

Expanding the Table:

A Wesleyan Consideration of the House Church Model

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Atlanta, GA

1) Introduction

- a) Thank you, Jane, for the introduction and for the privilege of working with you and the Foundation for Evangelism.
- b) Well, good afternoon! How is everyone doing? Trust you are doing well. Did you all have a great summer? My summer was very busy as usual when children are home from school. My son is 14 and daughter is 10. We went up to Pisgah Forest in North Carolina to some do rafting and hiking to the waterfalls. We had a great time. We especially enjoyed visiting the Sliding Rock Water Fall where you can ride the waves down the fall to a nice pool of cold water. On the way there and back, I heard my share of knock-knock jokes, why did the chicken cross the road jokes, and the riddles children love to tell. I tell you these jokes have evolved. Why did the turtle cross the road? To get to the Shell station. Why did the horse cross the road? Because the chicken needed a day off. My favorite was “Why did the chicken cross the road? Because he can.”
- c) Well, children are back at school and I am shifting gears to return to the classroom and church. This conference has been a fabulous opportunity for me to recalibrate my thoughts on congregational development. Thank you for such a rich and provocative

experience. It is great to be here with all of you, and thank you for the honor and pleasure of sharing with you my thoughts on expanding the table. S2

2) In search of a model

a) A couple of summers ago, I was attending a conference on evangelism and I noticed something peculiar. I saw a group of people approaching others throughout the conference with a sense of mission. It seemed as though they were there to evangelize. Sure enough they eventually found their way to me and introduced themselves. It turns out that they were Presbyterians. After a brief introduction, they posed a question that has stayed with me ever since. Their question was this: do you know of any evangelism model with a proven track record that can be used to train lay people, seminarians and pastors? Presbyterians of all people were in search of an evangelism model with a proven track record. They did not want any kind of evangelism but something that has credibility based on the staying power of its effectiveness. s3

b) Well, truth be told, it's not just the Presbyterians but mainline denominations across the board, including the United Methodists, are also in search of models. Here are some statistics about the worldwide membership of the United Methodist Church. In 2005, 71% of UMC membership, roughly about 8 million people, was made up of people in the US. In 2015, it had decreased to 51%. But the goodnews is that during the same period, the overall membership of the UMC grew from 11.3 million to 12.7 million people with some help from Africa. We celebrate the growth of the UMC worldwide, but also are concerned about the declining church membership here in the US. s4

c) We are increasingly faced with a generation of people who have not been churched and do not see themselves as Christians. According to the Pew Research Center's report "America's Changing Religious Landscape," the percentage of the group religiously unaffiliated grew from 16.1% to 22.8% between 2007 to 2014, that is equivalent to more than 1 out of every 5 persons in America, or 56 million Americans. What do we mean by religiously unaffiliated? The Pew Center specifies them as those who are atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particular, and also sees themselves as the nones. It may include people who are spiritual but not religious, and the ones who are simply done with all religions. s5

3) Jill Filipovic

a) I would like to share with you Jill Filipovic's CNN article, "I am a millennial 'none,' but I still want Easter." Jill is a journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya, and identifies herself as a "none" without attachment to any religious belief. She writes, "We are, many of us nonreligious millennials, still on the hunt for something fundamentally human: community, connection, and devotion. Something like church, without the church part. We may not be going to church or temple or mosque as much as our parents or grandparents, and we may not even believe in the gods worshipped within those spaces, but that doesn't mean we don't seek sanctuary, kinship...and even divine grace." At the end of the article, Jill concludes, "Even the "nones" among us need this ritual and community; we just don't need it to happen inside a temple. We can find it even if we don't believe the divine is a single omnipotent being in the sky, but that it lives in the smell of a wet forest, the daily dedication to a solitary run or a quiet meditation, and,

this weekend, in the ringing laughter of friends and family gathered around a shared table.”

