ could not remain hidden for long. As one spokesman for many, Irenaeus pointed to the "evangelistic" function of exorcism: "Those who have been cleansed often both believe in Christ and join themselves to the Church". In an age of competitive miracle working, the Christian God and this powerful "spiritual detoxification" in the name of Jesus seemed stronger and more profound than the influence of other gods. Catechist Justin of Rome, writing about 150, described how Christians helped other people almost systematically to renounce demons and see them being liberated from spiritual oppression mainly in four key areas: unlawful sex, the secret and magic arts, escalating private wealth, and violent xenophobia, the hate of foreigners.

The early Christians would have seen people practising illicit sex outside of marriage; someone accumulating material wealth just for his personal gain; somebody involved in occultism, and those being rough and violent to foreigners and strangers as demonically bound, persons who needs the help of Jesus to be released from those overpowering spiritual forces beyond any known human control. As the church stopped focussing on these ministries in later centuries, they left a gaping vacuum, which might need to be filled again by the only organism on earth called and gifted to do so, the church.

4. They had found the Way to live

Christians believed they were God's instrument of a new world, and not only had they found the right reason and way to die, they had also found the right way to live. Before they were called Christians, they were called followers of The Way for two reasons: Jesus had said "I am the Way," and they had obviously found the way to live. The way they organised and structured their life was called the church. When a Christian whispered to a pagan he knew: "*I have found the way to live!*", it was not offensive, but intriguing and quite attractive in an age where people were aware that things are somehow going wrong with them. In addition to that, Christians had a communal lifestyle, socially inclusive like no other group in ancient history. They shared material blessings out of a common fund with everyone in need. They even used to pick up discarded babies left to die on the local garbage dumps, and raised them as their own, or volunteered to nurse victims of the plague, endangering their own lives, much to the dumbfounding of their contemporaries. In the eyes of a materialistic society, they were either crazy or holy. They were approachable and trusted friends and counsellors for anyone. This was true specially for the women, maybe because of their ability to listen to people and be attentive to their questions. Augustine wrote quite embarrassed to a group of men: "*Oh you men, you are easily beaten by your women. It is their presence in great numbers that causes the church to grow.*" The Christians were aware that the life of their "free communities" was remarkable. It is the "*Beauty of life that causes strangers to join the ranks*", one of them wrote. They could selfconsciously say: "*We do not talk about great things, we live them.*" That is also why the early leaders of the churches gave much attention to maintain the quality of fellowship, love and relationship amongst each other, because they knew that this is one of the main reasons for people being drawn to Christ and being saved.

5. The teachings and person of Jesus

A modern day Christian leader from Africa once exclaimed about the Christian missionaries he knew: "They came to preach the gospel to us, but they did not show us how to live!" Many early Christians were convinced, "that conversion began not so much at the level of belief than at the level of lifestyle", says Kreider. Only a person who was willing to change his life was ready for the gospel. That is also the reason why, one of the most compelling dynamics of people being drawn to the church was the person and teaching of Jesus himself. His "sermon of the Mount" was not so much understood as a sermon or moral dream, but as a set of Godly ethics, a heavenly guide to live by. Pagans of all ages were powerfully drawn to Jesus and his sayings. No other teaching of Jesus was more often repeated than the command to love the

enemies. These words, many held, were so wonderful that they made you either laugh or cry. The church did not preach itself, it preached Christ by promoting his teaching and by living his lifestyle.

The derailing of the church

The New Testament Church has been mostly an organic, relational, spiritual family, multiplying itself. But even before his death, Jesus warned his disciples of deception, false prophets, false Christs, who all have one common purpose: to deceive and to derail the elect. It is natural for all of us to think of this deception to be a part of a terrible future, and to happen to “all the others”, but not us. However, Paul, Peter, and Jude all warn, of the immediate coming of ungodly men, false teachers and false prophets, disguising as angels from heaven. They did not mince words: they even cursed those who will do this in advance (Gal 1:8-10; 2 Pet 2:1-2; Jude 1:3-6).

A growing number of Christian leaders today entertain a daunting realisation that this deception may have already happened in global proportions through what has been coined “Christendom,” the derailed caricature and doomed version of Christianity. Maybe the worst of what Christ has predicted is yet to come, and we need to be prepared for a worst possible scenario. But this also means that today we may simply stand on the apogee of many already derailed and now institutionalised developments. Even if we want to be true children of our mother churches, we will therefore automatically become part of traditional movements which may have departed long ago from other movements that themselves have departed from some derailed movements in the past. If the river has once found its bed, it is very difficult to change its course. However, our first allegiance as Christians is with the God of the future, not with the history of the past. Rick Joyner, a prophetic teacher from the USA, said it this way: many need to realize, that they do not need to be born by the mother (church), but truly be born of the Father in heaven himself.

Why were the Dark Ages dark?

“I am the light of the World,” says Jesus. To darken the Light of the world means to darken the world. And dark, the world did become. If there ever was a derailing of the church, it is worth to go back a few steps in history and have a look at some of these ecclesiological accidents. How did it happen?

