

PETER ROENNFELDT

WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH AT HOME



“These are the very questions many of my colleagues in Fiji are asking . . . this will be very helpful.”

—Maveni Kaufononga, Pacific church leader

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“An easy to understand read—and what we want to see among the diaspora peoples in the western and northern Melbourne suburbs.”—Phil Malone, Pioneers Area Leader, Diaspora Australia and New Zealand

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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!”¹

Today, Chan leads *We Are Church*—a house-church movement in San Francisco.² 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.”

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.³ 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> 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/>.)

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.

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.

HOW? DOING CHURCH AT HOME

For many, not being able to meet and worship in church buildings has been disorienting, even distressing. But while these are difficult times, they are not unprecedented. Greater numbers have suffered and died during past plagues and pandemics, and health authorities have closed church buildings even in more recent decades. Some people recall church buildings being closed in the 1950s to contain the spread of polio.

And while we do not like our movements or gatherings restricted or monitored, carrying health cards is hardly a new requirement. I have been travelling internationally for almost 50 years and have regularly carried a health card with my passport for border authorities to inspect my vaccination records for measles, tetanus, yellow fever and other infections.

We are aware that persecuted believers meet “underground” in house churches, but as challenging as our health regulations may be, we are not being persecuted for our faith. Not only church buildings have been closed, but also mosques, synagogues, Buddhist and Hindu temples, pubs, bars and cafes—and thousands of businesses.

Perhaps the main reason why being stuck at home for church has been so disconcerting is that most of us have no track record of doing church like this. Even most local and denominational leaders found it difficult to imagine church without a weekly one-to-two-hour program of music and preaching, and scrambled to replicate what most of the faithful had become accustomed to.

But what is church? What is the meaning and purpose of church? What do *households of faith* or churches at home look like? What do they do? What insights do we gather from New Testament churches?

Jesus' idea of church

The gospels show Jesus' commitment to cultivating a movement of multiplying disciples, but Matthew is the only one reporting the two occasions when He specifically spoke of church. The Greek word *ekklesia*—chosen to translate His words—simply means *a gathering*, with no institutional, denominational, political or architectural connotations.

Also called the *body* and *bride* of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:27, 28; Revelation 19:7), Jesus spoke of “my church” in Matthew 16:13–21:

- Built upon the truth that He is “the Christ”—the anointed of God.
- Given “the keys of the kingdom”—with full responsibility for His mission.
- Established upon the reality of His death and resurrection—the eternal gospel.

With His church being people—with not a single church building erected until 300 years after His time—it is not surprising that the second time Jesus spoke of church He addressed relational issues and conflict resolution. He knew what people could be like! In Matthew 18:15–20, He spoke of:

- The basic unit of church—the “two or three” who *gather* “in my name”; and
- His presence—saying, “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

In the days before His crucifixion, Jesus outlined the *great commands* for His disciples or church (see Matthew 22:34–40), and after His resurrection, the *great commission* (see Matthew 28:16–20), with baptism and the Lord's Supper being tangible expression of our fellowship with God and each other. In these statements and symbols, we have the five summary purposes of His church:

1. Worship—to love and honour God.

2. Service—to meet the needs of others.
3. Mission—to make and multiply disciples.
4. Fellowship—to experience God and love each other.
5. Obedient discipleship—to mature in every way in our relationship with God.

A glimpse of the earliest church

Just as Jesus was born of the Spirit and anointed for ministry, so the church (His *body*) was born of the Spirit and then anointed on Pentecost day. Luke describes the church in Jerusalem. Observe how the gatherings of early believers reflected the principles Jesus had outlined for His church. The believers were devoted to:

- “The apostles’ teaching”—that Jesus had come in the flesh, that He died but was alive and was now at the Father’s right hand (Acts 2:42).
- “The fellowship” of baptism in the name of Father, Son and Spirit, “sharing in meals [including the Lord’s Supper], and . . . prayer” (Acts 2:41, 42).
- “A deep sense of awe”—in Jesus’ presence, seen in miracles and wonders (Acts 2:43).
- Sharing “everything they had . . . with those in need” (Acts 2:44, 45).
- Worship and praise—in both the Temple courts when they could, and daily celebrating the Lord’s Supper and sharing meals “with great joy and generosity” in their homes (Acts 2:46, 47).

Luke records, “And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Within a short time, opposition from the authorities barred the church—or these *gatherings* of disciples—access to the Temple, and they faced strident opposition in synagogues. But they could gather in their homes. By Acts 4:4, 5000 men plus women, youth and children had become believers in Jesus—so by that time, there might have been more than 15,000 believers in the population of approximately 25,000.

With 10 to 20 people gathered in a home, this means there might

have been as many as 1000 home churches in Jerusalem before the believers were scattered from the city by the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom (see Acts 7:54–8:3).

And when scattered, those early believers:

- “Preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went” (Acts 8:4).

Philip went to Samaria, then down towards Gaza to share the good news of Jesus with an Ethiopian eunuch—one who was sexually different. By the dramatic intervention of Jesus Himself, Saul was converted, later becoming the apostle Paul. And Peter was sent by the Spirit to the home of an Italian centurion, with his whole pagan gentile household experiencing conversion with the baptism of the Spirit.

It is when reporting on Paul's second major missionary journey that Luke specifically mentions the apostles planting and multiplying churches in the *oikos* or *households* of new believers. It is from those that we borrow the term *households of faith*. In the next chapter, we will consider more closely the nature of those churches, but at this point, just keep in mind that all the New Testament churches met in homes—all the churches! There weren't any church buildings or dedicated meeting places for early believers.

And they were complete churches!

Some of my richest memories of church as a child were small gatherings in homes, school classrooms or simple Country Women's Association (CWA) Halls. Dad was a lay-preacher and on weekends we travelled the then narrow forest roads in the southwest of Western Australia to mostly remote groups of believers and their neighbours.

There was Bible study, prayer, discussion—that, to me, sometimes felt endless!—the Lord's Supper, baptisms, anointing prayer, food—those country women could cook, and more than once my eyes were bigger than my stomach!—the exchange of farm and garden

produce, and visits with neighbours “who might be interested” before returning home, often very late in the night.

I never thought of those gatherings as some kind of halfway house on the way to becoming a real church. That was church! They were not going to grow to be mega-churches—or even a church of 200. There weren’t that many people in their communities. They were church and manifested every quality of complete New Testament churches.

All participate and contribute

Watching a children’s mission story selected by Eunice’s granddaughter Jada, who was new to their *household of faith*, was a catalyst for change. It was a story about a young girl who wanted to feed the homeless, rather than get a birthday cake—and this motivated their household of faith to raise funds for backpack-beds for the homeless in their community.

This has led to many opportunities to share Jesus’ love through conversations, prayer and messages of hope while providing meals for the homeless in their community, raising funds for kids with cancer, and engaging with agencies caring for victims of domestic violence and mental health issues.

Connecting is essential. “We developed a social media platform that is the interface to connect with friends and family—our *relational streams*,” Eunice explains. “This has proven effective.” Eunice has also developed an attractive folded business card with the words *Household of Faith* and her contact details on the front, and a simple outline of the *Discovery Bible Reading* process on the inside.