4) Where do we go from here?

a) So, the situation is not all doom and gloom; there is hope and possibility. We can see our current crisis as deeply problematic and become discouraged by it, or we can see it as an opportunity to start to something good and beautiful. s6

b) You may know of an evangelistic model with a proven track record, and there may be not one but many models. If you know of great evangelistic models, I would love to learn about them. I want to share with you that the house church model is one of those models with a proven track record of credibility and positive outcomes.

c) Is the house church model perfect? No. Does it have all the answers? No. Is there just one way to do house church? No. But I think it is a great model that holds enormous potential for the church and expanding the table. People may not come to a traditional Sunday gathering, but they may come to gatherings at homes where they can begin their lifelong journey with God and others, hopefully claiming the United Methodist Church as their home. So, this afternoon I would like to share with you about the basics of the house church model for evangelism. As I do this, I will make connections to the Wesleyan tradition and offer postliberal theological insights.

5) Introducing Seoul Baptist Church/New Life Fellowship in Houston, TX

a) Before I proceed further, I want to say that there are three caveats to claiming the house church model. One, the congregations I will be sharing about are part of the Southern Baptist Convention. We may be in very different places theologically, which

means it may require some modification in theology and practice. Two, these congregations are either a Korean immigrant congregation or an Asian American congregation that is becoming more and more multi-cultural. The house church model seems to work particularly well for diaspora communities, but I think it may work just as well in non-immigrant communities. And three, Eric the lead pastor of one of these congregations, happens to be my brother, who can be good crazy at times. I hope we can look beyond these to the issue at hand. s7

- b) Seoul Baptist Church was found in 1978 and transitioned to the house church model in 1993 under the leadership of Pastor Young Gi Chai. (not to be confused with Young Gi Cho) Chai began house church ministry with just over 100 people and now there are over 1,200 dedicated adult members, plus children and youth. It is a Korean immigrant congregation and Korean is the primary language spoken there.
- c) New Life Fellowship is an offshoot of Seoul Baptist Church and its primary language is English. It began with about 20 people and now totals over 500 members strong, plus children and youth. Increasingly it is becoming multi-cultural to include not only Korean-Americans, but also people of other ethnicities. S8
- d) These numbers that I gave you, 1200 for Seoul Baptist and 500 for New Life, are somewhat deceiving in a positive way and worth elaboration, because while these numbers are nothing to laugh at, they are more significant than they appear. The majority of both congregations are new Christians who experienced conversion through their ministry. Pastor Lee, who is the current pastor of Seoul Baptist Church, said that over 75% of his current 1200 members are new Christians and there are always more

people in the house church than in Sunday worship. Since 1994 there have been about 150 to 200 baptisms per year. In the present, there are over 200 house churches at Seoul Baptist Church.

- e) With regards to the New Life Fellowship, it started out with 6 house churches in 1999, now there are 75 house churches, and about 60% of 500 members became Christians through New Life Fellowship. There have been 683 baptisms to date. S9
- f) Another interesting fact is that New Life Fellowship began with Korean Americans but now the ratio between Korean-Americans and non-Korean-Americans is about 50 to 50, and becoming more and more diverse. Their commitment to diversity is demonstrated by some house churches where there is not a single Korean-American but made up of people of other races and cultures, a change that is celebrated. S10
- g) Furthermore, both congregations are active in spreading the house church ministry through domestic and international conferences held in the US, Korea, Japan, South Africa, Mozambique, Australia, Kazakhstan, and other countries. I would not be surprised if house church ministry eventually becomes a worldwide movement. S11
- h) Just as expanding the table is not merely about numbers, house church is not about becoming a mega church, but intentionally focused on reaching out to non-Christians to help them become followers of Jesus Christ. Reaching out to non-Christians is probably the highest priority of these congregations. In fact, evangelism is such a high priority they rarely accept transfer Christians from other churches in the area. One thing for certain is that house church is not about church growth through transfer membership.

