

If we compare cell churches and housechurches, they might simply echo the age old distinction between chiefdoms, tribes with a headman, and acephalous or headless tribes. Cell churches would then reflect the chiefdom pattern, housechurches the makeup of the headless tribal societies.

2. *City and village culture*

Many of today's Cell Churches have developed in cities or metropolitan areas, whereby housechurches have flourished in both contexts, cities and villages. Most Cell Churches are city-bred. I think this is important to note. Although, some have contended, the story of redemption starts in the garden of Eden and ends in the new city of Jerusalem, many people today do simply live in both worlds at the same time, the city and the village. A person might dwell in a city, but still live in a village within the city, his colony, barrangay, apartment block, gated community, slum or neighborhood quarter. As much as the Cell Church seems to offer a visible island in the urban sea of humanity, a castle rising above the masses, where people can seek and find refuge under a standard bearers' flag or in the shadow of a great man of God, we need not forget that this is only a part of the full picture, and not applicable for everybody at all. It is true that many people in cities seem socially lost, without identity, waiting for someone to come along to offer them a place to belong. But that is only true at the surface. Underneath, many people even in cities actually "do belong" already, to a club, a clan, a group of all sorts, a gang, a modern "tribe", or feel a strong part of their geographic location, their apartment block or neighbourhood watch group, for example. They still have their tribe, their village, even within the city. Almost all nations - with the obvious exception of typical city-nations like Singapore or the Vatican, retain most of its heritage, typical life patterns and cultural traditions and strongholds in the village. Many nations are increasingly aware and proud of that. "India lives in a village", exclaimed Mahatma Gandhi. But what if the church in India, for example, lives in the cities? Can a city church disciple villages? The statistics say no. The consequences are simple enough: a church developed in the city, on average, will not win the villages. If we do not win the villages, we will not disciple the whole nation. As much as we need to "win the cities" - which we could also see as a huge network of villages and neighbourhoods - we need the type of church which can penetrate and win the villages, too. If we can disciple the neighbourhoods, we can also disciple the nation. The housechurches seem to be able to do both.

3. *War and peace*

Some tribes are traditional warrior tribes, like the African Massai, the Japanese or the Norwegian Vikings, while others have a more peaceful mindset and history like the Dravidians of South India, the Finns, the Filipinos or the nomadic Berbers. Some nations have developed, more than others, a warrior culture, others are simply more peaceloving and settler minded. This is expressed in the way they see their nation, see themselves as individuals, in the films they produce, in the role of the army or the law, and whether they like have a king or a president. In some countries many people simply have come to expect others to tell them what to do, in other countries that same behaviour would be highly offensive. In some countries people are highly formal and ritualistic, in others extremely low key and cordial. Some countries feel like you enter an army camp, with tight control from top to bottom, where nobody moves without prior permission; other countries are more like a camping ground, a loosely organised and quite pleasurable mess. In many western countries individualism and democracy is valued above all else, where each person is in charge of his own life, where in other nations the individual feels much more part of the "Ummah", the tight-knit community, and others are generally in charge of his life. Churches growing in particular cultures and nations always reflect, to a high degree, this "war or peace" mentality. A person growing up in a "warrior" culture will much more expect and accept others to tell him which place to sit and belong, what to do and how to behave. From childhood on his life will be filled with little rituals and ceremonies, ribbons and badges, titles and climbing carrier ladders, and there will be always a standard bearer to which he should rally. What wonder if he expects the same in church. The Cell Church, I believe, reflects that pattern, and rightfully so. However, people growing up with a peaceful, democratic, socialist or even communist background have something in common with today's X-Generation culture in the West: they will instinctively question any self-imposing authority, be it political, economical, or spiritual. They will resist a church with a "military touch and a spiritual general on top", and value an organic and relational church with servant leadership. This is one more reason why I favour housechurches. They simply function in both "war and peace climates".

4. *Interdependent status*

Where the cell is an important part of a larger individual church - it "belongs" structurally to the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul or the Faith Community Baptists Church in Singapore -, the housechurch does not organisationally "belong" to a larger unit in that sense. It is usually part of an interdependent - not independent! - network of similar housechurches, or functions completely on its own. They are not part of a larger, "real" church, they are the real thing all by themselves.

5. *Jethro or the Five-fold ministry*

In tune with a stunning absence of the fivefold ministry, many Cell Churches favour the so-called Jethro-principle, a system of administration which delegates authority to several levels of leadership. Jethro, Moses's father in law, advised him (Ex.18) to delegate judging the people of Israel to "rulers and officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and ten", because otherwise he would be overworked. What we should not fail to notice, however, is that the Jethro-principle is basically a policing structure enforcing law and order, not designed to build and empower the New Testament fellowship of grace and love. Moses was a mediator between the people of Israel and God, and this is exactly what Jesus did away with, as he himself became the mediator once and for all, opening access to the throne of grace for all people washed by the blood of the lamb. Are we literally trying to do the new in the power of the old? In a Cell Church the unquestioned leader is typically of a Moses type, the "Senior Pastor" with his "cabinet of Ministers", delegating his authority to a myriad of levels of responsibility and leadership with quite an enormous amount of counting, administration, bureaucracy, and, may I say it, control. This sometimes looks to me like a protestant attempt in Catholicism. Is it a Freudian lapse when we read in "Church Growth and the Home Cell System" (Seoul, page 122) that "*every week new souls are being added to the central computer*"? What it does to somebodies' Ego to know that he or she is number 5.432 in the tracking system of the churches computers I do not know. What I do know is this: few people want to be run and tracked by others, and live a life where every move is controlled and observed by the watchful eye of "Big Brother". I have been proudly introduced into a number of large computer operating rooms of Cell Churches as if it were the "Holy of Holies". Sometimes I walked away with the feeling that the greatest unspoken fear of this church is that someone might fail to do his duty, walk out of line, the senior pastor falls ill or dies, the electricity will fail, or a computer virus creeps in, and the whole church will fall apart in an instant.

"*The growth of the (Cell) Church should only be limited by our anointing and vision*", says Lawrence Khong, and Markus Koch, working with the Christliches Zentrum Buchegg, a Cell Church in Zürich, Switzerland, goes on to suggest that "*a church should be lead by one pastor*". This traditional one pastor-centred thinking does not differ much from the congregational model of church at all. In fact, the very life and quality of the church would depend very highly on the quality, vision and energy of the Senior Pastor. Knowing many christian leaders - and myself! - I am not only suggesting that something can go wrong with anyone, and we therefore should not build too much on just one persons' charisma. But the "stock" of senior pastors available today is quite limited, too. In every nation the number of persons with the calibre of a Lawrence Khong, Yonggi Cho, Ralph Neighbour, Kriensak Chareonwonsak, William Kumuyi, Gerald Coates, Max Schlöpfer, D. Mohan, Bill Hybels and Cesar Castellanos is simply limited. They may be not really just "Senior Pastors" at all, but truly people with an apostolic gifting and calling much larger than their current setup, and should and will probably not confine themselves just to "their own church" in the future or even now.

A housechurch, in contrast to all this, is much less threatened by an electrical power cut, because there is not much data to loose. The elders of housechurches are in relationship with people doing the fivefold ministry, were God empowers and anoints people to encourage, empower and build up others to do the work of the ministry. This fivefold ministry functions like a blood-circulating system amongst the housechurch-"cells", is low key and quite invisible. The idea is not delegating authority top-down to build an ever-increasing pyramid touching the sky, but empowering each other to spread out and generate a movement which can fit under a carpet.

5. *Do we have a programme, or "are we the programme"?*

In a typical Cell Church there is an agenda to accomplish and a fairly set pattern to follow for each cell. This agenda could be handed to the "cell leader" on a sheet from the Senior Pastor or a responsible person, or discussed with the cell leaders on Wednesday in order to rehearse for the cell meetings on Thursday, or the agenda might be contained in the agreed upon pattern for such meetings. Yonggi Cho advises other ministers "*to never delegate the important responsibility of writing the teaching lessons and having seminars with the homecell leaders to others*".

In contrast, the housechurch ideally is the agenda itself. Since a housechurch is typically part of an apostolic network within which the five-fold ministry is operating, it is prevented from becoming a pious bless-me club or an isolated social club or a fellowship with koinonitis, that is a form of "fellowship-infection" of an inward looking and selfcentred christian group, not by a programme, but by the way it functions and relates to other housechurches. Although Christians in housechurches read and discuss the Bible, it is not a bible study; although they pray, it is not a prayer meeting. Since Jesus is a person, the idea of having each meeting with that person structured around the same old pattern seems to be as creative and inventive as a bridegroom bringing his future bride each day the same set of flowers, singing the same songs, and declaring his ardent love in the same poems. I suspect after a short time she would be less than excited to receive him and listen to his programme. Much of the programme-drivenness of the traditional church stems from the fact that most

meetings are usually arranged in such a way that there can be no (unpleasant!?) surprises, like “lay people” exercising gifts to the embarrassment of a religious professional; for the very fear of something going terribly wrong, many of them have developed democratic forms of administration. Democracy may look like the safest form of church government, but it has proven to be the very one which is quickly leading into spiritual oblivion and facelessness, because it has the ability to block out prophetic direction in the name of the numerical majority, and usually introduces bureaucracy as the most inhumane and legalistic form of administration by accountants who will make sure that the letter of the law is followed. It is yes or no. Instead of people symbolically sitting under the paradisiacal tree of life, we end up all sitting - and arguing! - under the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and who is right becomes more important than who we are in Christ. The church programmes then start to become fool proof, follow an agreed-upon pattern (unpack the guitar and songbooks, sing, pray, listen to a bible study or sermon, pray again, close the meeting), where simply nothing can go wrong. In such a context, I suspect, not much can go right, either. Nothing is wrong with singing, praying and having bible study in itself. But if it becomes the dominating programme whenever Christians meet, it will soon become a tradition. This is also why a preoccupation with Bible studies or even prayer can easily kill a healthy community, because it values and emphasizes one agenda over the others. This ultimately attracts and involves people quickly into a programme, which is easy for the first few months, but then not only generates the need to go on inventing follow-up programmes to the last follow-up programme, but starts to actually wear and burn out the people. “*When we realized this with a shock, we closed down all our prayer meetings*”, says Pastor D. Mohan of the 12.000 member Assemblies of God Church in Madras, India.