Everyone participates. Eunice is excited about *Discovery Bible Reading* because anyone can do it. “It is user-friendly, non-threatening, simple and easy,” she says. They regularly eat and share life together, but on Friday evenings, as well as during their worship times, they also share the Lord’s Supper. “All participate and are valued, including the children,” Eunice says. “In this we experience the gospel and the importance of mission.”

It is a complete church. As well as worship and Bible reading, serving community needs, making disciples and experiencing spiritual and numeric growth, each *household of faith* offers rich fellowship. When a long-time friend was diagnosed with cancer, the HOF offered anointing and prayer. At the same time, other family members also requested prayer—for a scheduled shoulder operation and the safe delivery of a new baby.

“God answered our prayers,” Eunice says, “and they had a family dinner to rejoice in the blessings of God upon them.” These experiences have had a big impact on all in the HOF and also connected them to fresh *relational streams*—where they have multiplied.

But multiplication is part of the story in the next chapters.

APPLICATION

1. From Jesus’ teaching and Luke’s report of the Jerusalem church, what have you learned about how to do church at home?

2. What things do you think are important for a *household of faith* to be a complete church?

WHERE? FINDING A HOUSE OR BEING CHURCH

We are introduced to Publius as he makes his way through the narrow, twisting and filthy streets of Rome. His friends Clement and Euodia have a standing invitation from a Jewish couple, Aquila and Prisca, to join them for a meal every seventh day of the week—and Publius was invited along.

Robert Banks tells the story in his small book, *Going to Church in the First Century*:¹

The city is crowded, with as many as a million people of every ethnicity imaginable—slaves and freedmen—culturally “a bit of a shambles.” The few buildings that survived the Great Fire in the days of Emperor Tiberius are now overshadowed by five- to six-storey tenement blocks, poorly built structures in danger of collapse or an even greater inferno.

At street level, Aquila and Prisca own a shopfront for their work, with their apartment behind. It was perhaps similar to their place in Corinth, where the apostle Paul stayed and worked with them as a tentmaker. Through him, they had learned of Jesus and “a new way of looking at the world.” There, and in Ephesus where they prepared the way for the apostle’s missionary activities, they started regular gatherings in their home.

It was to this type of weekly gathering that Publius had been invited, in their rooms in Rome.

Publius was surprised by the warm welcome he received, but shocked by the lack of discrimination for those obviously of different

social rank—with slaves and their masters treated equally. Their associated trades—booksellers, tentmakers, weavers and leather workers—connected some.

There was a family with four children, and another couple with two girls. The freedmen and more affluent brought gifts, which Publius observed, they shared with the others.

Various people brought food for the meal, and as they moved to recline at the table Publius asked Clement, “Is this when the meeting starts?”

“It really began the moment we came into the house,” he replied—leaving Publius to wonder what that might mean!

Aquila called for quiet and took bread from the table, saying he would like to “give thanks.” Publius, a pagan Roman, assumed it was like an offering to the gods. But instead, Aquila told how their God had offered Himself—His only Son had died that they might live. After being executed, He had come to life again, and all who followed Him would share in His life.

Publius found the meal, prayers, stories from the Jewish scriptures, songs written and sung by the children, the testimony of a slave baptised in the Tiber that week, the reading of one of Paul’s letters, the ensuing vigorous conversation, and anointing prayer, to be surprisingly “simple and matter-of-fact”: “Neither decently ritualistic nor exotically mysterious.”

On the table were cups of grape juice or wine, and as the evening was ending, Aquila took his cup, reminding all of Jesus’ death, the fellowship we share because of Him, and His promise that we will one day sit down with Him. And Publius said, “In this spirit we all drank.”

After more socialising, games, singing and prayer, they said farewell and the meeting was over. As Publius stepped into the night, he realised that the “goings-on” in that home were “unmistakably real.”

“I wondered,” he said, “whether I would take up Aquila’s and Prisca’s invitation to attend the following week. It was hard to say. I wasn’t sure at all. But I suspected I might.”

Oikos—where the idea came from!

The term *households of faith* originates from Luke's reports in Acts. Jesus had modelled a home-based ministry in Bethany and Capernaum, and commissioned His disciples to “make disciples” of all *ethnē*—that is, in all people groups or in every *relational stream* (see Matthew 28:18–20). Paul clearly followed this instruction on his first journey to Cyprus, southern Galatia and Pamphylia; but on his second journey, which took him to Macedonia and Greece, Luke features Paul's work in the *oikos* or *households*.²

The *oikos* was an essential feature of Greco-Roman life and culture. It referred to *households*—extended families of husband and wife, their parents, uncles and aunts, servants, slaves and children. The wife and mother managed the affairs of the home—servants, slaves, the education of children and the sale of produce from home industries in the market. The men were the leaders in the *polis* or city.

When Paul arrived in a city, he visited the market, looking for employment, and on the first Sabbath went to the Jewish synagogue. In both settings, he sought to connect with the *relational streams* of the city: in the markets, gentiles with an interest in God; and at the synagogues, Jews who had perhaps been to the Jordan in the days of John's preaching, or to Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified or at Pentecost when the Spirit had come.

Philippi was a pagan city without enough men for a synagogue gathering or building, but Paul found some *God-fearers* beside the river. It was not a church gathering, but he found Lydia receptive to the gospel. She and her *oikos*, as well as the jailer with his, became believers and were baptised (see Acts 16:13–15, 31–34).

It seems that when still named Saul—before meeting the risen Jesus—Paul was aware of the role of women in the early Jerusalem church, for when determined “to destroy the church,” he had gone “house to house” dragging off both “men and women” to prison (see Acts 8:3). While Jewish Christian believers could attend synagogues in some places until 80 AD, their main gathering place

was the home. The *oikos* was the model for all churches until the fourth century when Constantine's influence and benevolence brought radical changes to the nature of church life, including the first church buildings.

Being a wealthy trader in Philippi, Lydia would have had a large home with separate living quarters where Paul and his team could have stayed. The jailer's house, adjacent to the prison cells, would have been more modest. But both became *households of faith* (see Acts 16:13–40). Culturally and socially, those two would have been quite different, one led by a wealthy migrant female, the other by a tough Roman soldier.

In Thessalonica, new Jewish and gentile believers gathered in Jason's house and, in Corinth, a number of *households of faith* were planted—in the *oikos* of Crispus the synagogue ruler, in that of Stephanas (see Acts 18:7; 1 Corinthians 1:16), in Phoebe's home in the port city of Cenchrea (see Romans 16:1), and perhaps in Aquila and Pricilla's home (see Acts 18:2, 3).

Finding a *house or being church*

Paul's focus was not on planting *house churches* for others to attend, but to bring *households to faith*—that they be church, God's gathered people. This meant multiplication for God's kingdom, for each *oikos* that came to faith became a *household of faith*. And all were complete churches, taking full responsibility for God's mission, baptising new believers and celebrating the Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 1:14–17; 11:17–34). They were vibrant and their witness dynamic.

In Cairns, Eunice and her *Household of Faith* are being intentional in multiplying. Eunice has identified those who are passionate about having a *household of faith* in their homes, and who love the Word of God and are committed to sharing the gospel. She encourages and resources them, gives them training in the environment of her home, gets the support of their pastors to coach them. Two other *households of faith* have already started.

WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

Some of my richest memories are of door-to-door visitation with fellow believers, searching for those open to the gospel among Palestinian families in Bethlehem, the town of Jesus' birth, and Nazareth, where He grew up; among Jewish families in Be'er Sheva, in the Negev; and among multicultural families on the slopes of Mount Carmel in Haifa. In cultivating dozens of new faith groups across Israel and the Palestinian Territory, our attention was not on the houses, but the *households*.

