

PETER ROENNFELDT

# WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH AT HOME



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# CHURCHES AT HOME: CATCHING OUR ATTENTION!

Frustration got Francis Chan started with churches at home.

With his wife Lisa, he planted a church that quickly grew to be a megachurch—one of the largest in Ventura County, California. But from his own Bible preaching, he knew all believers are supernaturally gifted to build up the body of Christ and he felt he was wasting their gifts when they were only sitting and listening to him.

“And I’m like, 5000 people show up every week to hear my gift, see my gift,” Chan says. “That’s a lot of waste. Then I started thinking, how much does it cost to run this thing? Millions of dollars!”<sup>1</sup>

Today, Chan leads *We Are Church*—a house-church movement in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup> In this network, each church has two pastors, who lead as volunteers. “Each church is designed to be small, so it’s more like family where members can actually get to know one another, love one another and make use of their gifts.” With hundreds of people now participating, it costs nothing.

“And everyone’s growing and everyone’s having to read [the Bible] for themselves and people are actually caring for one another,” Chan explains. “I don’t even preach. . . . They’re becoming the church and I’m just loving it.”

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Recently, my wife and I watched a conversation organised by a network of “Australian house churches” who were hosting Chan. It was good. But it was not what Chan said that caught my attention,

but the number of people participating and the questions in the chat.

Regulars on Zoom know that in Australia one could expect perhaps 25 to 30 people—maybe up to 50—at an event like this. However, there were almost 500 online screens with two or three participants viewing on most. As I scrolled across the screens, all microphones had been muted by the moderators but not one participant had their video off—all were actively engaged.

Does this signal a shift in the interests of believers? And is this what church might look like in the future? Of course, the numbers were still small—but there are indicators of shifts in thinking about church. This is not entirely surprising. COVID lockdowns and restrictions sent many home for work and study—and church! This has meant that believers have been forced to rethink church, asking why, how, where, what and when.

Most acknowledge that church has changed.<sup>3</sup> But, as I have said, it was not only the numbers or level of participation that attracted my attention in the Q&A with Chan. In many other discussions across Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia and the Pacific in recent times, there has been a pattern in the chat comments and questions. Many are seeking help, repeating the questions: (1) How do we do this? (2) Where can we go to join a house church? and (3) What ensures their sustainability?

### **In this book**

Many are interested in this form of church but are not sure where to start. Most struggle to imagine how to go about it. And many are still thinking of *going to church*, rather than *being church* or even creating church in our communities.

In this book, we explore some of the most frequently asked questions:

1. Why the heightened interest in *churches at home*?
2. How do we do *house church*? Are there any New Testament insights?

3. Where do we find them, so as to be involved?
4. What factors contribute to their sustainability? And is that important?
5. When is church, church? And what are the opportunities for families?
6. What approach to Bible reading could be most effective in sharing faith?

In foreshadowing the answer to question 6, *Discovery Bible Reading*—a reproducible, anyone-can-do-it, no-cost process for spiritual growth and faith sharing—is increasingly used in churches at home. One real strength of this approach to Bible reading is its in-built protection against hijackers intent on pushing their own agendas and heresies upon groups. So a special feature of this book is a chapter that explores how this simple process works.

## Unease with the label

Some express discomfort with the label “house church.” At times it has represented a disgruntled element—those who just want to do their own thing. Others feel that these types of churches can be insular and disconnected from the wider church as well as from their no-faith and multi-faith communities. Sometimes unwittingly, the impression is given by those involved that theirs is the only right way. This can be annoying—to say the least! So, for some, the *house church* brand carries excessive baggage.

In most cultures, both terms—*house* and *church*—have been redefined since New Testament times. Alternatives have been suggested—Home Church, Homes of Hope, Simple Church, Basic Church, Church at Home, and more. While I have written and spoken widely about *households of faith*, in an endeavour to reflect the New Testament frames of *oikos*, missional communities and mission hubs, I do not advocate any one label.

Resources for multiplying *households of faith* at <[www.following-Jesus.com](http://www.following-Jesus.com)> sit under the tab CHURCH@HOME—simply a shorter and

convenient link. If you like either label, use them—but these are descriptive, not prescriptive. It is best for each network to choose an identity that relates to their communities.

### Seize the opportunity

The church has a long history of division. First-century Jewish believers didn't want gentiles to join unless they followed their prescribed laws. Debates over the role of women have torn churches apart—and still do. Music and worship wars persist. Let us not now divide over whether we meet in church buildings or gather in homes or gardens.

Over the years, I have fostered community churches, multi-campus churches, multiple worship services, umbrella mother-churches with multiplying home churches, mission hubs with their networks of missional communities, and even hybrid churches.

Some models relate better in certain cultures, and some reflect New Testament frames more closely. However, it is the good news of salvation that makes us all one in Christ. While we are many, and there will be variety, the *body of Christ* is one and our love for each other is to “prove to the world” that we are His disciples (see John 13:35).

Church members, local church leaders, ministers and denominational leaders, whatever you have thought about churches going home in the past, there are indicators that they might figure large in the days ahead. This could be an opportunity for church and mission that must not be missed. This short book is designed to provide a handle on the possibilities—the why, how, where, what, when and method—of church at home.