In a housechurch the idea is to come together in order to be together in the presence of Jesus, who, yes, might very well have an agenda for the asking, and will gladly reveal it through his Holy Spirit and anyone present with a prophetic ministry (1. Cor. 14:26-29: “*When you come together ... two or three prophets should speak.*” The core reason Christians come together is to share and transfer life, and since life is not predictable, their meetings are not really predictable also. That this very issue of unpredictability makes housechurches more attractive, at least for Teenagers, may be a pleasant sideeffect.

An agenda can potentially even harm or prevent community and fellowship, because it may introduce an overriding focus to the community and squeeze it mechanically into a predefined direction. The very agenda-drivenness of Cell Church introduces a condition, and conditional fellowship is limited fellowship. Many such programmes or agendas develop because Christians are told that their meetings are for evangelistic purposes and reasons. This evangelistic structure carries and inbuilt evangelistic pressure to perform, which accounts for much of the startling burn-out figures of Cell Churches.

Programmes can, however, sometimes serve as a temporary method of ingraining a mentality or a pattern of behaviour into people. Once they have achieved that, the programme can be discarded and life can go on. I heard about one of the best of such programmes for cell meetings from my friend Steve Dixon of the cell-based Kings Church in Slough (UK). They call it L.I.F.E.: L stands for dealing with life issues, I for intercession, F for Fun, fellowship and food, and E for evangelism.

Rather than seeing church or cell groups as “a series of programme driven weekly meetings at 7.30 PM at Elms street”, housechurches do see their essence as sharing lives, and could meet everyday like in biblical days, or any other number of times suitable. Here, the people are the resources, Jesus is the programme, fellowship is the reason, multiplication is the outcome, and discipling the neighbourhood the goal.

6. *Pyramid or flat structure*

Most everything that man touches - buildings, companies, politics, grows into a bigger and higher structure, with any amount of levels, stairs and pyramid schemes. Beyond the Tabernacle, which was a tent, the Temple was the only building God ever designed, and it was flat, not multi-storied. The Cell church usually develops quickly into a pyramid structure with the Senior Pastor on top, followed downwards by Assistant Pastors, Directors of Pastoral Care Departments, District Pastors, Sub-District Pastors, Section Leaders and finally, at the bottom, the Home Cell Leaders with their Assistant Home Cell leader and Spiritual Parents. The housechurch has, in comparison, a flat structure. The various tasks are not executed by people within a hierarchy, but by people uniquely gifted for a special ministry relating to each other as redeemed friends and submitting themselves to each other. In the New Testament there is no inferiority or superiority amongst members of the church, but equality: no one is more important than the others (1 Cor. 12:21-25), but everyone has to simply fulfill a different function within the Body. Ministry is therefore not delegated top-down but earned through a spirit of humble servanthood. There are three main areas of responsibility:

- a. The housechurches are led by Elders;
- b. the elders are constantly equipped and trained by people who have been called by God for one of the five-fold ministries;

- c. Those spiritual equippers are relating to what I call apostolic regional fathers, people with an apostolic and prophetic gifting plus a special calling from God for a city, a region or a nation. Those apostolic fathers, usually recognizable by the almost unbearable agony and spiritual pain they bear for a place, a city, a nation or a people group, become the local backbone, the regional or national “pillars of faith”, anchoring the whole movement of housechurches and being responsible for any celebrations and the city-church that will emerge.

The housechurch is typically part of an interdependent (not: independent) network, a truly selfregulating system of interrelated elements or clusters of elements. *“The biotic principle of interdependence states that the way the individual parts are integrated into a whole system is more important than the parts themselves. This is nature’s blueprint: structured interdependence”*, says Christian Schwarz.

The structure is flat, because there is no one “higher” or more important than the other person. This also has consequences for the potential corruption with money and power in the church, from which the traditional church is not exactly free and immune, because it is not all that impressing to be the humble elder of 13 others or to simply serve a number of housechurches as a teacher, pastor or evangelist.

7. *Lead or fathered*

In spite of Jesus’ stern words *“do not let anyone call you a leader, for one is your leader, Christ”* (Mt 23:10), one of the greatest cries of today’s church is for more leaders. We humans love leaders, and chuckle knowingly when we drink out of a coffee mug that reads the slogan: Lead, follow, or get out of the way. As always, when we ignore a biblical principle, there is a price to pay. Like in the days of Saul God wanted to be King of the Israelites, but the nation wanted to rather follow the ways of the nations and have a decent king. Today we are in the same danger. The whole world wants leaders, not servants, and so does the traditional church. Maybe we simply want what God is not willing to give, and instead of seeing our futile attempts, we carry on with what we think is persistence. Just like a human body the Body of Christ has not many leaders, but simply many different members, all with different functions. As those members function together in collective obedience to their head, so the whole Body is literally led by the head. To call one member a leader over the others - and in spite of the presence of the head! - would be grossly misleading. Jesus is the head of the church, and that is all the leadership it truly needs. The church is led when its members obey its head. The Church experiences leadership as they collectively obey their head and function together in unity.

No leadership awards in heaven

If we want to see biblical - and not political or management type - leadership to happen, we must stop to blindly assuming and usurping leadership of the church, as if it is the most natural thing to do. Man assumes leadership to anything he touches. It is part of his creational brief. However, the church is an exception: it is not man’s invention nor property. It is truly God’s. This is something which runs so contrary to our human thinking, that supernatural faith in a God who has things under control when they long seem to have slipped out of our hands is simply required to be true and faithful stewards of his church. That is also why God is mainly reigning his church through apostolic and prophetic people who usually have the charismatic gift of faith more than others. Rick Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Community Church says it this way: *“For a church to grow, both the pastor and the people must give up control.”*

Leadership in the political sense of assuming the last responsibility, filling a ministry slot and function within a job description within a programme, or to take on some delegated authority from someone else, is simply not good enough for the church. This will choke its development like Saul choked Israel, or bygone bishops who behaved like little kings choked the development of the Church and led them into plain meaninglessness and religious chiefdoms. The Body of Christ requires humble and faithful stewards, functioning in obedience to Christ and in mutual love, respect and submission to each other, not highly professional and individual great “leaders” in their own right, who build their little kingdoms around their personality or personal gifting for some time. The Church requires Christ-like stewards managing God’s *oikonomia* or household well, who know that they themselves are led by Christ, who is neither dominating and order-giving nor works with assistants, but has absolute faith in his father and has *therefore* been entrusted with the world.

Cell Churches are very leader-intensive; they require leadership at many levels. Housechurches, in contrast, are basically not led, but fathered. A Cell group usually has a leader and an assistant leader, a housechurch has an elder. There is a huge difference. I am the father and husband of a small family, but few would call me the leader of my family. It is simply part of a father’s brief to lead, but it is not necessarily part of a leader’s brief to father. The nature of housechurches are spiritual extended families, extension centres of the heavenly father’s heart, who expresses his passionate heart for his children through special people whose hearts are beating to the rhythm of God’s own passion. No church in the New Testament is said to be “led” by a pastor or any other leader; but there are always God-ordained persons - stewards - who are carrying a special responsibility for the church, namely the elders, the apostles and prophets. Again, this does not mean that they are leaders. Few

would turn to a steward to ask for his business card. The stewards of the Church are servants, and the more they serve, the more they will ultimately lead (Lk 22:6) in a way which is upside-down to the way the world expects leadership. An obedient and humble servant can lead because he is lead. Leadership, if at all, is therefore a function of obedience. Many housechurch movements in the world have no leaders in the political sense; they are served by anointed stewards, who function very much like spiritual fathers and mothers, as in the case of Yuan Allen in Beijing, the “Father” of the Chinese Housechurch movement.

For a Cell Church with a pyramid structure and “leaders” trained at every level, it is quite possible that a new professionalism and clericalism enters through the back door. In addition, many Cell Churches have a “leaders ladder”, where a person can work himself “up” from assistant cell leader level to assistant to the senior pastor. Quite apart from the danger of possible competition in such a “career structure”, it means that a person usually performs his task only for a short time, and then moves on or up. What if God has called a person simply to be an elder, and never fashioned him or her to become assistant senior pastor at all?

8. *The role of Celebrations*

The Cell Church typically requires both sociological sizes, the cell and the celebration, to function well; both are necessary wings of the “two-winged church”, as Bill Beckham illustrates it. The housechurch can exist independent of celebrations, especially in a hostile environment, and still spread out. They can celebrate through the way they are linked together in an interdependent structure, whereby in the Cell Church the celebration, complete with worship band and preaching by the Senior Pastor, can often become a way back into the very cathedral/congregational-type structure they have tried to leave behind. The celebrations of Cell Churches often have a denominational character - it is our brand of cell groups that meet in our celebration -, whereby the housechurches favour and support more the regional or citywide celebrations, where the whole local church comes together as the sum total of all Christians in an area. One builds a new denominationalism, the other builds the Kingdom. Which is more biblical?

9. *The headquarter question*

The Cell Church usually has quite an impressive headquarter-building, typically as an expression of the unique ministry of its Senior Pastor and his close associates, whereby housechurches are typically a decentralised system with many different centres - that is homes! -, which can change any time if needed. I was reminded of this while speaking recently in Yuan Allens housechurch in Beijing, which is networked invisibly “under the carpet” with many other housechurches. All his happens from a single bedroom with a few chairs and a minute porch, all located in a small alley too narrow for a car to pass through, just behind a bustling market. Housechurches seem to reflect more of a flexible pilgrims-mentality, they are on the move, just like God’s spirit is on the move. The Cell Churches are more settled down than that, have developed roots and a more or less huge administration structure, and usually broadcast the message that “they are here to stay.” One of the negative aspects of a headquarter is that it generates the need for a lot of organising and administration. The biggest problem with organising the church is, that it introduces buerocracy. Buerocracy is possible the most dangerous, cruel and inhuman form of administration, because it basically asks only two questions: yes or no. “Did you fill out the form properly, yes or no.” A buerocratic system of administration throws the door wide open for the kind of people who ultimately would account, organize, administrate, manage, sell, run and finally control - and therefore kill - the church. Howard Astin in his book “Body and Cell” comments that some Cell Churches feel very “regimented”. This can be avoided quite easily in housechurches, because everything here is relational, and therefore things are simply more humane. There is not much more to organize than in living in an extended family. We do not have to assume control of the church as if it were a company which needs “Total Quality Management”, a modern business philosophy leaving no space for unforeseen developments and “having all bases covered” for maximum quality and therefore maximum customer satisfaction which means maximum profit. With the Church, we can have a more humble approach, knowing that God is in control. Since there is a head - and naturally a headquarter in heaven - we can relax on earth and have as many small outlets of this heavenly chain of churches as possible, because God does not loose track of them, he does have the final oversight. In frantically trying to help God run his business by establishing visible and impressive cathedrals and headquarters on earth we might, unwillingly, have actually hindered him, because these structures may have shouted glory to men on earth so loud that the glory of the lamb was drowned in the process.