- i) [They also do not accept transfer membership because they want to discourage people from church hopping and to prevent competition among churches in the spirit of collegiality. Another interesting reason for not accepting transfer membership is that they discovered some church people come with certain baggage and are resistant to doing church differently. But above all, they do not want their evangelistic vision to be compromised by the temptation of building a bigger church.] s12-16

6) Pictures of New Life Fellowship s17

7) Basics of house church ministry

- a) What I will share with you today is only an introduction to the basics of house church ministry and you may interpret it for your own contexts of ministry. If you are interested and need further information, you may attend house church conferences offered by both Seoul Baptist Church and New Life Fellowship in the fall and spring.

b) Biblical references to house church

- i) Colossians 4:15: "Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house."
- ii) Acts 2:46-47, I Cor. 16:19, Romans 16:3-5, Philemon 1:2. s18

c) Four pillars

d) Pillar 1 is make disciples of Jesus Christ

- i) The Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...". Evangelism and discipleship are inseparable.
- ii) What comes to mind is William Abraham's definition of evangelism as initiation into the reign of God.

- e) Pillar 2 is service.
 - i) What is this discipleship about? It is about service.
 - ii) Mark 10:42-45: Jesus called them together and said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- f) Pillar 3 is Jesus’ method of discipleship
 - i) How did Jesus teach servant discipleship? Jesus disciplined not merely through teaching in words but by modeling a way of life.
 - ii) John 13:15, I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.
 - iii) I Cor. 11: 1 and I Peter 5:3
- g) Pillar 4 is division of ministry
 - i) The pastor’s job is not to do everything himself or herself but to equip God’s people in order that they may also participate in the work of God.
 - ii) Ephesians 4:11-12: “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”
 - iii) This vision of ministry has allowed the house church ministry to tap into that deep reservoir of power, resource, creativity, and endless possibilities called the priesthood of all believers. Lay people are trained in ministry—in other words, they know exactly what the game plan is and their role in it—and unleashed to fulfill their own calling to ministry.

iv) Robert Coleman: Selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction. Some have said that Coleman's work is theologically thin but I think it is practical and social scientifically on target. s19

h) Three axes (pediment)

i) House church is committed to the notion that true transformation takes place when people's intellect, will and emotion are holistically engaged.

ii) Intellect: the faculty of reason is engaged in enrichment classes at church

iii) Emotion: affection, disposition, character, and virtue are expressed and shaped in distinctly Christian manner

iv) Will: there is a clear challenge to follow God by obeying Christ's teachings in one's daily life. S20

8) Practice of house church ministry

a) Here are the basic features of a house church meeting that implements the principles.

b) A group usually begins with about 6-10 Christians who meet weekly, usually on Friday or Saturday evenings. Yes, weekly. At first it takes some getting used to, but people usually find their rhythm and it becomes a vital part of their life. Not a problem at all.

20

c) While the group is settling in and becoming a community, house church members prayerfully develop relationships with their non-Christian friends. House church members seek to live an exemplary life at home, work, and other life settings before a watching world in order to bear a compelling witness for Christ. Discipleship understood as a life of service begins even before non-Christian friends are invited to a house church

in having coffee or meal together, hanging out and doing things that normal friends do according to their interests. Yes, the goal is to help people to become a follower of Christ but not without developing a lasting, genuine I and Thou relationship with our friends. 21

- d) When they meet, this is the order of their meetings:
 - i) Love feast (30-60 minutes)
 - ii) Praise: (10-15 minutes)
 - iii) Announcements: (3 minutes)
 - iv) Devotion: (10-15 minutes)
 - v) Sharing: (60-120 minutes)
 - vi) Intercessory prayer: (15 minutes)
 - vii) Mission and evangelism challenge: (15 minutes)
- e) Let me highlight somethings about the meeting
 - i) Meet at the leader's home in the first 6 months in order that servant leadership is demonstrated. Then people are invited to host meetings on a rotation basis. The rationale behind this is that the leaders need to model loving service before inviting others to do so.
 - ii) Everyone has a role in the meeting, e.g., leading praise and giving announcements.
 - iii) Each house church supports a mission either domestic or overseas, and adopts overseas mission sites such as Thailand or Nairobi as their house church names.
 - iv) Devotion

v) The length of devotion is intentionally limited to 10 to 15 minutes. If people are interested in Bible studies and other classes, they can take classes at the larger church. Another reason behind keeping devotions brief is because sometimes Bible studies can turn into shouting matches and conflicts. Positively stated, house gatherings are intentionally designed to create time and space for personal sharing that brings about healing and fosters genuine fellowship. This approach frees the leaders from the burden of preparing content oriented Bible studies to attend to the life needs of their members. Furthermore, if you conducted an intense Bible study, then chances are that unchurched, non-Christians would get lost when you start discussing about Melchizedek, Nebuchadnezzar, Jesus' geneology, apocalyptic writings, etc.