East of the Jordan River in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, I had the privilege of visiting such *households of faith* around the capital Amman, north at Irbid close to the Syrian border, and south in the desert Crusader city of Kerak. In each place, I was reminded of the *households of faith* that the apostle planted across the provinces of the Roman Empire.

Faith was multiplying along *relational* connections. And new believers were leading these new churches. But it was also abundantly clear that for these to continue to multiply and be sustainable, these new leaders would need consistent mentoring, including encouragement, coaching, visits, letters, and today, regular phone calls, emails and Zoom chats. Otherwise, they would not survive.

APPLICATION

1. With some friends, do a SWOT analysis of the idea of *households of faith*. From your perspective, what are some of the:

Strengths?

Weaknesses?

Opportunities?

Threats?

2. How could ministers and local churches capitalise on the concept of *households of faith* to increase the impact of the church for God's mission?

WHAT? ESSENTIALS FOR MULTIPLICATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Even as the 12 apostles gathered for the Lord's Supper, tension filled the Upper Room. Knowing their dispute was about who was the greatest, Jesus took the role of slave and washed their feet in a counter-cultural demonstration of the upside-down, counter-intuitive nature of His kingdom (see John 13:1–17).

Warning that Satan had demanded to test and destroy each of them (see Luke 22:31), Jesus then gave a new commandment: “Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:34, 35).

Jesus was demonstrating and talking values.

To the Philippian churches that he had planted, Paul wrote: “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.” Although God, Jesus gave up His “divine privileges,” took “the humble position of a slave,” being born into humanity to suffer “a criminal's death on a cross.” In telling this “master story,”¹ Paul's point was, “Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too” (Philippians 2:4–8).

Paul was also talking values.

Values, purpose and vision

Values describe how we relate. The devil is irritated when people follow Jesus Christ, stirring up strife within gatherings or throwing darts from without. Early in my experiences in church-planting, I came to realise that the values that we had prayed over and agreed on were of greater significance for the health of a church community than a doctrinal statement—as important as that is! Values like respect, equity, a safe place for all, serving others and intentionally sharing the gospel, define our actions—and our doctrines.

The purposes of church—worship, service, the mission of making and multiplying disciples, fellowship and obedient discipleship—are enriched by these values (see Matthew 22:34–40; 28:18–20). And without a commitment to these values and God’s vision of taking the gospel to all, making disciples in all *relational streams*—with no place left where Christ has not been shared (Romans 15:20–23)—a *household of faith* might be no more than another club.

Values defined by God’s character, with His purposes and vision, are basic to the vitality and spiritual growth of His church. From these, we identify essentials for the multiplication and sustainability of *households of faith*.

Some essentials for households of faith

Keep your theology simple. When Jesus ascended, the message He left for His followers to share was profound, but simple: (1) He had died for all and had risen, and, (2) He would be with the Father, but present with them by His Spirit—and would return in glory. He left no institutions, buildings or structures—just the good news of Calvary and the powerful presence of His Spirit. To complicate this, confuses and stymies His mission.

Focus on His story. You could use a harmony of the Gospels² with *Following Jesus*³ to explore all 184 stories of His life in sequence. Discover what God is like and share this transformative experience with others. This is a frame for multiplication.

Cultivate enthusiastic spirituality. There is nothing mediocre or boring about God. Be excited by His qualities and grace. Keep an open conversation, listening and learning from the Spirit and each other. Remember, Jesus said, “Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). Try to detect His presence and influence. Share in conversational prayer—rejoice, praise and express gratitude to Him.

Immerse yourselves in the experience of the early believers. Read and re-read the book of Acts—perhaps with *Following the Spirit*⁴—and have your life enriched and revitalised by the daily filling of the Holy Spirit. This inspires multiplication.

Serve in your communities. What is needed? Rather than starting new services, ask, “What are others doing to provide food and shelter or support for those suffering family violence or mental health challenges in our community?”—and get involved. Provide practical support for those around where you live.

Households of faith do not have the expense of maintaining church buildings or parking spaces, so your group could provide financial support to meet needs such as utility bills, accommodation or medical expenses for people in your community in times of crisis. This enables multiplication.

Commit to the vision of “no place left.”⁵ As *households of faith*, be intentional and strategic in sharing the gospel with all in your communities. Those without faith who connect and visit will be drawn by your enthusiasm for God’s mission, your genuine care for their eternal and personal welfare, and your commitment to your community. This is a vision of multiplication.

Only use anyone-can-do-it methods of evangelism. Because of its simplicity, Jesus’ approach to disciple-making is reproducible. He used on-the-path-of-life invitations—come and see, follow me, fish with me, sacrifice with me, and receive the Holy Spirit. He taught and modelled a three-step process for leading people from contact to faith: (1) eat their food and listen to their stories, (2) heal them and share your story, and (3) tell God’s story and introduce them to Jesus (see Luke 10:8, 9).⁶

This naturally opens opportunities to share in *Discovery Bible Reading*—which we will explain in detail later in this book—a process that even a novice on the spiritual journey can immediately use. This is a process for multiplication.

Intentionally cultivate sustainability

For multiplication and sustainability, *households of faith* must be intentional. Here are three essentials that do not just happen, they need to be continually kept on the agenda:

Pursuing *ethnē* or relational streams. A small house church bemoaned the fact that they had not grown beyond their original seven or eight people. I asked, “How many know that you are here today?” As we went around the room, we found that not one had invited a family member, friend or work associate to share their meal or Bible reading.

We must also ask: who is each person connected to—and, consequently, who are they connected to? And what other *relational streams* can we identify in our communities—those related by ethnicities or connected by education, work, recreational or sporting clubs? Is anyone in our group a *bridge* into unentered *relational streams*?⁷ And how do we identify key people in each, and how might they be brought to Jesus—to then influence their whole stream? (See Episode 1, “Following Relational Streams,” <www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/>.)

Adopting functional structures. Jesus condemned religious-political systems that gave authority for some to lord it over others. But structures that reflect God’s triune community—each putting the other first, where the value is service—are both good and necessary. These Paul found in the frames of *oikos*. While each will develop its own character and culture—like families—all *households of faith* need structure.

Not only will there need to be agreement on the times and format for worship gathering and periodic celebrations with a wider network,

but also how the group will engage in shared service, disciple-making, fellowship, equipping and planning. How will decisions be made for these various activities, and how will tithe be returned and offerings used? What values will be upheld? How will conflicts be resolved? How will the safety of all be ensured? And what about risk and liability?

These cannot be left to chance.

Mentoring natural key leaders. When compared with Jesus' ministry and Paul's, most local churches and denominations today give little attention to the potential of *people of peace* for mission or church. In equipping the 72, these key people were identified as hospitable and receptive; and in Jesus' ministry, those who became followers used their reputations to influence their *relational streams* to also follow Jesus (see Luke 10:5–9). Classic examples include the woman of Samaria and the demon-possessed man of Gadara, both bringing many others to Him.

In Paul's ministry, there are a number of examples of these key people bringing their families to faith, with churches planted in their *households*. In Philippi, the wealthy trader Lydia brought her *household* (*oikos*) to faith and baptism, as did the Roman jailer, Jason in Thessalonica, Crispus and Stephanas in Corinth, and Phoebe in Cenchrea.