10. *High and low visibility*

As the housechurch can function with or without a celebration and the necessary administrative headquarter to run it, it is obviously much less visible. In many nations or cities, housechurches can function for a long time

without being noticed at all by the public. The interdependent network structure of a housechurch movement links the churches “under the carpet”, through an invisible and flat structure, so that even the celebration happens as the fivefold ministry rotates through the housechurches and carries with it good news, greetings, gifts and vision. This also means that housechurches are less prone to corruption through insecure and therefore power-hungry people attracted by powerful and impressive structures like flies to the honey. This type of Christianity makes a much more humble statement about itself, which is specially important for areas of the world with a lot of religious bigotry, where religious movements outdo each other by who competing to have the highest steeple or tower attached to holy buildings. Low visibility of human structures also means high visibility of God’s hand in all this. Finally, a low visibility structure is much more persecution-proof and prepared for all apocalyptic eventualities than massive cell churches with a vulnerable top man and a vulnerable hub.

11. Evangelistic or apostolic and prophetic foundations

Many have understood correctly that Cell Church is an evangelistic model of church. And because many feel that “evangelism is the need of the hour”, we might feel prone to go with the flow and build evangelistically. However, as I have pointed out before, the longterm driving force of a church is not its evangelistic vision, but a solid apostolic and prophetic foundation (Eph. 2:20). In this way, the apostolic outward focus and a prophetic vision for the past, the present and the future, is literally built-in. I believe that the housechurches are apostolic and prophetic, because this is exactly the way the New Testament apostles and prophets built the church. Evangelists have never played the main role in propagating the church, this has always been the ministry of prophetic and apostolically gifted people. The apostolic and prophetic church as a new way of life is good news in itself, and does not really need evangelism as an activity to be driven by, with all the unhealthy pressure to perform that comes with it.

Argentina: from Evangelism to Church Multiplication

A good example for this is Argentina, a country that experiences revival roughly since 1982, as they lost a war to England, and as much of its national pride was sunk together with its big flagship, the Belgrano. Gifted Evangelists like Carlos Annacondia, Hector Gimenez and Omar Cabrera sprung up and had massive evangelistic rallies of almost unheard of proportions, counting the “decisions for Christ” by the tens of Thousands. However, I was told that Carlos Annacondia and others have honestly asked themselves, where are all those people we lead to Christ now? Argentina, as a study done in Sept. 1996 revealed, has one of the lowest churchplanting rates of all of Latinamerica. All that “Extraction Evangelism” as I call it, trying to extract individuals from their families through an individual and purely verbal “decision for Christ” is not only breaking existing social structures and is therefore hated by parents of converted children around the world, but has not lead to much growth of the church, either. There must be a missing link. *“Evangelism which pulls individuals out of their family context and provides no new context is halfbaked and may well do more harm than good”*, says Alan Tippet. Argentinian Alberto de Luca, together with a growing number of pastors, sees churchplanting and multiplication as the prophetic way forward. They are developing now a national church-multiplication strategy. In other words, they move from being Evangelism driven to function in an apostolic and prophetic way to see their country discipled. Good evangelism supports and functions in unity with the five-fold ministry, never isolated as a single force or cure-all for the lost or unheard witness of the church.

I have mentioned above that the Cell Church seems to be an urban product, a model of church grown in the city or a metropolitan climate. The city develops a particular culture, much different from the villages. In a village, each person is directly responsible for his actions. In an atmosphere of tight social control he cannot escape because everybody knows everybody. In a city, however, an individual quickly drowns in an anonymous mass and may start to feel that he does not have to stand up for the consequences of his actions, because he can always disappear into the faceless crowd. The city breeds a philosophy of its own, of a “hit and run” approach, where any salesman understands that he needs to quickly touch as many people as he can with his product, because next moment they are gone. This philosophy has molded much of today’s evangelistic thinking, and much of today’s evangelistic thinking has, in turn, flown into the Cell Church approach. But as long as the church thinks the evangelists are the prophets, the true prophets will be overheard.

Transitioning for ever?

One of the most striking aspects of cell churches is that most of them seem to be constantly “in transition”. Transition could easily become the outstanding constant of the Cell Church movement. Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church, Singapore, a passionate and visionary man of God, mentioned in a recent brochure that they are now (1998) “in their 10th year of transitioning.” In my view, Cell Churches have done only half a paradigm shift, have not fully concluded the circle and not finished the “second reformation” quite

yet. But they are a brilliant start into the right direction, given the fact that a large part of churches in the world are build according to the cathedral or congregational model of church.

God's hand in the Cell Church movement

I clearly see the hand of God in the Cell Church and related movements. I believe God is the prime initiator of a paradigm shift and resulting changes in terms of church of such radical and global proportions, that many of us would be simply shocked or startled, if we were to see the whole picture. I myself readily agree that what I write here is only a small part of the whole truth, and needs the complementary work and input of many others. "I do know in parts", very much so. The impending changes will be so immense, that even many contemporary prophets will be ill prepared. I agree that it is difficult to swallow the whole issue and implications of housechurches in one big bite, let alone simply take them serious and implement them by tomorrow night.

But God is a gentle global teacher, he teaches us step by step, first ABC, than DEF, and finally XYZ. Through the Cell Church he teaches a return to smallness in a language that many traditional programme based churches can and do understand quite well. The fact that the Cell Church itself clearly carries some genes of a programme based design does not really disturb me, since I see that this can serve as a beautiful bridge of understanding for those yet to cross the river back from organised cathedral type religion to an organic and relational understanding of the church as a way of life, at home were we are at home. In this sense, I see the Cell Church as one of God's Half-way houses, giving limited focus and vision, so that we in our own limitations can glimpse the way ahead. It may be also God's gracious hand to slow down our traditional and global church bus to negotiate the more radical bend to housechurch Christianity ahead. If we do not slow down by warning signs we actually understand and heed, we would be ill prepared and possibly overturned at the corner with disastrous results. God does not want to overturn us and create chaos, but help us to negotiate the future, and therefore sometimes has to slow us down to prepare us for what he sees, but we don't. Often our very own over-activistic mentality does this nicely, and in times of "burn-out" and break-downs many new prophetic insights have been born, because we had the time to pray and think, to again be quiet and still before the Lord.

I believe that God wants us to go full circle, returning back wholeheartedly to the New Testament God and consequently his model of housechurches, incarnated in apostolic and prophetic ways into our soil, time, people group and culture, because God one more time wants to turn the world upside down.

6. *Developing a persecution proof structure*

“Blessed are you when you are persecuted”: how to develop a persecution proof spirit and thrive under pressure

As much as people loved him, the life of Jesus was almost always threatened. He was a stumbling block to the religious leaders, to the political leaders, and He upset and challenged the nice business-driven world of the civilized and ordinary citizens to the core. As a result, He was questioned, threatened, tempted, tricked, persecuted and finally betrayed, captured and killed. The miracle is, that He survived it all, he was “proof” to all this suffering. In fact, He survived even his own death.

His disciples lived in a world of fierce and brutal religious persecution, were in and out of jails, had little academic education, did not call massive church buildings or mission headquarters their own, had, at one point, favour in the eyes of the public, and, in the other moment, were feverishly persecuted and had no foundations and donors to appeal to for financial support. Still, Jesus told them to go and make disciples of all nations.

Jesus must have known something which we sometimes are in the danger to overlook. His own ability to survive, His supernatural power to live, to achieve His purposes against all possible odds, His own resilience, was to be built into the church, His Body on Earth. Maybe Jesus foresaw that His church had fascinating and God-given supernatural abilities: it can thrive on chaos, blossom in the darkness, be rich in poverty, grow in the desert, flourish under pressure, and sing in jail.

Where do we look for inspiration?

Many insights, lessons and advice for Church Growth or Churchplanting on the market today come from the non-persecuted churches rather than the persecuted church. Not that there is nothing to learn from peacefully settled down churches, far from it. But statistical evidence and missionary research shows that the church grew and still grows most vigorously under a certain level of persecution and affliction. As Mao Tse Tung closed out all western Missionaries in 1949 in China, the church began to be persecuted - and grew like never before. According to some researchers, now up to 10% of China is evangelical, the largest single evangelical block in the world. Similar observations come from Ethiopia, Russia, Vietnam, Sudan and Cuba. But the eyes of the church are often where the eyes of the world are, too: on Dow Jones indexes, and the centres of political and economic power. Many want to learn from the powerful how to *dominate* the world; only few people want to learn from the meek how to *inherit* the earth.

As a result, many Church Growth and Church Planting lessons from Djibouti, for example, go down unnoticed, because most Christians do not even know where Djibouti is. They know about Wheaton, Pasadena and Colorado Springs, Brownsville, Toronto, Oslo, Rome, Stuttgart, London and Bern, and consequently learn lessons from the teachers to whom they look up to.

In 1998, German Evangelist Ulrich Parzany received a medal for his outstanding achievements in the area of youth work in Germany. In his response he said: *“They crucified my boss Jesus Christ. I am being honored. What did I do wrong?”*

Jesus sent us as lambs amongst the wolves, not as wolves amongst the lambs. This means that there are lessons to learn from the lambs who have been amongst the wolves. That also means, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to preach the message of redemption from a position of power. More and more Christians are realizing today that there is power in weakness, strength in humbleness, and a powerful mission agency is a contradiction of terms.

Thank God for pressure

Pauls words, “indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” (2. Tim 3:12) seem to be valid for another place and another time, maybe another world. However, Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12: *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

Today we are in the danger of turning those words on their heads, and defining blessings and curse according to the patterns of the world, not according to the values of an upside-down Kingdom of God. We feel we are blessed when we are successful and remunerated, honored and quoted, given seats of honour, and when we are admired and glide painfree through a “peaceful and safe life without problems”. We behave as if religious freedom is a status of blessing, and persecution is inherently bad, “and may the very God who sent the persecution kindly protect us from it.”