A silent revolution

Church historians agree that it may have begun with challenging and changing the apostolic teaching on repentance, holiness and sin, baptisms and the Godhead itself. One of the first attempts at inventing the nonscriptural distinction between “clergy and laity” was made by the Nicolaites, a group that emphasized the difference between the “listening lay people and the ministering brothers”. They go back to Nicolas, who was one of the first seven church deacons (Acts 6:5), later influenced by Greek Dualism, who then goes on to develop the doctrine of “the Nicolaites” (Rev 2:6), which the risen Christ says “he hates.” Nicolait in Greek is composed of two words. *Nikao* means conquer, to be above others, and *laos* means common people. “A Nicolait is someone conquering the common people, climbing above the laity”, says Watchman Nee in his book “The Orthodoxy of the Church”. “*The conduct of climbing over and above the common believers as a mediatorial class is what the Lord detests and hates*”.

Then there was the aspect of the reintroduction of two powerful forces to Christianity: moralism and religion. The one introduced a set of behavioural patterns, a group of laws to live by; the other may have started with the crucifix, starting to “cross oneself” and ward off some evil spirit through this practise. It may have been a few “harmless” waxcandles there and some burnt-incense here, but it is not harmless at all. It drew back Christianity into the religious “patterns of the world”, complete with idols, charms, religious rites, priests.

From then on it was a quick and constant succession of derailments from the original teachings of Jesus and the Apostles: Early “innovations” were the veneration of the usually martyred Saints, and the separation of the Lords Supper as a meaningful and prophetic way to eat together in the presence of Christ into a “love or agape feast” and “the eucharist”, a social potluck-type dinner and a religious and highly symbolic function. In the second half of the first century documents like the Didache and the Canon of Hippolytus show that the Lords Suppers were not “attached” to a meal, it was a meal, says Peter. H. Davis in his article “The Church in the House”. But very soon, the “love-feast” became purely social and was abandoned, whereby the Eucharist in its symbolic form - without “real food” - became the accepted way to celebrate the Lords Supper. Around the year 150 “Scholastic Theology” was introduced, as a system to interpret the scriptures and defend it against heresies like the Gnosis. Very soon the defensive system became more important than the message it defended.

As early as 220 AD, Origen introduces the doctrine of infant baptism in Alexandria, which, by 416 AD became not only compulsory in the Western churchworld, but remained the church's main way of "evangelism" and initiating the general population into the church system, a practise that can be likened to selling spiritual insurance for the afterlife to biblically ignorant, but religious and pious parents who fear for their children and simply had to trust the religious specialists of the day.

Constantine

When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity (312) and made Christianity in his Edict of Milan a State-religion, Christians, tired of centuries of persecution, celebrated him as a saviour, relaxed - and experienced probably the biggest single derailment in history. During this time the church was heavily professionalized, were approved and "licensed" Priests conducted weddings and other functions in a more and more professional public matter, and the church experienced the doubtful blessing to be equipped with a mediatorial caste between itself and God. The church needed to be "fit for the King" and his company, and that also meant cathedrals, not shabby houses. Through this, the great divide between clergy and laity not only emerged, it was sanctioned, institutionalized and sealed and protected by the State, an error that was costing the lives of millions of martyrs until today, who have been killed at the hand of political soldiers, instigated by "properly organised and registered" advocates of Christendom.

The church had gladly accepted national graduation from a persecuted cult to a State-prescribed religion, and lost its prophetic power over social, cultural and pagan habits in the process, because it was from now on married to the system that granted and protected all of it. The church lost its identity as a prophetic counter-culture, supernaturally different from the patterns of this world, and became a celebrated insider. As a result, both the State and the Church were trapped. The state lost its' direction because it had swallowed the beacon and the compass, and the church became drunk with political power.

Forbidding the housechurch

In all these developments, a very significant one stands out: Bishops Theodosius and Gratian (380) ordered that there should be only one state-recognized Orthodox church and one set of faith - the orthodox dogma. Each Roman citizen was forced to be a member and should be made to believe in the "lex fidei," the law of faith. Other groups and movements - including those meeting in homes - were forbidden. That meant the legal end of the housechurch. The law turned the rules upside down. Once, church buildings were not even allowed by the government until the rule of Severus around AD 222-235, and housechurches where the only way for Christians to meet. But from now on, to start a housechurch meant breaking the law and becoming a criminal. This started a new era: the persecution of the church in the name of the "church."

Reviving synagoge-style worship pattens

Just as the the jewish *Mishnah* allowed ten male Jews to form a synagogue, Christians have inherited their pattern of worship from the jewish synagoges, not the temple, says Dr. Met Castillo. Rabinowitz has found five elements in synagogue worship: Invitation to worship with hymns and a formal call to worship; prayers and petitions; scripture lessons; an address based on the scripture lessons; conclusion with benedictions. As the Christian worship became more and more formal in christian church-houses rather tahn house-churches after the time of Constantine, the basic jewish synagogue-pattern was revived and thus inherited, with the addition of saying the creed. This made the church fall back into legalistic and ritualistic patterns of worship which would remain almost unchanged for the next centuries and became the sacrosanct and agreed upon style of meetings for Christians.