They were the natural leaders “inside” their *households* or *relational streams*, even while very new in faith. A God-fearing gentile one day, Lydia became the leader of her *household of faith* the next; a pagan Roman soldier one day, the jailer became the leader of his *household of faith* the next. Clearly, they were not recognised as spiritual elders that quickly, but they each played a critically important role in God's multiplying kingdom movement. (See Episode 4, “Equipping Teams from the Harvest,” <www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/>.)

In each case, mentoring by one of greater experience provided the encouragement and counsel they needed. Luke remained in Philippi for about five years after Paul, Silas and Timothy were forced to leave.

Being a physician, he could get work while equipping these new leaders and *households* to take full responsibility for mission, teaching, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, anointing, and the multiplication of disciples and churches.

These three practices—baptism, the Lord's Supper and anointing—are essential to church life. They were foundational to the early church and have undergirded every movement of Christian faith. Various denominational policies and practices relating to these have been mostly borrowed rather than shaped by biblical injunctions, and you will find more practical suggestions in balancing these in *If Your Church Is Closed, Be the Church*.⁸

Silas, a prophet, stayed on in Thessalonica, and Paul himself coached the new churches in Corinth—handing on the task of baptising to new believers very quickly (see 1 Corinthians 1:14–17). Through mentors, visits and letters, the apostle aimed to have these new *households of faith* take total responsibility for mission in their regions as fully functioning, multiplying churches within the shortest time possible.

Today, regular visits, phone calls, emails and Zoom conferences can be scheduled to provide the leaders of *households of faith* with the support, resources, debriefing and encouragement they need. New Testament churches were not expected to prosper or even survive on their own, and if regional ministers and pastors do not provide this mentoring and support, many *households of faith* will not survive today either. (See Episode 5, “Releasing Next Generation Leaders,” <www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/>.)

In New Zealand

In the Canterbury/Waitaha region of the South Island of New Zealand, Pastor Siaoisi Halisi Kei oversees 14 active *households of faith*, with another three about to launch and a further six in the planning stage.⁹

Each has three to seven believers, who invite their friends and meet regularly in their homes to read the Bible and share their love for Jesus. Pastor Kei acts as a coach, regularly visiting the key leaders to pray with them, answer questions, and offer support and resources.

Using the S.O.A.P. acronym¹⁰ (which can be enlarged to S.O.A.P.S.—Scripture, Observation, Application, Prayer and Share) as a broad frame for their gatherings, they use the *Discovery Bible Reading* process for exploring Scripture, while each group develops its own unique culture. For some, this is church and they are deeply engaged with their communities.

Pastor Kei says there is wide support among the churches and denominational leaders. It is “a biblical model,” and in this way “church-planting becomes possible.” He uses the convenience of Zoom to encourage and equip the team leaders. And future plans include an annual regional meetings of all the *households of faith*—“to celebrate what God is doing in our territory.”

Support from mission hubs

The idea of some churches being *mission hubs* is described in Luke’s report on Paul’s third major missionary journey. While remaining in Ephesus, the apostle led people to faith, equipped them and sent them back across the province of Asia so that in two years Jews and Greeks “throughout the province . . . heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:8–10).

Mission hubs are not *mission stations* nor popular *ministry centres*, with facilities and institutions, but local churches—in Paul’s day, *households of faith*—equipping a multiplying network of *oikos* missional communities.¹¹ From Ephesus, Paul did not visit all the new churches that were planted, but he sent others to mentor and wrote letters to encourage them.

Only when *households of faith* are fostering new *households of faith*—the second generation—and are cultivating and equipping new

households of faith—the third generation—can we say there is a movement.

In Melbourne, Australia, Tui Fanene pastors nine churches and they are multiplying. The foundations for this were laid by Pastor Eddie Erika and a team of dedicated believers about 20 years ago. The vision is of *hub churches*, each connecting with new contacts through their *relational connections* and multiplying using the simple process of *Discovery Bible Reading* in homes.

Their Melbourne School of Discipleship provides current and potential leaders with systematic, structured equipping and support. Under the umbrella or support and encouragement of their *hub churches* and the coaching of those who have already cultivated *Discovery Bible Reading* groups, further groups are multiplying. In turn, as these new home groups mature in faith and witness, they equip and encourage others. Some are now multiplying to the third and fourth generations—following their *relational* or *family streams*. (See Episode 3, “Planting Mission Hub Churches,” <www.following-jesus.com/videos/following-the-apostles-vision-videos/>.)

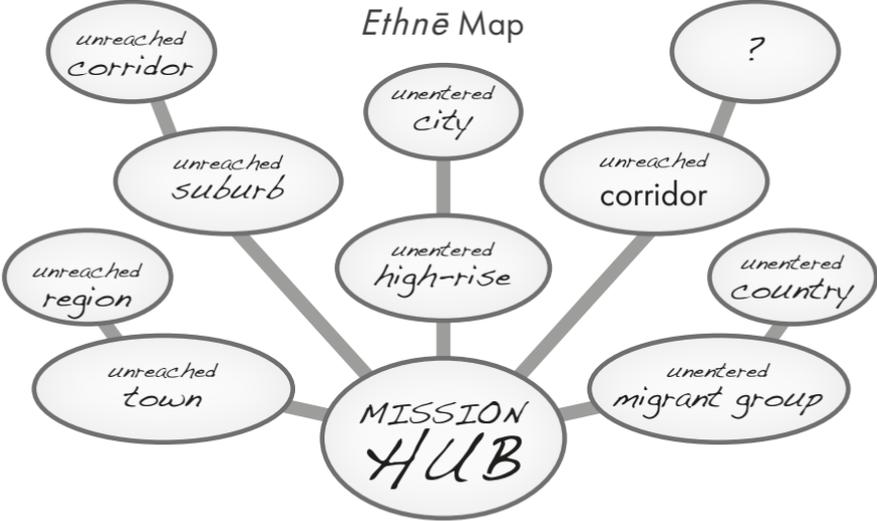
APPLICATION

1. Why do you think *people of peace*—like Lydia, the jailer, Jason and others—are important for God’s mission and church?

- What are their strengths—and how can these be utilised?
- What are potential weaknesses—and how can these be addressed?

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2. Draw an *ethnē* map for your region. Identify and write on this map some of the unreached places and *relational streams* in your region:



3. Draw a personal *oikos* map. Write down the names of some in your network of families that you can pray for and share faith with:



WHEN? FAMILY OPPORTUNITIES

On his second major missionary journey, the apostle Paul revisited Lystra in Southern Galatia—a “relatively obscure, unsophisticated, pagan rural village-city”¹—where previously he had been severely beaten and left for dead on the roadside. Travelling with Silas now, Paul wanted to strengthen the church he had planted there and invite Timothy to join their team.

A teenager at the time, Timothy had a mixed Jewish-gentile heritage, with his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois both commended by Paul for their “genuine faith” (2 Timothy 1:5). For his internship, Timothy spent the next years “tracking with Paul through Macedonia and Greece, back around the Mediterranean to Jerusalem, then back to Asia, to Corinth again, back to Jerusalem,” experiencing both the inspiration of Paul’s teaching and “the horrors of [his] beatings, imprisonment, arrests and trials.”² Paul invested heavily in the next generation of team leaders and apostles.