Three kinds of persecution

There are three kinds of persecution: *external*, by national or local government, or other religious groups; *internal*, whereby Christians are fighting and persecuting each other, withholding blessing from each other, and filling up countries with “angry brothers” (Mt 5:22-24); thirdly and probably worst of all, *no persecution at all*, because the church is not worth being persecuted at all; it’s values and it’s lifestyle has blended with a godless society, the salt has become saltless and is simply trodden under the feet of society unnoticed.

In this regard it is helpful to reexamine the role of persecution and suffering in regard to the church. Some insights stand out:

1. Jesus was persecuted because he did not keep religious laws

John 5:16 “And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath.”

2. Christians are supposed to have enemies in order to love them

Matthew 5:44 “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”

Romans 12:14 “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.”

3. Jesus predicted persecution

Matthew 10:23 “But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.”

Matthew 13:21 “yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.”

Luke 21:12 “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake.”

John 15:20 “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”

4. Persecution is not an extraordinary but a normal part of Christian experience, of “all those who desire to live godly”

Romans 8:35 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”

1 Cor. 4:12 “and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;”

2 Thes. 1:4 “therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.”

2 Tim. 3:11-12 “persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me! And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

5. Persecution is a blessing, not a curse

Mark 10:30 “but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. “

2 Cor. 12:10 “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

6. Jesus identifies with the persecuted church

Acts 9:4-5 “and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

Acts 22:7-8 “and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And I answered, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’”

Acts 26:14-15 “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ “And I said, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’”

7. Persecution has a long history

Exodus 1:12 “But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. “

Acts 7:52 “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;”

8. The gospel spreads because of persecution

Acts 11:19 “So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. “

9. Avoiding persecution can be avoiding the cross

Galatians 5:11 “But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.”

Galatians 6:12 “Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”

When the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church

It has been pointed out countless times that persecution helps the church to be pure, holy, pay and pray the price, helps it from being less concerned with luxurious issues, and that the blood of the martyrs has always been - and still is - the seed of the church. We can draw at least three important conclusions for the housechurches:

1. Persecution is normal, peace is the exception.

If the Kingdom of God is conflicting at the deepest possible level with the Kingdom of this world, disturbances and conflicts or even a state of war are the necessary outcome. At this present stage of history, God’s Kingdom and “the world under the rule of the evil one” are simply not compatible, unreconcilable, they are like water and fire. Jesus came to destroy the works of the evil one, and this will not happen in diplomatic peace talks. The Church as Jesus’ Body on earth will be drawn into this conflict. Persecution, therefore, is business as usual for the churches, peace and harmony the exception.

2. Persecution reforms quality (content) and structure of Christianity, and therefore restores apostolic church patterns

Jesus says “Love your enemies”. Many Pastors know that even after many hours of motivational sermons as well as bible studies, few Christians truly manage to love their friendly neighbours, let alone the unfriendly ones. Persecution changes all this by regularly upsetting the Status Quo and changing comfortably settled-in Christians into pilgrims; it uproots complacency and restores the pioneer spirit, it liberates Christians from their let-us build-a-big-castle mentality and involves them in a movement. The command of Jesus “to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) was only reaching beyond Jerusalem after God allowed persecution (Acts 8:1-4). This restores the Church back into the likeness of its persecuted founder, Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “Blessed are you when you are persecuted.” Persecution, therefore, restores back an amount of “blessedness”, which in itself is a quality, God is gifting the church with.

This has also structural consequences, because during persecution the church needs “to live off the suitcases,” needs to have a “moveable structure”, live and grow in a flexible tent rather than a solid immovable structure meant to stay here forever; needs to have forms that are dynamic, readily adaptable to any change. The housechurch perfectly fits this description.

Sometimes persecution may be God’s last word to a sleepy church which has afforded the luxury of overhearing all the apostolic and prophetic wake-up calls in the past. Persecution is a wake-up call few will be able to overhear. This way God may bring back a mentality of urgency and mission, and restore the apostolic nature back to the church. As they are scattered, they again might go and “preach the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4), which is what they should have done in the first place.

3. Persecution purifies the agenda of the church

A settled-down, streamlined church that is absorbed within a given culture will soon develop values, priorities, habits and agendas, that are not up to God’s priorities of upsetting the Status quo by introducing the Kingdom of God.

The Early Church had few of the projects, may they be social, political, ecological, evangelistic or holistic the church allows itself today, and still grew and flourished. In times of persecution, the agenda of the church is simply reduced to absolute Kingdom-essentials: spreading itself thin and carrying on to be the yeast that leavens the dough and keep on discipling the nations. A degree of persecution also helps to prevent corruption in the church, because no one wants to be much of a king or a star in a secret half-legal society.

Standing in good company

We must find a healthy way between unhealthily glorifying persecution like the Early Church Father Irenaeus who reportedly even “lusted for the beasts in Rome”, or appealing for every discrimination as Christians to the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, the secretaries of the World Evangelical Fellowship or the local newspaper. We need to see persecution and its purposes from God’s perspective, which may be different from our own feelings and desires. We simply need to be prepared to stand joyfully in the company of the main accused, Jesus Christ Himself. If any person who yields some amount of religious, political or economical power today, still truly begins to understand the total claims of Jesus Christ - and rejects it, he will naturally join in the age old cry: “We do not want him to rule over us, crucify him!” (Lk 19:14 and 23:20) - and with him all those who carry his name.

The message of 40 million martyrs

At the time of the death of Stephen (Acts 7), a reported 2.000 Christians were martyred in Jerusalem, writes F.L. Plotter in his book “Martyrs in all Ages.” Philip, after a revival happened in Phrygia, was imprisoned, bound and hanged. Matthew was reportedly martyred in Ethiopia. James, the brother of Jesus, as an old man of 96 was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and stoned, and after that his brains got dashed out with a club, says Josephus. Matthias was stoned, beheaded and crucified, Andrew was preaching in Asia, and ended up crucified by order of Algenas, proconsul of Achaia. Mark was sent to Egypt, planted a church in Alexandria, and was dragged do death, says Eusebius. Peter, says a tradition, died in Rome, crucified head downwards. Paul died in Rome, and Jude, some early writers say, was crucified in Jerusalem. Bartholomnew was flogged and crucified, Thomas allegedly died a martyr in India, killed by a spear. Luke was probably hanged from an olive tree in Greece; Simon (the ZeLOT) preached in Africa, and was later crucified in Britain. John, as an exception, died a natural death in Patmos at the age of 98. Timothy, bishop in Ephesus, was martyred,

Barnabas killed by Jews in Syria. From here a long list of martyrs, Ignatius, Simeon, Clement, Zenon, Faustius, Jobita, Justin Martyr, Polycarp and many others, is written throughout history. David Barrett of Global Evangelisation Movement has documented around 40 million Christians martyrs since Christ died, averaging 160.000 each year, “not counting those just harassed and kicked out of their houses or denied their social status because of their Christian faith.” Barrett anticipates this figure to rise to an average of 300.000 martyrs each year in the year 2025.

You cannot burn the church

The true church of Jesus Christ cannot be burnt. It is not made of wood, hay, straw and even stone, but of the redeemed people of God. If the most visible aspects of traditional Christendom, church buildings etc., can be attacked, houses usually won't. In almost every culture the home is a safe and quite protected zone, “*it is simply poor upbringing to attack a private home*”, says Dr. Met Castillo. I am not saying that the church is virtually immune to persecution in homes, but that it is not only the most natural, but also the safest possible place for it.

Strategy of flexible response

In many countries, the housechurches have been and still are the spiritual backbone of Christians movements for many years, even under fierce persecution or surveillance like in Russia, China and some countries in the Middle East. Since housechurches fit invisibly into the existing architecture of any nation, housechurches are able to respond flexible to any pressure or new situation. Since housechurches focus on sharing lives, not on performing religious worship-services, housechurches can easily exist without alerting the neighbours or the secret police through loud music, clapping, dancing, loud prayers and sermons. Some housechurches even rotate, they meet each time somewhere else, the next meeting place only known to the members. This can be a hotel room, in a rented bus for an outing, under a tree, and in the various houses of members. In some countries people even come one by one or two by two to the housechurches, in order not to alert any suspicions. If anyone should ask probing questions, it is quite amazing to learn just how many birthdays, weddings, anniversaries and reunions of all kinds some families can have nowadays.

Avoid to create our very own “persecution”

A young man in a church stood up and told how he boldly went into the marketplace of villagers adhering to a non-christian religion. There he started to preach loudly. “They were soon harassing me, finally beating me, and then chased me out of the village, but I am proud I took a stand for Jesus,” he exclaimed. I asked him: “Who told you to offend them? What would Jesus have done in that village? Maybe He would not have openly agitated them at all. He did not want to deliver a bomb, but to win their hearts. Jesus might have started with having dinner with a man of peace in the village, and might not have been chased out of it at all.”

In another city an evangelistic crusade drew massive hostility of non-christian activists. Some Christians got challenged and excited and started to fight with the police. The result were law suits, discrimination, some Christians ended up in jail, there were arguments and other problems.

I was once invited to preach in a small village church in Tamil Nadu, South India. The church of about 35 people met in a rented building, just across the main road. If there was one thing to be mentioned about the worship and singing: it was very loud! This church had hired a big loudspeaker, microphones, and the sound could probably be heard for 500 meters. 50 meters away there was a political meeting going on. Every 5 minutes someone from there would come and politely ask the church to please be more quiet. The leaders of the church were eagerly pointing out to me: “See, we cannot have undisturbed worship. We need the financial help of the West to build our own church building,” they concluded. “There might be a much more simple and cheaper solution for your problem,” I said. “Pull the plug! In such a small family type gathering you really do not need a loudspeaker at all!”

We need to avoid a wrong sense of competition and religious pride, the eagerness to fight at any length for our “human rights” or “minority status”. Whether the word “crusades” for evangelistic rallies is still an appropriate word for today's world everyone may judge for himself. If there is true persecution arising, it should happen because of the stumbling block of the Cross, not because of our own lack of wisdom.