f) After a period of inquiry and participation in a house church, when you see that non-Christian friends are ready to take the next step, they are invited to take a seminar on the basics of Christianity, profess faith and receive baptism, and become a member of the church. The goal of each house church is to lead 1 person to Christ each year. It is useful to remember here the saying "belonging before believing." S22

9) Testimonies

a) "Melanie's letter about "Wayne" (fictitious names):

b) Hi Pastor!!!! Thank you so much for baptizing Wayne today!!! His family immigrated to Canada from China, when he was in middle school. He is now the first member of his family who has accepted Christ. My family have been praying that he would accept Christ for many years now. He was so adamantly opposed, especially the concept of

Trinity and where Jesus fit into everything....among others. I had initially asked that he attend NLF when he began his residency at MD Anderson but he had many excuses for NOT attending it: the church was too far, it was embarrassing to go alone, his entire 'workable' day would be 'ruined' if he attended church. Wayne is an extremely shy, but a brilliant scientist and is very analytical and therefore had tremendous issues accepting something that could not be explained by science. (He had full scholarships to Harvard/MIT and then a full scholarship to Stanford Medical School) We were really excited to hear that Wayne was attending house church with "Mike". Wayne had many questions after your Easter service (and even quizzed me about what the last words of Jesus was), and now he is going through the New Testament and "Pee-Salms" (aka Psalms) and reading the Bible daily. It is amazing how the Holy Spirit works. I consider this a 'miracle'...and after 7+ years of praying, God has answered our prayers! Thank you so much! Warm regards, "Melanie", MD, PhD, Director of Research at _____ Clinic, Department of Neuroscience

c) Audio testimony: "Michael Johnson," an attorney

i) 0 to 1:21 / 3:33-7:35

d) Janet Chang

i) 0 to 3:22

e) Jason and Linda Hong

i) At this time, we have the privilege of having two guests in person who will share with us about their personal experience of the house church ministry in Houston.

ii) Please welcome Jason and Linda Hong. They are natives of Southern California and moved last year to call Georgia their home. Between California and Georgia, they also lived in Houston where they participated in house church ministry. Currently they are involved in another house church ministry in north Georgia.

iii) Welcome, Jason and Linda, to our discussion on expanding the table. How long were you a member of a house church and what was it like?

iv) Would you share with us some of the most memorable experiences?

v) Why should churches and church leaders consider trying house church ministry? What are the benefits?

vi) Is there anything else you would like to share?

f) Jason and Linda, thank you for your time this afternoon and sharing with us your thoughts and experiences. S23

10) What happens after a person has experienced enough of house church and wishes to join the larger church?

a) He or she would take the Receiving Jesus meeting which is offered once a month. It is about 2 to 3 hours long, and people who decide to become a Christian receive baptism.

b) There are development classes, such as Membership Class, Maturity Class, Discovering Spiritual Gifts Class, and Mission and Evangelism Class.

c) The church offers 4 electives which are open to all but required for the lay leaders.

d) Furthermore, there are enrichment classes on parenting skills, marriage enrichment, financial responsibility, etc.