Priscillians movement

Priscillan was a Spanish nobleman who, already in the 4th century, immediately revolted against the State-and Priest-religion. This man, on fire for God, "initiated a large lay movement in Spain and France; even many priests and bishops joined in. They started small fellowships they called brotherhoods, where, only converted and baptized Christians could take part of their simple meetings in ordinary houses. That was too much for orthodox church to take: Priscillian and six of his friends were killed in Trier", says Ch. Babut, who studied this movement. In this they became a forerunner of many similar reformation movements like the Bogomilians, Petrobustians, Patarenians, Waldensians, Lollards and others.

The road to the bottom

Far gone were the times, when the train of Christianity was running on safe prophetic and apostolic tracks right on target. From here on the road into the wilderness continued. It was a time which corresponds in some ways

greatly to today's spiritual anarchy in some countries, where, people in practice basically believed anything - as long as it was not in the Bible.

Forgotten were the words of Jesus, "let the dead bury the dead," and the church proudly engaged in opening graveyards close by the "holy" church building, where people felt they were safe from the monsters and dragons of the depth, fuelled by the naive and religious belief that God dwells in Church buildings in a special way. The Council of Ephesus (431) proclaimed the worship of Mary as the mother of God. Leo the Great pronounced himself Bishop of Rome (440), and Cesar Valentinian (445) confirmed his position as the spiritual leader of the whole Western Empire. Around 500 the priesthood started to observe a common dress code. With Justinian (527-565) the church became truly a State-ordained church: all priest became public servants. As early as 607, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Boniface III was the first bishop to adopt the name Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. Before that, this title (Pontifex maximus - Latin for big bridgebuilder) was used by the Emperors of Rome to describe themselves as high priests and Gods of the Roman Empire. Some further steps down into spiritual darkness were:

- 709 Kissing the Pope's foot begins
- 786 Worship of images and relics develops
- 850 Use of holy water begins
- 995 Canonization of dead Saints
- 998 Fasting on Fridays and before Lent
- 1079 Celibacy of the priesthood instituted
- 1090 Prayer beads adopted from several pagan religious systems
- 1184 The Inquisition begins - about 26 million Jews and Protestant believers will die at the hands of the church of Rome alone before it ends. It is officially established by Pope Innocence IV in 1252. The Reformation Churches joined later in the same spirit
- 1190 The sale of indulgences - forgiveness of sins against payment of money- is instituted
- 1215 Transubstantiation of the wafer and wine: these elements supernaturally change into the Body and Blood of Jesus at the incantation of the Priest
- 1229 Bible as a book too holy to read was forbidden to laymen
- 1414 Communion cup was forbidden to lay people
- 1439 Doctrine of Purgatory decreed
- 1439 Dogma of sacraments affirmed
- 1545 Tradition granted equal authority with the Bible (Council of Trent)

The Inquisition

As a mere political consequence of the decision already taken under Gratian and Theodosius in AD 380, the Inquisition, a religious-political joint venture in the form of a Christian "faith police", lifted its bloody head, killing millions of Protestants at the hands of Catholics, and Catholics and so called "Anabaptists" at the hand of Protestants. After defeating the Islamic Kingdom in Granada 1492, the Inquisition found yet another group to hunt: the Moriscos, Islamic Maures which had converted to Christianity. Persecuted and killed by almost everyone were the Jews, seen as the "murderers of God".

Only as late as 22 January, 1998 did the Vatican, under the leadership of German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, open its extensive archives on the Inquisition in the Palazzo del Sant'Uffizio in Rome, where the bloody business of systematically persecuting and killing heretics is documented in no less than 4.500 large volumes. "We are concerned about the truth, and this is an act of selfcleansing", says Cardinal Achille Silvestrini. It is believed however, that those 4.500 volumes represent much less than a third of the original material, which got lost.

"The Inquisition sniffed with dedication after anyone who only faintly smelled a heretic", says the German Magazine SPIEGEL (23/1998) in a report. Any dangerous written material was immediately put on the "Index Additus Librorum Prohibitum", the black list of forbidden books, and burnt, wherever possible. The Inquisition was especially cruel in Spain, where as late as 1826, 18 years after Joseph Bonaparte, a brother of Napoleon, declared the Inquisition illegal in 1808, the last "heretic" was hanged in Valencia. This religious persecution went hand in hand with the proverbial witch-hunt, and we could imagine Satans glee to also see Biblically converted women and housechurch leaders being put to the stake by the church in the name of witchcraft. Equally cruel and heartless was the Inquisition in Germany. When, for example, Reformer Jan Hus died in German Konstanz on the stake, (1415), the "Fathers of the Council" simply laughed.

The reformation