No peace ahead

Jesus did never predict a more peaceful and unharmed future for the church, living around a romantic village church building in front of lush greens and scenic hills. He prophesied increased heat, persecution and even tribulation. “If they persecute you in one city, flee to another” (Mt 10:23), or: “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death” (Mt 24:9). The future scenario for the world which Jesus paints in Mt 24 and other

places are not at all of a peacefully united world, harmoniously co-existing and trading with each other and sending and receiving nice Christmas cards and embroidered table clothes all life long. Jesus speaks of a terribly war-torn and increasingly bitter planet, deeply distressed, nation rising against nation, ridden by famines and earthquakes, and worst of all, a loss of love and increase of hatred.

Be prepared

Noah did not start building the Ark when it began to rain. For a similar reason we need to be prepared today for what comes tomorrow:

1. We need to develop a persecution proof quality or mentality first, and prepare ourselves to again become worthy to be persecuted by conforming with the patterns of the Kingdom of God, and stand up for the name of God, even if this means we lose our face and respectability in society. This preparation starts with a revival of New Testament quality of Christianity in all of us, today, where a fire starts to burn in us again that no one can quench.
2. We then need to let an appropriate structure of the church emerge out of this mindset, and again embrace the New Testament form of housechurches, because they will be able to not only sustain the life of the church, but allow it to flourish and grow even under pressure and persecution.

Then we need to consider the consequences of this decision, pray alone and together with our families, friends, churches, organisations and co-workers, listening to God for his direction, and start taking the appropriate measures. Now.

The Mennonites in Ethiopia

It is a wellknown story by now that the Mennonite Church of America did traditional mission work in Ethiopia. In 1982 the Meserete Kristos Church had around 5.000 members. Then the communist government took over. The government confiscated all the church buildings and properties, and threw most of their leaders into jail. The Mennonite church became, almost by government decree, a "lay driven house based" movement. But instead of slowing down the church, the drastic measure of the Communists had the opposite effect. After 10 years the Mennonite movement had grown to 50.000 people. It's most explosive growth period started, when two of their presumed pillars of growth were taken away: their church buildings and their pastors.

"Now we have a good two-step plan for the growth of the church anywhere," exclaimed a Pastor humorously at the end of a seminar. "Close down all the church buildings, and kindly ask all pastors to take a prolonged vacation!" he said.

When did persecution start?

Although God's elect, His people, prophets and godly Kings have almost always been threatened and persecuted, the days of persecution for the New Testament church did not start by accident. "And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. And on *that day* a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" Acts 8:1).

What had happened?

In Acts 7 Stephen had preached his sermon before the religious authorities, and almost all he said was acceptable to them - until he reached on single topic, touched one wound, dared to tackle only hot item which was the King of all Tabus. When they heard *this*, "they were furious and gnashed their teeth, covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, all rushed at him and stoned him".

What had they heard to lose their mind in such a manner? What terrible and explosive subject did Stephen touch?

He had said: "The Most High does not live in Temples made by men."

Stephen had questioned the core of their belief, the temple, the religious building.

As much as the Tabernacle and the Temple with the worship related to it were at the core of Old Testament religious practice, the New Testament brings in a totally new dimension of worship, where the Spirit of God seems to clearly disassociate himself from bricks. From now on, the people themselves are the temple (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). What does this do to the old temple? "*One greater than the temple*" has come" (Mt 12:6). It replaces it with the temple of the Body (John 2:19-21). It closes the chapter about stone temples and temple centred worship, and opens a new chapter. Worship does not any more happen in Jerusalem or Samaria, at any

special “Houses of the Lord”, Tabernacles”, holy places, buildings or around holy symbols like stone altars, but “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24), because God is spirit and truth. The Temples are gone forever, never to return. Even in heaven, there will be no temple: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are it’s temple” (Rev. 21:22).

When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, she immediately brought up the topic of religious worship, obviously at the core of her heart. “*We worship at this mountain, you Jews say we should worship in Jerusalem. Who is right?*” “*Nobody,*” answers Jesus. “*The time comes and has come, that the true worshippers of God will worship God in truth and Spirit,*” not in any place more holy than the other. The whole concept of a “house of God”, a temple as a religious or holy place, an abode of God with men, a holy night, is completely vanished in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, God simply never asked anyone to build a religious house for him. “Heaven is my throne, and earth is the footstool of my feet; what kind of house will you build for me?” says the Lord; or what place is there for my repose?” (Acts 7:49).

He much rather builds ourselves into a spiritual house, the church, make us part of his household, and builds a house for us in heaven, in the city to come.

Religion - the core of the problem

“Religion is for unbelievers; it’s the business of the godless”, says German Theologian Karl Barth. Religion is what man makes out of God; Christianity is what God makes out of man. Christianity, therefore, is no religion. It is a life relationship with a living God. The moment Christianity becomes religion, it dies. Religion literally means to bind yourself back, to rest a secure anchor at a safe place, so we are not swept away by the current of life into unknown and dangerous waters. Religion tries to reach up to God, and throw an anchor into a safe place beyond the line between humans and God, the secular and the saint, then it safe guards that anchor and line at any cost. Religion does not only not see that Christ has done all that for us; *it does not want to see it.*

The religious man cuts a tree in the forest, carves an idol out of it, places it before himself, falls down before it and exclaims: “Save me!” (Jer. 10). He makes his own arrangements with the spiritual world, and should anyone be proud or convincing enough, he will find a new religion, if necessary, the way we deal with God here in this part of the world. Religion wants to be on the safe side in terms of spiritual things. The more insecure someone is deep inside, the more fantastic is the amount of time and energy he will spend to defend his religious convictions and sacred cows, in order not to reveal his deep doubts and lose face. The religious person needs daily assurance of what he is not sure, touch what he knows he cannot touch, smell the unsmellable. He wants to feel God, hear God, drink God, eat God, internalize God, and would love to ultimately possess God and put him - or at least something related to God, something holy - onto a throne, into a safe, close the heavy metal door and put the key under his mattress. Then he will hire a sacred priest or holy man to safeguard the shrine for good money, later build a religious house around the idol, the safe and the priest, and visit it himself once a week, give donations and ask blessings. This way the religious man has created a temple for himself, because he is the genius behind it, and he knows ultimately that he sits on the throne himself. That is what troubles him most. That he has been deceived by the devil who lusts to detract worship away from God any way he can, has not yet crossed his mind.

His skin loves to crawl with excited goosebumps when he participates with feverish fervour in religious ceremonies with candles, holy music, smells and bells, and aweinspiring rituals, and he will defend his religious traditions and practises to almost any extreme extent and argue about it without any logic, because he ultimately argues about himself.

The root problem is he knows deep down that he is lost without God, but he is too proud to say so, because of peer pressure of friends, family and society. No one has told him yet that there is a way to deal with his pride and sin, the cross of Jesus Christ.

In Islam, for example, there is no concept of assurance of salvation, except, some say, to die in a Holy War. Even after observing all religious laws, there is no guarantee Allah will ever let you go to paradise; he may just feel different that day you die. That makes people deeply insecure. Deeply insecure people are the ideal market for insurance. And deeply insecure people in the area of religion will buy almost anything from the sales representatives of religion, do this, that and the other, in order to have at least the feeling of safety. This pattern cannot calm the empty agony of peacelessness, and search going on inside people.

Religion is ultimately false worship, pseudosacred beliefs and useless practises inspired, empowered and defended by “the spirit of this world”. Many Bible teachers have pointed out in regard to religion to the whore of Babylon, “drunk with the blood of the saints, for all nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries, and the merchants of the world grew rich from her excessive luxuries” (Rev. 17:6; 18:3). Since every

person has been born a sinner (Psalm 51; Rom 3:23), everyone has a wounded consciousness, he knows he is guilty against God. The easy answer to calm this trouble is religion, which is like a built-in feature of every person on earth; the world literally steams with religion, even if it comes in the form of agnosticism and liberalism, to which teachings its adherents cling with outright religious fervor. We do not have to do anything to become religious, it is creational, natural, and it creeps in unaware, like an ugly spirit raising its head while everyone sleeps. Religion builds up like static energy when we walk with plastic shoes on a carpet. It needs the power of the Holy spirit, constant prophetic and apostolic ministry and the ongoing equipping of the saints to maintain a non-religious, alert and sober spirit, and to be free from religion, and liberated by Christ to worship him in truth and spirit.

If I were the devil and would want to stop Christians from being effective witnesses to Jesus, I would definitely let loose the most deadly plague on the followers of Jesus there is on this planet; religion. I would look for the weakest members of the church - which sometimes look to be the strongest! - whisper into their minds the age old and history-proven words "Did God really say?" (Gen. 3:1), undermine their faith in God's word and God himself, and instill in them the hunger for more security, power, glory and fame - and then feed them a ready made poison: religion. The devil will ultimately rejoice if he can arrange the ultimate demonic scheme: to persecute the church in the name of the church, to persecute the people of God in the name of God, to hold the head of the organic Body of Christ under the water as long as possible by functionaries of organized religion.

In establishing multiplying housechurch movements, we therefore need to be excitingly sober and aware of emerging religious cults around special names, famed rituals and traditions, moral laws, spiritual practises and methods, pseudo-holy worship patterns and religious experiences, and earth any religious energy which builds up regularly like static electric energy by coming to the Cross of Christ and ask him to set us free individually and corporately from the religious spirit, and fill us with His Spirit again and again, until the Earth is filled with the fragrance of God, where "believers are a letter read by all men" and "the manifest wisdom of God is made known through the church" (Eph. 3:10), through simply and supernatural housechurches in which the people of God share their lives with God and each other. Those houses literally will change the earth.

We also need to understand again, that in the days when Stephen spoke against the Temple, not only did Saul and his men lose their mind in bloody fanaticism, but literally all hell broke loose, because the core of the religious and demonic system to keep people in blindness and ignorance and therefore lost for eternity was under direct attack.