- e) The role of the larger church is to offer programs and events that enable house churches to reach out to non-Christian friends in different ways. The church organizes special events such as fall festival, crawfish boil, barbeque picnic, field days, comedy night, community service projects, short term missions, etc. These events are fun, relational, and designed to provide an opportunity for non-Christian friends to meet others from the church and experience the larger community.
- f) All this to say that house church ministry is systematically organized and implemented to help people move from being a seeker toward growing members in the local church and maturing in service and witness in the wider Christian movement. Expanding the table does not just happen but it is intentional and methodical in character. S24
- g) Those of you who are familiar with George Lindbeck's work on cultural-linguistic approach to religion may find that what is happening in house churches and all of their meetings and programs is people being absorbed into a Christian cultural-linguistic system to adopt a new way of life, speaking a new language and practicing a culture patterned after the way of Christ. House church can be a rich, fertile religious ecosystem where the Christian way of life thrives and is passed on. S25

11) Wesleyan connections and theological reflection

- a) It is obviously clear that the structure and function of house church ministry is similar to the Methodist organizational structure of bands, classes, and societies. S26
- b) The value of the Methodist structure of bands, classes, and societies cannot be stressed enough. Between 1745 to 1748, the Methodist movement was bursting at the seams and growing more rapidly than it was prepared to handle. So Wesley and other

Methodist leaders went on to preach without organizing the crowd into bands, classes, and societies. After four years of preaching without Methodist structure, Wesley confessed, “Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit of it remaining.”

- c) Wesley on Whitefield’s ministry: “How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokehire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.”
- d) We cannot not organize into smaller discipleship and evangelism groups. To me, this is a non-negotiable in thinking about how to expand the table. S27
- e) I would like to make another connection to the Wesleyan tradition, in particular the via salutis, the way of salvation. As you already know, John Wesley has been called a theologian of grace, and rightly so because of his emphasis on grace in his understanding of salvation. S28
- f) One very effective way that Wesley used to teach the Methodists about God’s grace was through the house analogy. He explained that prevenient grace is like the porch which invites and draws us to the gift of God’s love, justifying grace is like the door allowing us to enter into the house, and sanctifying grace is like the rooms of the house where we dwell together with God and others in loving fellowship and service. Wesley underscored the fact that just as the point of the door is to allow entrance into the rooms of the house, the very point of justification is sanctification, which is to allow the love of God shed abroad in our hearts to lead us in works of piety and mercy.

- g) In my estimation, house church is none other than an embodiment of Wesley's understanding of the grace of God which he spoke about through the house analogy. If this is the case, then the question is how do we invite people to the porch in order to enter through the door and eventually dwell into the rooms of the house with God and others?
- h) One way to follow the movement of God's grace is to embrace the model of house church where God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace are all working together simultaneously. When Christians reach out to non-Christians to develop relationships and invite them to a house church gathering, that is God's prevenient grace operating. When non-Christians come to house church, they are given a chance to see up close and personal God's justifying and sanctifying grace at work in people's lives. There is something about witnessing first hand trust, transparency and transformation, or aesthetics of holiness as Brian Stone would say, in a community with all of its imperfections and frailties as well as its finest and precious moments.
- i) Great theologian Karl Barth once said, "The best apologetics is good dogmatics." Well, there is some truth to that. I would like to say, "the best evangelism is good discipleship." It is vital that non-Christian friends are given a chance to see a community of people doing life together serving one another in love, and house church ministry does just that, it provides an opportunity for people to see and taste what Christian discipleship is all about. S29
- j) I want to be clear here and say that house church does not provide a quick fix to the problem of declining membership we face, but it goes to the core of Wesleyan theology

of sanctification and practice of Methodist structure of bands, classes, and societies. It is a practice that requires time and patience. It takes about 3 years to let roots down. It takes about 5 years until fruits begin to show. It takes about 10 years to truly establish and see exponential growth. This slow approach to expanding the table is similar to the approach of early Methodists. According to Tom Albin's research, the mean time between awakening to conversion of early Methodists was 2.4 years! Evangelism is like planting fruit trees, rather than annuals. S30

12) Conclusion

- a) This spring I had the privilege of serving through the World Methodist Evangelism Institute in Kyrgyzstan. On the way home, I visited the United Methodist Seminary in Moscow and came across this painting of Wesley and the early Methodists. What do you see here? Is that a fresh expression or what? If Wesley were here today, what would he do to expand the table? WWJD? WSID?
- b) I don't know about you but I love the United Methodist Church with all of its strengths and weaknesses. It is my deepest prayer and wish that God would bless our ministry together to help people to live radiant lives in service of God and their neighbors. Amen.