While Luke records nothing of Paul’s work with children, he modelled his life on that of Jesus who said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14, NIV). Only once in Acts do we read of children in worship with Paul—on the beach at Tyre where, with him, “all the disciples and their wives and children . . . knelt to pray” (Acts 21:1–6, NIV)—but Paul’s ministry involved the *oikos* or families.

In the Jewish tradition, only men and teenage boys attended the synagogue on *Shabbat* to discuss the Torah, not the women and

children. In contrast, churches were gatherings of families, including children.

Households of faith prioritise children and youth

Writing to the *households of faith* in Ephesus—remember, all New Testament churches gathered in homes with families—Paul wrote, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, NIV).

That’s wise counsel: children can run wild in *households of faith*. Ask any child to sit through an hour of adult discussion and they will get ratty, the teenagers bored, the parents angry, and all others frustrated and annoyed. But it doesn’t have to be that way!

It is possible for *households of faith* to work for all age groups—but how and when?

It starts early in the faith journey

In my early ministry, my mentor took me to visit 25 to 35 families each week, introducing the gospel. Arriving at each home, we carried in our Bibles and also a small slide projector, projector stand and screen. Bible studies involved pictures, Bible readings, stories, discussions involving everyone—and often a song, such as, “I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back!” The whole family was involved.

Knocking on doors in Wellington, on the edge of the Western Plains in central New South Wales, I found John and Brian West and commenced weekly Bible studies with their families and then with their wider Indigenous community. They taught me the first scripture song I ever sang—some years before Keith Green made it popular:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, O Lord,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:10,
11, KJV, adapted).

As part of every visit, we shared slides, stories, Bible readings and songs. A Bible study was like family worship and so was the worship service in the small church we planted.

Unfortunately, most who come to faith, either then or today, have never experienced family worship. Therefore, as we lead individuals, couples and families to be disciples, part of the journey is to teach them how to have family worship. Sadly, this has been neglected in disciple-making, resulting in many families not knowing how to do church when COVID sent us home!

Each household of faith must be different

Relational streams are different and so are *households*. Compared to Lydia’s *oikos*, that of the jailer would have been very different. Each *household of faith* will have its own unique culture and makeup.

Over the past decade, PlentyLife has multiplied to nine missional communities in the northern growth corridor of Melbourne. Cultivated by Craig and Vanessa Ogden with their teams, each faith group represents different demographics in the wider community—indicated to some extent by the names they have chosen: Balance, Forge Youth, Zest, Love Thy Neighbour, Kinect, The Grace Collective, Home Base and Thrive.

Each fulfils the purposes of being complete churches in their neighbourhoods during the week and every second weekend, but all meet in a combined gathering of all *households* on the other weekends. They all share God’s mission of “multiplying disciples who make disciples”—empowering families “to live on mission for the sake of the lost”—but each reaches people from their type of *relational stream*.³

When might households of faith gather?

Imagine three different *households of faith*. While the following descriptions illustrate the diversity in each, for a discussion of how they might each function as gatherings we will label them as *households* of single adults, elderly and families. Each is equally important, but it is clear that they will worship and witness differently:

- *Single adults—with perhaps 10–15 young singles, with one small baby and one elderly person.*

Some might connect with morning worship programs in community-type churches. Single adults might meet for lunch in one of their homes—during which they might celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and grape juice as part of the meal, then enjoy music (perhaps with singing), conversation, Bible reading, discussion, prayer and reflection.

They might read through Bible books, using a process like *Discovery Bible Reading* as a frame for discussion and application. To further aid discussion, videos and relevant, new online resources will be utilised. They will plan, give and engage with needs in their communities, perhaps helping with a local soup kitchen, schedule times of social interaction, and intentionally plan all activities with friends of no-faith or those from the fringes of faith in mind.

The single adults' *household of faith* might keep connected as a Facebook or WhatsApp group, and meet in smaller clusters of two or three friends at a café for lunch or a gym workout a few times each week. If enduring lockdowns, they will be in touch by social media for encouragement and support.

- *Elderly—with perhaps 12–15 elderly people (couples and singles), with one young dad and child.*

This group is more likely to share a hot drink and cake around mid-morning, when churches gathered in the past—usually when farmers

had cared for their farm-animals! In their *households of faith*, these older people might sing a well-known hymn, some with a sense of relief that they understand the story line—“not like the *seven-eleven* songs, seven words repeated 11 times to that wild modern music!”

They will share news snippets from family, friends and neighbours, as well as “missionaries” in far-off places. They will update each other on the health of those absent, and pray earnestly for their families and neighbours.

Some will be engaged in service projects in the community—organising food parcels or clothes for people who are struggling—and many are very faithful in giving “tithes and offerings.” Some rejoice in sharing the Lord’s Supper in their home, but others prefer to go to a church building once a month or quarter for Communion—it’s a tradition they have followed all their lives!

Their Bible reading (or study) could go on for a couple of hours—but everyone is happy, including their unchurched neighbours who just love the fellowship. All dote on the child among them—with extra food—and they really appreciate having a young dad with them.

- *Families—with perhaps 4–6 families (couples and single parents), with 10–12 children aged 3 to 13 years.*

It shouldn’t take much imagination to realise how totally different the times of Bible reading, worship, community service, social interaction, and faith sharing must be when it is a family *household of faith*. It just doesn’t work to replicate what might be done in the previous groups.

Doing church at home works really well for children, but it takes commitment. Children and teens cannot simply be sent off to their programs, so parents and all in the *household of faith* take *greater responsibility* for their spiritual and social development. All are committed to ensuring a safe environment.

Family churches at home are naturally *intergenerational*—but it is only church if all ages are engaged and interacting. It is like an

extended family, with children, youth, singles, parents, grandparents and friends together.

So how could this work?

Some possibilities—but, with no prescriptions

There is evidence that early believers met for worship at meal times, when they also celebrated the Lord's Supper and shared in prayer, fellowship, reflected on the Word, met each other's needs and experienced miracles (see Acts 2:41–47). For Dean and Chris Beveridge, food has been central in their 30 years of cultivating and multiplying home churches. "It as an opportunity to enjoy the Lord's Supper or agape feast together," they say. "Eating together is an incredible way to build community."

And the main worship time for a family *household of faith* will follow the form of a family worship—involving all, including the children and teens.

One Friday evening, I was invited to the worship time for a family *household of faith*. As I walked towards the house, a woman on the path to the home stopped me and asked, "Have you also been invited to this church?"

"Yes," I said. "You too?"

"Yes. My first time. Just getting up the courage to go in," she said—taking a last draw on her cigarette and draining the final drops from a can.

When the door opened to us, the host expressed delight in seeing her. They had met the previous Saturday at the local park where members of this *household of faith* regularly had activities for kids and a barbeque, inviting people to their home for a meal and worship on Friday evenings.

Others were there for the first time as well, making a total of about 25 people, including children. People mingled and chatted, catching

up or being introduced and getting to know each other. It was very much like a family. Most, including newly invited friends, had brought food for the meal.

The host called for quiet and, in welcoming everyone, thanked each person for the food they had brought. By doing this, each person was affirmed as well as informed of the choices they might make—gluten or gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan or meat, etc.

Then, before prayer or eating, the host explained the special feature of unleavened bread and jugs of grape juice on the table. This was an *agape* meal—and these were the symbols of the Lord's Supper. A young teen offered to explain their meaning, an adult thanked God for the bread and wine—just as Jesus had done—and all who wanted to express their faith in Him were invited to eat. As the meal commenced, I heard some sharing more explanation with their invited friends.