Unprecedented growth - unprecedented persecution

As God's spirit resurrects the Body of Jesus in its organic and original form again; as Jesus the head of the Church restores back apostolic and prophetic patterns of Church, there will be an unprecedented and explosive growth of housechurches in many nations. Uncountable people will be saved and incorporated into the churches, the poor and the rich, the rural and the urban populations alike. But alongside this final harvest movement we should not forget for a second that what Jesus predicted will come true: persecution will mount like never before, because the devil will realize that now the church means real business, and is now structured and equipped with a harvesting tool that he dreads the most and has spent almost 2.000 years to obliterate from the planet: the simple nonreligious household of God in the form of housechurches. This global movement, emerging from the shadows of history and religious tradition, is empowered and does actively storm against the "gates of hell", preventive mechanisms, spiritual roadblocks and religious mindsets and probably even cherub-type demons like the ones God had placed before the garden of Eden to prevent Adam and Eve to reenter paradise. Those gates or portals (Mt 16:18) can be interpreted as a devilish equivalent to the "beautiful gate" of the temple where the lame man was healed after Peter and John prayed for him (Acts 3). The outer court of the Temple was not the inner sanctuary itself, it was a first stage of the Temple. In the same way, the "gates of hell" might be portals and heavily guarded gateways and entries trying to keep people inside the gigantic waiting room of hell, a place where, if nothing happens, billions of people will die and glide into a godless eternity into hell. As American intercessor Cindy Jacobs said, "the church will have to possess the gates of the enemy." As Jesus has clearly predicted, those gates will not prevail and hold their captives forever.

We need to be ready for just when that happens. In terms of our vision, in terms of our readiness, in terms of our flexible structures, we also need to be ready for any number of people, God himself chooses to add to His church. Just like in the time of Elisha (2. Kings 3 and 4) we need to "make this valley full of trenches", and "ask all our neighbours for empty jars", so God, seeing our faith, can pour out his water and fill those ditches to the brim, and those jars with his oil.

The art of Transitioning, or: how to avoid to do the New in the power of the Old

A camel caravan was trodding along the desert. Suddenly someone was missing. They finally found him, sitting under a tree in the last oasis. When they asked him why he stayed behind, he said: "My body moved so fast during the journey. I need to wait for my spirit to catch up with me again." Similarly to this, many Christians experience that their spirit sometimes will go far ahead of their present day realities. Like in a vision or a dream, they suddenly feel lifted away from their wellknown life and soar above the current planes and deserts, driven to unknown lands by the wind of the Spirit. Once they wake up from their vision or dream, they feel challenged to go where they have not gone before. They experience the classical tension between a vision of the future, and the realities of their present situation. This seems to happen to many Christians in regards to the nature of the Church. Many, therefore, feel the need to allow for their body to catch up with their spirit again, and for the structures to match the new quality of church they are discovering. To borrow and turn around the illustration of our lost camel traveller: their spirit has gone far away into the future and is now resting under a tree in an oasis far ahead, while their body still toils under the sun of the desert and wants to catch up.

The leader of a denomination once asked me after a seminar: "I am 100 percent convinced of housechurches. But the denomination I lead is based on the traditional church model. What do I do now?"

He had seen a new vision of church, but, as a responsible leader, saw his present day realities and realized that he had some catching-up to do now with his structures.

In almost every meeting, seminar or conference on the subject of a relational, organic, house-based church movement there is an inevitable question. It usually goes like this: "*I have understood what you are saying, and I am totally with you. But I have this church at home. It is running according to the traditional pattern. How do I change the system without breaking it?!*" I usually call this the "How to cross the river without wetting my feet" -question. Can we really have progress without change? I do not think so. But the painful part is: all change is personal. It upsets routines and traditions. But if we want to see new things happening in and through the church, we need to be prepared to make personal changes first, changes in the family second, and changes in our ministry third.

After one seminar in an Asian country, the leader of a denomination came up to me with that very question. "*I am personally involved in pastoring a church. What would you suggest me to do now?*", he asked.

It was 10 PM in the evening, we were walking on a lush green towards our sleeping quarters. I rather casually said to him: "Good that you ask what you could do. I would stop pastoring in the traditional sense, realize, in your case, that I have a more apostolic role, lay down my office, get my hands free, and start fathering and equipping a new generation of housechurch planters."

"That is the answer I was looking for the last 7 years!", he exclaimed.

Not everything new is good, and not all change is helpful. Although it is already a well known story, I still love that letter, because it reflects not a theological conviction, but a philosophy, that simply cannot see necessary and good change, because it wants to defend the Status Quo:

January 31, 1829

To President Jackson,

The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as "railroads." The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons:

1. If canal boats are supplanted by "railroads," serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for the horses.
2. Boat builders would suffer, and towline, whip and harness makers would be left destitute.
3. Canal boats are absolutely essential to defend the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.

As you may well know, Mr. President, "railroad" carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by "engines" which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.

- Martin Van Buren, Governor of New York.

(from: Dynamic preaching, Net Results Magazine, March 1991)

Four phases of a paradigm shift

If we want to see practical changes, our paradigm must change first. A paradigm is the way we see and interpret the world according to an inbuilt pattern or a worldview, seeing things through a specific type of glasses. A paradigm shift is a process which typically has four stages:

- a. *“Search it!”* A paradigm shift usually starts with a crisis of our old worldview, which may be related to a personal crisis. Crisis gives birth to creativity. Without asking pertinent and pointed questions, without a burning search for new answers there will be no room to even accept a new insight or even a new paradigm. False contentness is the biggest enemy of change. Typically a paradigm shift starts therefore with a crisis, were our safe and sound world, our traditional way of explaining things, simply falls to pieces. This crisis can be caused by an accident or a revelation, a negative or positive experience with something that simply does not fit into our world. The chinese word for crisis is *wu-wei*, and means change as well as the opportunity of starting something new.
- b. *“Preach it”*. In the second phase, we find what we have searched for. I call it the “heureka-phase”, because this part of a paradigm shift is usually accompanied by the obverwhelming feeling of thrill and excitement of someone who has “found it”. We may find ourselves standing up with hands in the air and bubbling foam on our lips about our new discovery, and want to tell everyone in an almost evangelistic or apologetic fashion about it. The truth is, that we usually find only a piece of the truth, a fragment of a larger piece, but our desperate search has temporarily made us blind for the bigger picture. We have been thirsty for too long, and now we have found a well all we want is to drink, drink, drink. This is the most dangerous phase of a paradigm shift, as our excitement may drive us to immature and naive statements or actions, which are difficult to redeem later.
- c. *“Live it”*. In this third phase we symbolically sit down, wipe the emotional foam off our mouths, and start to become an integral part of our newfound paradigm. We stop preaching and defending it, we live it.
- d. *“Teach it”*. This last phase turns us into a change agent, helping others to discover the paradigm we have found ourselves, and assisting them in making the necessary changes themselves.

Three options of change

One of the most devastating frustrations anyone can experience is, if we try *to do the new in the power of the old*. It is like preaching democracy from the loudhailers of a warship of a colonializing nation. Jesus in his teaching about new wine in new wineskins and the new patch on old cloth is not lacking clarity at all. He said, that two so radically different systems like old wine and new wine cannot be mixed without doing damage to both the wine and the wineskins. The same principle is true for the new patch on old cloth (Mt 9:16-17). That gives us three options for change:

- a. *Do not change at all*, and keep going. Stay within your structure, maintain it, expand it, work from within it, because you realized that change will be too costly, too upsetting, too painful, or simply too frightening and insecure. God will bless you. Not everyone is having an apostolic or prophetic ministry, unafraid of touching and changing “touchy” subjects and people. Do the best you can to use your structure for good, and have close and personal relationships - open doors and bridges of communication - to those who have taken another choice. You may need each other in the days ahead. Maybe God will open doors for cooperations with some people in the future, who help you, your church, organisation or denomination, to be ready to change. Prepare yourself for that day already now.
- b. *Attempt a compromise* to “dance on two weddings at the same time”, pour new wine into old wineskins, or old wine into new wineskins, and try to live in both worlds. This is, from all I have seen, a sure recipe for disaster. You may very well enter a phase of transitioning - and never leave it.
- c. *Prepare yourself for change*. Your spirit may have gone far ahead, now the structures have to catch up with it.

Beyond the Titanic model

The best and most radical kind of change might be to start all over again. One pastor got up in a seminar and said: *“That means we have to close down all our churches!”* And he was quite serious. But with a church of more than 10.000 attenders, that is not easy to do at all. To change from one setup to another means transitioning, crossing over from one camp to another. There are many ways to do it, all of them are dangerous, costly, they take time, and the still sometimes do not work. Companies and businesses spend millions to anticipate and implement change in order to remain in business or gain markets. Management and change consultants like Tom Peters are earning 50.000 Dollars a day for a seminar for business executives. However, there are some changes that do not change a thing. They help us to soothe our mind and our emotions, give us the temporary illusion that we are doing something, but they are as harmless as “a storm in a waterglass”.

Someone might want to paint his sanctuary afresh; move the piano from the left side to the right side, or merge with another, similar, organisation. I call this type of change the “*Titanic model*.” When the Titanic was struck by an iceberg, no amount of changing the furniture, repainting the ship, or even restructuring the apartments would do any good. They would have had only cosmetic value and be obsolete, as the ship itself was disappearing from the face of the earth.

You are the man!

Let me point out that most changes in history did come from quite unbalanced persons, radical in most senses. Very little innovations and true and radical changes were initiated by committees and boards; most came from visionary people who saw what no one saw, said, what no one dared to say, and did what was “forbidden” and taboo at their time. Many of yesterdays revolutionaries, like Luther, Booth, Wesley, or Hudson Taylor, have become todays trusted pillars of the church. Many of them have created churches or movements, who today have become so big, vast and administratively complex, that the statistical probability for these organisations or churches to entrust enough decision making power into the hands of one visionary person is minute. Yet, change starts with people, and you might just be the man or the woman for the job. I encourage you to start to do this in the area of your personal or organisational jurisdiction, no matter how small or large it is. Start with what is at hand.

Five models of Transitioning

Except the radical approach to change - to start all over again - there are five different ways of transitioning which I see:

1. “Windows 95”

The well known Computerprogramme “Windows 95” allows you to make changes in it’s configuration, which determines the way the computer understands itself and ultimately runs your programmes. Changing the configuration is like changing an entry in your own passport. If you want the new changes in the configuration to work properly, the software will flash you a message: “You have to restart the computer in order for the changes to become effective”. Once you restart your computer, the new configuration will work, and your computer will run differently. In changing and transitioning from one model of church to another, this means that you might want to close down your existing work, and restart it according to a new “configuration”, a different set of values. This approach would allow you to close down a phase properly and in style, lay a new foundation, a new “Q” (quality), and then build a different structure into a different direction.