# WHY? A HEIGHTENED INTEREST

It was COVID-19 that got Eunice Winship started with her *household of faith* (HOF). A Papua New Guinean, Eunice is married to Peter, an Australian, and has lived in Australia for 35 years. Sharing the good news of salvation has been her passion. Leading a small Saturday afternoon Bible-study group, she has brought several people to Jesus and baptism. Then COVID-19 restrictions closed their church building in Cairns, Queensland—about 18 kilometres from her northern suburb of Trinity Beach, which has a population of 5500.

As restrictions eased, Eunice felt impressed to open her home as a HOF, and although Peter was not a church attender, he supported her. Eunice shared her plan with another church member living in their suburb and she was excited, also inviting her friends.

“Our first household of faith was a most humbling, new experience,” Eunice says. “Nine of us gathered for fellowship. We had all missed social contact, Bible study and shared worship.” Their engagement with the community has led to many opportunities to share Jesus’ love through meeting needs, and sharing conversations, prayer and messages of hope—intentionally inviting friends, contacts and family to join them.

Eunice quickly saw the potential of *Discovery Bible Reading* for their HOF. It allows everyone to participate in reading and discussing the Bible, and sharing Jesus with others. And it has made it easy to multiply their HOF network. (See Episode 2, “Multiplying Households of Faith,” <[www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/](http://www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/)>.)



## Is the environment right?

A range of factors threaten the sustainability of our planet, motivating many to action. We have become more aware of our part in protecting our global environment, and an increasing number of believers are realising that we must also be proactive in shaping our spiritual environments.

A rapidly deteriorating spiritual, social and ethical environment is compelling many to rethink church. As we take responsibility for recycling and creating clean, pleasant and enjoyable communities with our neighbours, some are sensing that we must also take more responsibility to foster spiritual and social environments that are just, equitable and honouring of others.

Historically, church and mission have flourished in the most forbidding and difficult circumstances. The current less-than-ideal societal and religious environment might be cultivating a heightened interest in church at home—whether people gather in homes, cafes, parks or other outdoor settings. Church is not simply the responsibility of others.

Many identify with Chan's *frustrations*. While we might enjoy the dynamic and professionalism offered by large churches in beautiful buildings, these come at the cost of many spiritually gifted believers remaining mere spectators. The desire to participate, along with the conviction that we should engage in mission for our families and communities, is driving many to rethink church.

There is a growing sense that *church needs to be closer to home*. It needs to be where our families and connections live, not many kilometres away—with us leaving to go to church. In fact, it is not so much about going to church as *being* the church. We might not be quite sure what that means, but it is a mantra that rings true—affirming the idea of church closer to home.

And what about the *money*? We give, but is it actually feeding the hungry, clothing the destitute, housing the homeless—including those on the streets around where we live? Or are the tithes and

offerings simply used to maintain buildings and offices, systems and institutions? The church has had large structures and multiple levels of organisation in past centuries but do we need to continue to maintain the status quo? What was church for Jesus and the early believers? And how does this relate to us today?

## Church sent home

Scattered by *pandemic restrictions*, we were rudely awakened to the idea that the basic unit of church is much smaller than we had imagined. Jesus had spoken of church as the “two or three” who gather in His name (see Matthew 18:15–20), but we have become used to larger numbers and programs. When this was taken away, it became obvious that we don’t need to go to a church building to be faithful.

It has also been *difficult to plan*. No-one can be sure when the church building will be open or locked down again, what the distancing rules might be next time, and whether it will be possible to invite friends to church. Planning for bigger events is difficult. Some feel that something smaller could be managed more easily. Church at home is more agile and adaptable. If restrictions are reimposed, it is easier to call family members, friends and neighbours, and adjust quickly.

Many long for closer *friendships and fellowship*. Some have been lonely in church. They feel disconnected, something small seems safer and they don’t need to wait for an infrequently scheduled pastoral visit or call. Life is difficult, and they look to strengthen relationships with those they already trust, including their neighbours.

For some there seems to be a *growing disconnect* between everyday reality and church. Significant social-justice movements—including Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Gender Equality and Women’s Rights—have reshaped how society thinks, but some feel church struggles to engage constructively with the ideals of Jesus, let alone these more radical agendas. Sadly, there seems to be dissonance.

## WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

There is a sense of *dissatisfaction*. Faith is never divorced from culture, and postmodernism has reshaped our expectations as believers. We expect variety, choice and conversations; and many are uncomfortable with single metanarratives, creedal statements, dogmatic pronouncements and the same routines. The church must champion justice and equity, and there is a sense that this may be possible in new forms.

But perhaps the two most powerful driving motivations behind the renewed interest in church at home or *households of faith* are: (1) a longing to simply focus on *Jesus*—to encounter Him through scripture, reflect on His love and grace, and grow in living for Him; and (2) a desire to *participate* in His mission where we live. The gospel has broken down all national, ethical, social and gender barriers, but faith and church have seemed so disconnected from life. *Households of faith* could provide an opportunity to make faith real in our communities—with all participating.

Not only have some pastors woken up to the waste of having Spirit-gifted believers merely sitting as consumers, but believers also want to engage actively in God's mission and being church. They want their faith to relate to their families, friends and colleagues. Many cannot see their family or friends coming to a church building, but feel they might engage in something more relational, personal and closer to their home environment—on the paths-of-life, even at home.

### **Could church capitalise on this interest?**

Might there be potential for God's mission—and for established churches—in this heightened interest in churches at home? With an increased awareness of how different New Testament churches were to what has evolved over the centuries, some are choosing to ally more closely with Jesus' life and teachings as the most effective model to fulfil His gospel disciple-making commission—and are re-examining what He said about church.

# End of product sample

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