The meal and chatting took some time, then all sat, with some of the children on their parents' knees, some on a rug on the floor. Kids were asked what they remembered from the previous week's story, and how they had tried to put into action the key idea they remembered from it.

Children's songs were taught and sung, and then there was a Bible story. It was read from the Bible—with a child and an adult reading the same story—followed by the story from an illustrated book, and the same or similar (I don't recall which!) on a video. There was a brief discussion of the story, using the five *Discovery Bible Reading* questions, with many sharing the key lesson they would act on during the next week.

While adults discussed the biblical lessons for a further 10 minutes, kids coloured in or drew pictures to illustrate the story. In some settings, children might act out the Bible story.

Then came a feature that I had not seen except in Jewish families. At the opening of the *Shabbat* meal, the father blesses the mother and children. In this home, the host modelled this blessing for those

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who were new. He told his wife why he appreciated her, then spoke directly to their children, thanking God for them and the qualities he saw developing in them.

Each man then followed, sharing in this way. Some wives and partners were surprised, saying they had never heard such lovely words! Single mums and dads, and those on their own, were not neglected, with a person of faith sharing special blessing for each. This led naturally into *conversational prayer*⁴—after which the children and teens went to an adjoining room to watch a short video, which an adult also enjoyed watching with them—while others shared and chatted.

The worship time—with Lord's Supper and meal, Bible reading, sharing, blessing and relaxing in fellowship—took about 2 hours. All were involved. It was family worship time.

Another family *household of faith* gathered at 10 am for a simple but delightful morning tea. There was a range of healthy snacks and finger food, hot and cold drinks, as well as unleavened bread and grape juice on the table. It was not a large group. Most were middle aged or older, with a family travelling through the area—and connected to some in the group—also invited.

As we stood around the table, all were welcomed and thanks expressed to God for the food, including the bread and wine that we would share. Then we were invited to tell what the bread and wine meant to us. The first to respond was a girl of about eight, from the visiting family. Her explanation of the gospel was simple, but beautiful. Older people had tears in their eyes. Her parents explained that each week they shared the Lord's Supper at a family meal in their home.

At the very first gathering of a new *house church* in Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, before the meal and *Discovery Bible Reading*—and before sharing the Lord's Supper—we washed each other's feet as

Jesus had done in the Upper Room, using the water and basins provided (see John 13:1–17). Some washed the hands of others. As we ate and remembered what Jesus had done for us, those who had never before shared in Christian fellowship expressed gratitude for such a tangible expression of faith and love.

Bible reading—for the adults

It is not wise to try to incorporate long adult Bible discussion into family *households of faith*. You will only frustrate children and teens, alienating them. But it is important to plan for the adults to experience a deeper journey of faith and Bible reading. This means, times need to be set aside for this.

One idea is for the men to regularly take responsibility for the children and teens each Saturday or Sunday afternoon—or at another designated weekly time—taking them away for other activities such as a bushwalk, while the women and mothers share, read their Bibles and pray together. Some have read through a harmony of the Gospels—with *Following Jesus* (Signs Publishing, 2017)—to walk through the life story of Jesus.

The men could plan to meet one morning a week—at 6.45 or earlier, depending on their work schedules—for breakfast, discussion of a Bible chapter and prayer. I belong to a men’s group that has met once each week for one hour (exactly) for more than 15 years. Because we now live in different places and countries, we continue meeting on Zoom—with a “virtual coffee”!

Equipping and releasing—for worship and witness

Be intentional about equipping each other for spiritual growth and family worships. Suggest and provide resources for new friends, as well as families—storybooks and videos suitable for the age range of their children—and model how to pray and worship.

Weekly equipping. By following the same simple reproducible process of *Discovery Bible Reading* each time you meet—with bookmarks for each participant⁵—the group is providing regular equipping for Bible reading, memorisation, prayer, application and witness. It is something they can each do at home and with friends.

Bible books are available in video form—the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, and the book of Acts. As well as reading, these can be used to watch each story unfold, with discussion for application. Equip all to engage and share faith. No person should just sit for weeks!

The *Filament New Living Translation*⁶ is a great asset to share—for while it is a printed Bible, it has an app that gives immediate phone/tablet access to a great range of digital resources: backgrounds, insights, maps, videos, study notes, book summaries, presentations, cross-referencing and more. Kids love exploring, and they will find many things to add to worship conversations.

Annual equipping. Each *household of faith*—whether for singles, the elderly or families—could plan a regular (perhaps annual) time of equipping for multiplication. Two ideal resources would be:

- *If You Can Eat, You Can Make Disciples* (Signs Publishing, 2018) which explores Jesus' equipping of disciple-makers. It is practical, providing a simple anyone-can-do-it process.⁷
- *Multiplying Disciples* (Signs Publishing, 2021) a conversation guide with links to a series of short videos (available as a free download from <www.following-jesus.com/multiplying-disciples-1/>).

Participation, support and accountability

Plan community involvement. Every church at home needs to commit to intentional involvement in every aspect of church—worship, service, disciple-making, fellowship and obedient discipleship. Participation in meeting the needs of the disadvantaged makes faith tangible and meaningful for all, including children, teens and young adults.

Pastoral care and support is vital. Many people experience brokenness and even in small *households of faith* some will feel isolated. Be proactive in ensuring all are both giving and receiving care and support. It is a simple process to team up, with each making a commitment to phoning those in the same three homes each month.

Reach out to others. Why not follow the three-hour rule—three hours outside of your own commitment to worship and gathering times given each week to calling neighbours, work associates and community contacts to encourage and serve them? If everyone in a *household of faith* does this, it makes a huge difference.

Set in place an accountability system. In *Your Church Has Changed* (Signs Publishing, 2021),⁸ possible structures and processes—including legal matters, financial accountability with tithe and offerings, safe places and liability issues—are outlined in some detail.

Where *households of faith* are part of a network—under the umbrella of a broader vision or an overarching organisation with equipping, coaching, tracking, insurance and accountability systems—they can often be more focused on mission and being church, and thus be more sustainable. However, the leaders and ministers of the umbrella networks or denominations must be intentional in supporting and releasing *households of faith* to be complete churches, otherwise their potential will be stymied.

During lockdown

For hundreds of large churches across Pacific nations, interest in *house church* groups sprang from their commitment to multiplying disciples. They had restructured their churches and Bible classes into teams of eight to 10 people according to where they lived. Many were equipped and conducting *Discovery Bible Reading* groups in their homes, under their houses or in their gardens, and when scattered and locked down they immediately took full responsibility as *churches at home*. They knew how to be church!

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Where only immediate family members could meet in their houses, the *households of faith* supported the smaller family groups of “two or three” gathered in Jesus’ name with phone calls, food dropped at doors and other support. *Households of faith* take full responsibility as complete churches. (See Video 3, “Disciple-making in PNG” for an inspiring case-study, <www.following-jesus.com/videos/church-planting-case-studies/>.)

APPLICATION

1. Get together with friends to plan or discuss your *household of faith*. What frame would best work for you—single adults, elderly or families—and what might this look like?