2. The “beachhead principle” of the prophetic 20 percent

Another approach is this: carefully and prayerfully chose and find those 20 percent of people in your church, organisation or denomination, who you feel will be well able, suited and gifted to lead your church or organisation into a new future. They will build a “prophetic beachhead” into the future, a base, which you later expand for more people to follow. Form one or several housechurches with them, live and model the pattern for them and with them, without touching your existing structure or changing a thing in it. For a while, which can be up to 6, 12 or 18 months, you will run a parallel structure, the old and the new model together. Once you have established a new pattern of behaviour and see that those 20 Percent you have chosen are well into the new paradigm and finding their way forward, empower them to multiply the pattern by leading others into the new paradigm themselves. They will then take people “boatload by boatload” to the new beachhead, introduce them into the new church pattern, until no-one else is willing to make the crossing. Then you declare a new phase open, give your marching orders into the new direction, and stop glancing over your shoulders to the other shore, where there will always be some of those standing, who were simply not ready to do the crossing. You will have to leave them behind, because you know that you need to move on.

In any change process there are four different groups: a small group of “pioneers”, who live on the masthead anyway and see what others do not even want to see; a slightly larger group of “early adapters”, who accept a new vision early if it is new *and endorsed* by some credible witness; the third group is a large group of “late adapters”. They will accept new things only if they are new, come endorsed *and made the new law*. Fourthly, there is a last and again relatively large group of “laggards”, hard-core traditionalists, who always seem to remember “the meatpots and onions of Egypt” and will not change no matter what. To wait for them to accept change is futile. They won’t. They are under “future shock”, as Alvin Toffler says, the paralysis of fear that grips those who feel generally overtaken by developments.

In almost every church or organisation you will find those for whom traditional values of the past are more important than to be pro-active, prophetic, and ready to change. In many Asian and African nations there is a strong ancestor cult; similarly, many christian traditionalists may slip into a spiritual ancestor-cult. It is a cult, because the adherents revere those who handed down to them cherished practises, faith systems and believes more than Jesus himself, the one who makes everything new. You may want to mentally prepare yourself and your church to ultimately loose them. They will not be lost to the Kingdom of God at all, but will either find another group or church to cope, or start their own.

3. Life transitioning

This process is determined to make the shift from one pattern to the other without loosing anyone, as smoothly and pastoral as possible. This approach introduces a new pattern in incremental steps. It still is a tricky business, because it is like changing a bull into a horse in full flight. The most vulnerable points are the times where the old pattern is not anymore fully valid, and the new not yet fully evident. Additionally, it means endless discussions and attempts at convincing traditionalists, and is adviseable only for those with supernatural good humour, pastoral patience and prophetic wisdom. You can follow a set of stages: introducing and teaching a new set of values; gradually introducing new patterns of behaviour; changing leadership according to the new pattern; resettle on a new foundation and start building.

A small church/organisation of up to 100 people or “voting entities” may take 1-3 years for this process. A medium church or organisation (100-500) may take between 3-5 years. A large church or organisation, above 500, may take between 5 and 8 years or more.

4. Behind their back

This models is for the more desperate and adventurous. It happens in secret, like many inventions, who have to happen under strict security for fear of being stolen or cloned prematurely. In this approach, you start from scratch without organisationally involving your church or organisation at all in a new venture. You do it across town, in another place, behind the back of your group, so to speak. It allows a new experiment without getting the spiritual genes and structures mixed, and to observe first hand a new pattern. You might want to delegate some work in your traditional setup to other people to free up more of your own time. As the model grows, you may, at some stage or other, introduce the two entities to each other. One example for this is “The Crowded House” in Sheffield, UK, intentionally not well known.

5. Hong Kong style: multi-structured churches or organisatons

As the gospel is dynamic and excellent, reflecting a God who is not mediocre and “average” in any aspect, we need to avoid institutionalized mediocrity as a “balanced mix” between bad and good. A last resort could be therefore to attempt to work according to two *separate* value patterns at the same time, carefully kept apart from each other in order not to mix the unmixeable. Many congregational churches have introduced multiple and different worship experiences, quite different from each other, but all organised by the same church. Some, like Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican church in London, offer a traditional worship service, and a more family type service a bit later, for different target audiences. Others, like Tilehurst Free Church in Reading (UK), offer cell groups for those who want it, and a congregational church service for those who prefer the traditional pattern. I call this the Hong Kong approach, because this is similarly to the “one country - two sytems” pattern, were China and Hongkong function under one governement, but with two administrative systems. One is based on socialist, the other on capitalist values. It may be a temporary compromise. But in some stages a compromise is better than a split.

Management and Organisational aspects of Transitioning

In business in a fast moving world with ever changing markets and products and an exploding technology, change is the only constant. Management advisers and business consultants know, that if a company is unable to adjust to change and beat the competition, they are out of business and have to close down. I do resist all too naive attempts to compare churches with companies, because they are like apples and oranges. Business success and maximum profit strategies are a bit different from following the Lamb of God and carrying our cross; the church and business are built on very different foundations, and pursue different agendas, Mammon and God. But there are areas of overlap, specially in the area of organising the visible part of the church. We can therefore risk at least a quick glance over the fence, to see how “the children of the world”, as Jesus says, handle this. The language in business in regards to transitioning and change is in no uncertain terms: “*Whatever made you succesfull in the past, won't in the future. It is the end of the world as we know it,*” says Tom Peters in his

book *The Circle of Innovation*. That is why we need to “*think revolution, not evolution. Incrementalism is innovation’s worst enemy,*” he contends.

Frantic over-activity, in churches as well as in business, can often be a cover-up for deep-seated insecurity. Jim Utterback, in his book “*Mastering the Dynamics of Innovation*”, says about those unwilling to change because of new technological developments: “*They resist all efforts to understand innovation, and further entrench their positions in the older products. This results in a surge of productivity and performance that may take the old technology to unheard-of heights. But in most cases, this is a sign of impending death.*” More important than attending the next seminar with “new insights” might be, says Peters, to buy an eraser to wipe away wrong thoughts and teachings, which block new developments. We need to even develop a “strategic forgetfulness”, he argues. “*The problem is never how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get old ones out*”, says Dee Hock, creator of VISA. Many companies, so Peters, do not really need a CEO, a Chief Executive Officer, but a CDO, a Chief Destructive Officer, whose job is to regularly tear down useless structures and procedures, avoiding personality cults, regularly slaughtering the Holy Cows that have crept in to graze amongst them, and avoid naive plans because the Boss of the company has fallen in love with a product that no-one else really wants.

In search of excellence and new products and breakthroughs, “*the size of your vision corresponds with the size of your paper basket*”. Business visionaries are immensely productive, but most of the time they produce useless rubbish, until that golden moment they come up with that one gem of insight or invention which will change the course of history. That’s why we need to “*bless the mess*”, to encourage innovators, product developers and visionary and seemingly chaotic seekers of the impossible, the “nerds”, bespectacled and almost unsociable brain geniuses working away forever in those little shacks and laboratories like Microsoft’s Bill Gates, who ended up leading one of the world’s most influential companies. When Tom Peters is invited to a management consultation of a company in deep trouble, “in just a second, I have the answer. Of the 150 executives, 144 are between the ages of 48 and 59. I call them OWM - Old White Males. They talk alike, smell alike, dress alike, eat the same food and think the same thoughts.” No wonder, he concludes, that there is no creativity in an atmosphere of conformity - and no space for vision, because everyone tightly observes and controls the other.

8. All Change is Practical - 23 Consequences and issues to address

“That means that we have to change almost everything we do!”, exclaimed a well known mission leader in India after hearing about housechurches.

However, I suggest not everything will change when we start to develop housechurch movements. The eternal gospel, it's content, live spiritually and many quality insights which the church of the past has discovered and taught us will remain, and needs to remain.

But if we seriously consider housechurches, it will have some very serious theological and practical consequences for the church, for church growth, for church planting and also for missions.

“The truth will never harm a just cause”, said Mahatma Gandhi.

This material, however, is not intended to criticize any particular Church at all. We have to move beyond that. In genuine love and appreciating for each other we are all called to be part of the solution, and not remain part of the problem.

Most Christian leaders today agree that sober thinking and even mission statistics will tell anyone that even if we multiply what we do today by a factor of 10, it is not going to make a big difference at all in terms of discipling the nations. Sometimes I am startled to observe issues and areas of ministry where seemingly no amount of empirical research and truth can change our thinking for good. “How foolish to act before knowing the facts!”, says a not so famous Proverb. In many countries, the population may still grow faster than the church; evangelism can be shortlived; churches may be aging; the structures need to be changed; the majority population does not respond to the type of church we favour; and even large evangelistic projects and programmes may barely scratch the surface, if we compare their results with the huge population figures of today.

Any sacred cows standing in the way of the Lamb?

It may neither be the first nor the last time, that the people of God were deaf to God's true intentions while dancing around a golden cow. Most leaders agree today that the obstacles in regard to the extension of the Kingdom of God are much more inside our own thinking than out there. The key problems of churches and missions today, many contend, are neither money, the -Isms of the day, but “in the hard ground of our own head,” hidden in those unquestioned concepts, axioms, and longgrown convictions and manmade traditions which have become so dear and sacred to us that even someone daring to touch them is for many “an act of heresy”.

This is what I call the “holy cow syndrom”, where seemingly sacred animals (spiritual concepts) block the road for the Lamb of God, dare to sleep in the streets and make the public drive around them or accept a traffic jam while one of these dear animals feels it needs to stand in the middle of a main road and look unimpressed. Rather than “accepting the cow” in a passive mode, we sometimes need to sound the horn, and, who knows, the cow might move, the road clears, and life goes on.

Pay the price

In housechurch Christianity, one of the prices to pay is to cease the worship of individual freedom over the collective obedience to Christ. If we want what Christ wants, we no longer will be willing to do what everyone just likes to do, and how and when he likes it, irrespective of the community he lives with. No longer can we call our homes just “our own” homes, or treat our cars just as “ours” only. In the West, the lifestyle of many Christians is still centred around a job carrier, TV, hobbies, privacy and pets, sugarcoated with a thin layer of christian behaviour like attending a church service, praying before meals and listening to *christian* music. This is not too much different from the lifestyle of the average person living in the West, where in one single lifelong orgy of individualism almost everything is geared and structured for the pursuit of personal security, success and fun, and even individual spiritual growth.