2. What practical insights have you gathered from this chapter?

METHOD? DISCOVERY BIBLE READING IN HOUSEHOLDS OF FAITH

Discovery Bible Reading is a simple, reproducible process that fosters spiritual growth, maturity and biblical literacy, while also protecting against heresies and conspiracies. It is a feature of worship in many *households of faith*. It is innovative and easy to use.

“It is user-friendly, non-threatening and simple. Literally anyone can do it,” Eunice Winship explains. “It is really effective when introducing Jesus to those who have never read the Bible, as well as for people of other faiths, our children and young people, and mature believers.”

“It is truly amazing,” Eunice adds. “My husband—who has not attended church regularly—and two others new to faith are leading out in *Discovery Bible Reading*.” Participants are meeting Jesus and growing in their relationship with Him. “It is a beautiful thing,” she says. “Questions are raised, challenges and struggles are discussed, and our lives are being changed.”

It is a simple process that can be used to guide the habit of personal daily Bible reading, to get the most from “time out with Jesus,” as well as for family worship times.

How does it work?¹

To start, use an easy-to-read Bible translation,² either paper or downloaded onto smart devices. Of course, some will have their favourite Bibles and a variety of translations enriches discussion. Also, have a supply of *Discovery Bible Reading* bookmarks outlining the process—available free in a variety of languages and styles, including some designed specifically for children, from <www.following-Jesus.com>.³

In *Discovery Bible Reading*:

1. Read each Bible book from beginning to end—the way they were written to be read. While this process can be used to explore any verse, passage or chapter, its impact is the greatest when we read each book or letter as a whole over a number of sessions.
2. We start with a simple prayer. If our prayers are too complicated, we *teach* people not to pray for fear they will not use the right words. On the bookmark, we have this prayer: *Dear God, Please guide us. Thank you.*
3. We start at the beginning of the Bible book and read one section or story at a time. If the section is very short, we might read two sections.
4. We read the section twice—reading from beginning to end—with another person retelling the story in their words. Never read one-verse-at-a-time around the circle, and the one retelling doesn't explain the passage but simply recalls it. In this way, all in the group, including those new to Bible reading, become familiar with the story. A child might be one reader, with an adult the other. This creates a basis for shared conversations.
5. We then discuss the scripture, using the same five discussion questions each time:
 - What is new to us?
 - What surprises us?
 - What do we not understand?
 - What will we each apply or obey this week?

- Who will we share with, and what will we share, this week?

These are direct questions to which all, including unchurched people, can relate easily. At first some church people might feel these questions are not spiritual, but most people soon find that these non-religious questions lead to deep discussions. Using these questions, the group can also explore other questions—perhaps, “What does this tell us about God?” and “What does it tell us about how to relate to Him and others?”—as they arise in the conversation.

Give each person a *Discovery Bible Reading* bookmark and encourage different ones to ask the questions each time. In this way, each one learns to share faith.

6. We don't have answers to all questions, and the Bible doesn't address all questions and subjects. If there is something we don't understand, we don't argue or conjecture. If the discussion wanders, call people back to the Bible with, “Which part of this text sparked that idea? What was your train of thought?” Thank each for their ideas, and the best answer is always, “Let's keep reading.”
7. We respect the time constraints agreed by all in the *household of faith*. Before we end, we pray together, with someone perhaps closing with the prayer on the bookmark: *Dear God, thank you for your Word. Help us to follow you. Amen.*

Where to start?

Today, few people know much about Jesus, so Mark's gospel is a good place to start. It is the shortest gospel, easy to read and interesting, and a great introduction to Jesus—so invite friends and colleagues without any Bible background to join your *household of faith* for a meal, fellowship and Bible reading.

Of course, you will invite friends each time you gather, and because you will be reading through Bible books—and reading each whole section twice, followed by its retelling—all will be able to participate.

After Mark, you could go to John's gospel for an introduction to all the essential ideas of the Christian faith, then Acts—the inspiring account of the early believers being empowered by the Holy Spirit, and multiplying disciples and churches to fulfil God's mission. These three—Mark, John and Acts—are available as an attractive compilation entitled *Discover Jesus*, available from Signs Publishing.⁴

There are 66 Bible books to explore, so there isn't any need for reading guides. Just read the Bible. When about to start a new Bible book, one in the group could research the background to that book—who wrote it, when and why?—and share a short introduction. A great resource for this is the *Filament Bible* app referred to earlier, which provides historical background and a wide range of maps and videos—including *The Bible Project* videos, devotional and study materials.⁵

Its strengths

Discovery Bible Reading allows God to be our teacher (see John 6:44, 45). Your friends will experience what Jesus is really like, become believers in the fellowship of a small supportive faith community, and be able to share with others using this same simple process.

Discovery Bible Reading cultivates theological thinking. This was a strength of New Testament churches. Let me explain. Early believers were devoted “to the apostles' teaching” (Acts 2:42), meaning the two historic realities of faith: (1) Calvary—Jesus came in the flesh, died for our sins and rose from the grave; and (2) Pentecost—Jesus ascended, is at the Father's right hand, but is present by His Holy Spirit and will return in glory. Every aspect of life, and all biblical stories and prophecies, were seen through these truths. This is theological thinking—and what *households of faith* do in *Discovery Bible Reading*.

Discovery Bible Reading fosters spiritual growth and biblical literacy. Participants are not spectators, but are actively engaged in growing in their understanding of God. Rather than disconnected verses, all have their Bibles open and read Bible books in context. Even for

church attenders, this can be a new experience. Unlike brief social media messages, we engage deeply with God's Word.

Discovery Bible Reading encourages participation. Like physical exercise, participation strengthens and sharpens our experience of God, refreshing and revitalising our relationship with Him. It is essential for our spiritual health.

Discovery Bible Reading equips disciple-makers. Rather than *study*, which implies a teacher with the answers, this is *Bible reading*. It is simple, natural and reproducible; literally, anyone can do it at no cost! Each time it is used in your *household of faith*, all involved are being equipped to use it with their friends.

Discovery Bible Reading facilitates the use of spiritual giftedness. When Jesus ascended, He gave gifts to His church. In each *household of faith*, there will be those gifted as apostles, prophets (with spiritual discernment), evangelists, pastors (or shepherds) and teachers. These equip and build each other up for God's work, cultivating unity and maturity "in the Lord" (see Ephesians 4:7–13).

The apostle Paul emphasised that participation protects a church from immaturity—from being "tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching," and being "influenced" by those who "try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth" (Ephesians 4:14–16).

Discovery Bible Reading creates an environment for conversations, growth and participation, and protection from heresy and conspiracies.

Learning from the past

The Great Awakening and Great Advent Revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries were some of the most significant revivals since New Testament times. The "keystone" for the Methodist movement was a simple process of weekly Bible reading, prayer and fellowship that John Wesley called "class meetings," led by people in their communities, using standard discussion questions all could follow.⁶

However, denominations birthed during that time and in the

subsequent Charismatic movements of the 20th century—in the broad category of what are called evangelical-type churches—have been easy targets for the current rash of conspiracy theories. There are various reasons for this vulnerability.

While powerful, those revivals reflected a general anti-intellectual and anti-scientific stance. They fostered a spirit of individualism (distrust of others); immediacy (past faith is suspect, so choose now); dogmatism (a convincing simplicity), and anti-traditionalism (all other traditions are of Babylon).⁷ These tend to isolate people from others of faith, leaving the unscrupulous to promote conspiracies—often to gain adherents and their money.