In the non-western world, we need to overcome an addiction to wrong priorities, were family honor, clan and tribal allegiance often still comes firmly before an allegiance to God; and were strong shame-oriented cultures make it difficult to say the plain truth and confess sins to each other, and were life remains often on a religious

and polite surface. In other words, without our own transformation, which starts with repentance, the crucifixion of self and yes, of some of our cultural values and habits, the giving-up of a self-centred lifestyle, were we simply stop to conform neatly and painfree to the patterns of this world, there will be little redemptive power left to touch and transform our societies with the Gospel. Christianity has never really been cheap, it always was meant to cost our very lives. Pauls message is short and simple: After I became disciple of Christ, I as my old self do not exist any more, but Christ lives in me.

As any pastor of a traditional church would know, it is not only fairly easy but also quite common for Christians in a Sunday-morning-service-cum-Wednesday-night-Bible-study Christianity to live double standards, to have a secret second life hidden away for years from their own congregation or pastor, or harbour petty sins for decades without anyone knowing. This is also due to the fact that out of 168 hours of a week, Christians in traditional meeting oriented Christianity spend typically 3-4 hours together with other Christians per week. This is simply not enough time to effectively transfer life and Kingdom values, to develop deep relationships, make disciples and lay down our lives for each other.

Housechurch christianity will greatly reduce a compromising lifestyle trying to make the best out of both worlds, because it involves us deeply into everyday-community and healthy ongoing accountability. This will cost us dearly. But if our lifestyle is in any relationship to the salvation of real people from a real hell, I reckon it is worth it.

In this small volume I would like to make a shortlist of 13 practical consequences of a housechurch setup, and 10 practical key issues we might need to consider and address as we start developing a housechurch movement:

13 practical consequences

1. *We would stop do church, and start be church*

We would stop going to church, and start becoming the church, 7 days a week. Church would cease to be an organized Sunday morning activity, and start to be the corporate organic local lifestyle of Christians.

2. *Church would again touch all of life, and be “holistic”*

Because church again becomes part of everyday life, all of life starts to become touched and transformed by God. The Gospel of the Kingdom would be expressed again in “words, works and wonders”, reflecting the trinune and holistic God the Son, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit.

3. *The end of the money problem*

Many traditional churchplanting activities and mission movements have a significant minimizing factor - money. We needed money for outreach activities, buying a plot, renting or building a special building, and paying the pastors salary, as well as putting up a decent parsonage. Then, we needed money for chairs, a PA system, and an overhead projector. Not so with housechurches. Housechurches would not cost money, they would produce money, which could financially support the five-fold ministries which in turn support them spiritually. Housechurches simply do not need a fulltime professional pastor, any person with the qualification of an Elder will do.

4. *The end of the leader-problem*

After money, the second most wellworn outcry of the Christian church is: “We do not have enough leaders!” For a typical congregational church movement, we need a big number of small geniuses. People who can handle any part of the various programmes, from preaching to teaching, marrying and burying, playing the organ, raising funds, organising and conducting small and big meetings, and conducting bible studies at any time of the day. By changing to a housechurch setup, the world would be full of potential leaders for housechurches in an instant, because we would not any more require professional or half-professional leaders which fit the congregational structure, but we would have a structure tailormade for all the people. This would also solve the global spiritual unemployment. Currently we have about 70 percent of all Christians spiritually unemployed, without a way to get involved in their church systems, while the leaders of this very system still cry out for more leaders. In a housechurch situation, everyone would participate and have a spiritual task.

5. *The end of the place-problem*

Instead of having a problem with more and new buildings to buy, build, rent or lease, we would be able to use what is already there in abundance: homes of every kind and shape. We could simply use the existing houses and their facilities to multiply themselves.

6. *New quality of conversions*

Most traditional churches organize outreach and evangelistic programmes, in order to make more people attend the churches. Statistically, usually 1 out of 100 who “makes a decision for Christ” in evangelistic meetings (rallies, conventions, “crusades”) will actually start attending a church. That means Christians lose 99 out of 100 new “converts”, which is not only a costly affair in terms of money and people, but also speaks of a very low quality level of the conversions produced through such activities. Instead of making individual spiritual seekers just pray “repeat after me to invite Jesus into your heart”- style prayers, housechurches would allow much more “relational conversions”, often of whole families and households, who would help each other to “stay converted” afterwards. For a quality conversion, contends David Pawson in his book “The normal Christian birth”, we need personal repentance, personal faith, personal infilling of the Holy Spirit, and baptism. Very different from the rushy atmosphere of evangelistic rallies and follow-up meetings, the housechurch would be able to provide the natural framework for that, and thus improve the quality of the conversion, reduce problems in the churches generated through half-baked conversions, and thus improve the overall quality of the church in a locality.

7. *No more “door to door”*

“Do not go from door to door!”, said Jesus (Lk.10). Yet, many evangelistic activities have “door to door” as it’s methodical foundation stone. This has very serious consequences. In Lk 10, Jesus sends his disciples “two by two”, without money, and asks them to find a “man of peace” in a village. They should enter his house, forming an immediate nucleus church with that “third member”. Then they are to “eat, what they give you, drink, what they give you”. Eating and drinking is a very significant means of identification with a new group. If we appreciate what they eat, they might appreciate what we have to say. Many Christians today take their lunch packets with them for so-called village outreach, not trusting the villagers to provide them with clean and healthy food. But how can villagers trust those visitors with their eternal life in return? In many societies hospitality is a God-given task; if strangers come to a village and knock at a door, it is the task of that family to host the strangers. If, however, those strangers are seen leaving the first house again and knocking on other doors, the villagers have only 2 conclusions: Either there is something terribly wrong with the first house, that they could not host them, or those strangers are in fact not guests at all, but either sales people, criminals or members of a cult. In both instances, the sales people might win a few people for some time, but ultimately lose the village. Such “evangelistic door-knocking” works usually extract-oriented, knocks at a great number of doors to end up with a small handful of people, who then have “to be followed-up.” Apostolic-prophetic churchplanting usually works the other way round, is penetration-oriented, and moves from the few to the large. It is more important to find and stay in the *right* house than to knock the door of *many* houses; then establish a quality housechurch there, and proceed to make this house of peace the foothold and beachhead for discipling the whole village or city.

8. *Missions will be redefined.*

At the heart of traditional and most of contemporary missions is the congregational understanding of church. From this static centre we “reach out” to others in proximity of “the church”, try to get them also to “come to church”, and call it Evangelism. If we do this abroad or across significant social and ethno-linguistic barriers, we call it missions. If the housechurch, however, would become the centre of our missions understanding, the static church could stop just identifying and sending mobile specialists, the “missionaries”, but would rather start to send itself by simply acting apostolically as a whole. The church, in the best sense of the word, would again become the mission, the sender as well as the sent one. We would “send forth” the very multipliable units of the church, who can change with their spiritual DNA everything it touches, and can deposit its spiritual message into every culture and language. It would work very much like a virus infection, where the virus would introduce its own genetical code into every host cell it touches, and therefore transforming it into its own image. Missions would again regain the dynamics of yeast. The yeast does not send informed emissaries of yeast - it sends itself. Instead of bringing more people to the church, we would be bringing the church to the people.

9. *More action, less acting*

The congregational type church is very much geared towards stage-centred performance. The emphasis is on “conducting” the meeting, “delivering” the message, “performing” the functions, “celebrating” the rites. The bottom line is, with so many spectators involved, it is not a discipleship structure at all, but lends itself at least potentially for acting, that is, going through the motions without emotions, performing the outward forms without content, and the spectators remaining empty and void behind a pious smokescreen of court nods, hallelujas and amens. The question “are you acting powerful, or are you a powerful actor?” would be answered by having the church return back into normal life, away from artificially conducted meetings. Result: Authenticity and authority is restored locally right in the neighbourhoods. This will lead to less acting, and more significant action.

10. *Combining local and regional dynamics, spiritual LAN and WAN*

When computers are linked together by cables or telephone wires, we differentiate between a Local Area Network - LAN, and a Wider Area Network - WAN. The LAN could be part of a WAN. This will be exactly the way housechurches will develop. A local network of interdependent - not independent! - housechurches (LAN) would interlink with a wider network of housechurches (WAN) in the district, the city, the state, exchange ministries and work together in a strategic partnership towards a goal of saturation church planting.

11. *A whole new era in reaching Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists*

It is no secret that, given the current structure and setup of the church, only marginalized and “lower caste” - adherents of others faiths are “joining the church” in any significant numbers, with painfully few exceptions. More and more Christians realize that the very setup of church is the biggest part of the problem. For many Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists entering a church building itself is a spiritual, cultural, social and philosophical problem. As relational family-style housechurches develop themselves, very much according to the extended-family mentality in those three religions mentioned, this will open up a whole new perspective on helping people raised in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist societies to follow Jesus Christ in an appropriate fashion. Already today we see that, of all possible church structures, housechurches have by far the greatest potential to grow amongst Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist people groups. Many Christians have tried, for example, to bring Muslims to the churches; housechurches would allow to bring the church to the Muslims.

12. *Thriving in socialist and communist cultures*

The traditional church has not done particularly well to attract the attention and excitement of intellectual students, atheists, socialists and communists. But what are their slogans usually all about? About redistribution of wealth, sharing resources and justice for all. These are all New Testament values, which the congregational church has preached, but not lived. Communism as an ideology is still a powerful attraction today because it focuses on injustice, the right of the poor, and the redistribution of wealth, if necessary by force; the problem is that communism does not deal with the root problem of corruption, the sinfulness of people, so those people who “redistribute” are as fallen and sinful as those from whom they take; more corruption and dictatorship is usually the result. Housechurches with their emphasis on sharing material and spiritual resources and the absence of dictator-type leaders are particularly well growing in current or historic socialist or communist societies like Russia, Cuba, China, Vietnam or Ethiopia. Communism is, in many ways, an involuntary strategic ally preparing the mindset of the people for a massive housechurch movement. If any socialist or communist government keeps on failing to implement the “communist paradise,” the housechurch, without much propaganda, can deliver the goods; it can do locally what the government cannot do nationally. The housechurch has the answer for the questions socialists ask, and it provides the right structure for life in a working model, because it has found the solution to sin, the root problem.

13. *The excitement level builds up*

Far less people in traditional congregational type churches are mobilised for actual ministry than in small housechurches. Even in a traditional church under 100 attenders, says the research of Christian Schwarz, only 31% are involved in a ministry corresponding to their spiritual gifts. In a larger church, the percentage is only 17%. It is a known fact that involved people are excited people, and uninvolved people are getting