Coupled with this was what has been called “the democratisation of American Christianity”⁸—the idea that with a concordance every person could read and interpret the Bible for themselves, with no need for qualified Bible teachers and theologians. Such self-reliance and self-confidence is dangerous. Jesus’ idea of the church is that it is community, where those qualified as careful Bible teachers add value and insights to our reading.

Then, thirdly, a fascination with speculative end-time scenarios—such as Dispensationalism, the Secret Rapture, the roles of Israel and America, and every twist and turn of the trinity of evil (dragon, beast and false prophet)—can leave churches vulnerable to conspiracies.

Further, an evangelistic method that has unduly emphasised *new secret information* that others do not have or know, along with a demand for results, cultivates an environment of exclusivity—“We are the only ones who know!”—in which conspiracy theories flourish.

A pragmatic results-driven methodology reduces or truncates the message. In the New England states—where in the 19th century all attended weekly worship services, Bible classes and prayer meetings—the questions that shaped evangelism were narrowed to:

What message would be most effective? What do people most want to hear? What can we say that will both convert the people and draw them to our particular church?⁹

As the decades pass, individualistic revivalism that is suspicious of others and self-confident, with a fascination with speculative end-time scenarios and an evangelistic approach largely obsessed with information others don't have—and creates a breeding ground for every heresy and conspiracy imaginable. Couple this with a void of biblical literacy, knowledge or understanding—with 24-hour social media and video messaging, but very little Bible reading—and the warning lights should be flashing, with sirens blaring!

Read your Bibles again!

When visiting a friend of many years, he excitedly told me of the latest news, asking, “Have you heard of what the Pope is doing? Are you aware of his latest secret decrees? Have you seen . . . ?”

My friend was unaware that each time he showed an interest, the internet served him even more startling and dramatic “secret information.” Social media algorithms create what we might call an echo chamber, a place where we receive information that reinforces what we have shown an interest in and want to hear again . . . and again . . . and again. He was an easy target for the latest conspiracy theories.

When he paused, I suggested, “Perhaps it would be good to simply close your iPad and open the gospels. Why not start reading the story of Jesus again?” His wife breathed a sigh of relief, responding, “Now, that would be a good idea!”

In your *households of faith*, don't be hijacked into following one person's hobbyhorse. Avoid a diet of YouTube videos featuring a particular speaker claiming access to secret information about end-time events. Remember, heresies come from bad preaching, not from Bible reading. So keep reading—following the theme of each Bible book.

For more in-depth Bible teaching and the study of complex themes, including the prophetic chapters of Daniel and Revelation, invite your pastor to teach for a few weeks or request your pastor recommend a good Bible teacher to share a short series of seminars—but then get back to *Discovery Bible Reading*.

WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

Discovery Bible Reading provides an environment for the Holy Spirit to work in *households of faith*, generating theological thinking, spiritual growth and biblical literacy. It encourages participation, equips and releases disciple-makers for God's mission, and facilitates the use of spiritual gifts for Christian maturity. It introduces new people to Jesus and encourages believers to be faithful to the inspired Word of God and the testimony of the apostles.

Tell others of this Bible-reading plan. Invite others to join your *household of faith*. Give each person a bookmark and encourage them to form other groups, multiplying *Discovery Bible Reading* groups and *households of faith*.

APPLICATION

1. Who could you team up with to start a *Discovery Bible Reading* group?
2. Each read *If You Can Eat, You Can Make Disciples*, then discuss it as a team.
3. Using the three-step process Jesus outlined in Luke 10:8, 9, who could you connect with to begin a *Discovery Bible Reading* group?
4. How could your *household of faith* use the *Discovery Bible Reading* process?

OUR RESPONSE: GOD DOES NOT MICRO-MANAGE

Whatever the reasons, the increased interest today in churches at home presents the Christian church with significant opportunities. *Households of faith* are not the only way to think of church. However, the “two or three” gathered in Jesus’ name is the basic unit of church and unless church is built and multiplied at this level—upon Jesus as the foundation “rock,” using the gospel “keys” to unlock God’s kingdom to our families, friends and communities—it cannot fulfil its purpose of accomplishing God’s mission.

All of us—believers, local church ministers, pastors and leaders, as well as mission agency and denominational directors—need to proactively and enthusiastically engage with and multiply this basic unit of church. The starting point is for all believers to be equipped to be church where they live.

Ask the simple question, is every family—whether nuclear, single-parent, step, extended, childless or grandparent-based—equipped to worship, as well as serve, make disciples, cultivate fellowship and grow in discipleship?

This is not about providing programs for people to watch, but equipping each unit of “two or three” believers to participate. What could it mean if the current interest in churches at home or *households of faith* is not simply an aberration or passing fad, but a return to an essential frame for mission—for the gospel to go to all?

The method and the message

Jesus gave the church its message. He is the message. But it is often overlooked that He is also our model or method for church—“the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). In His Spirit-filled life, teachings and commission, we see the method by which He fulfilled His mission, as well as the most effective method by which His mission can be accomplished by us.

Led and empowered by the Spirit, the apostle Paul followed Jesus’ methods in proclaiming His message. He modelled his life and ministry on that of Christ, and planted churches shaped by the life and ministry of Jesus. However, as the centuries passed, the churches where Paul planted did not remain faithful to the methods or message of Jesus. And across Turkey today—in the region of the Roman province of Asia where Paul worked—there are very few believers.

In the early centuries, many suffered for their faith. In the theological controversies, faithful believers and church fathers resisted powerful state influences bent on supporting a hierarchical view of God. However, looking back, we now see how the very essence or nature of church and its message changed in the early fourth century. That is when, with Constantine’s blessing and benevolence, the church moved from humble homes and caves to lavish basilicas and church buildings.

The structures and systems of church changed. Worship, service, teaching, disciple-making, baptisms, the Lord’s Supper, fellowship and membership became centred in dedicated buildings with an ordained, separated male priesthood presiding. It was so radically different to the *oikos* models of Jesus’ ministry and the early church. The method changed—and the message changed to match.

However, God did not intervene to prevent this change. While His hand is over His people, He does not micro-manage or override unwise decisions made by the leaders and members of His church. He rarely interrupts unwise directions. He has revealed His message and methods, and we are to follow His ways under His Spirit’s leading.

By their methods, *households of faith* can challenge the wider church

to remember Jesus' idea of church and the experience of the early church. They may simply be families taking full responsibility for mission and church in their areas, unaffiliated house churches, missional communities under the umbrella of established churches or denominations, or a networks of house churches gathering in homes, parks or gardens. But whatever their form, they can each act as a catalyst calling all believers and churches to the incarnational, apostolic and messianic practices of Jesus. Their practices and methods must proclaim God's message of grace and salvation for all people—without discrimination or status.

Look at the church!

Many years ago, when inviting friends or contacts to church, I cautioned them, "Don't look too closely at the people. If you do, you might be disappointed—so look to Jesus!"

However, I quickly learned that guests want to see who the people are who make up church—and if you tell them not to look, they will do so more intently! So I changed my advice, urging first time guests to, "Look at the people who make up the church. Check them out. Look at how they do church. Hear their stories."

How are guests received by them? How do they relate and interact with each other? What do they value? How enthusiastic is their relationship with God? How are they meeting the needs of their community? How do they share their faith? Is it a safe environment for vulnerable and diverse people? How inclusive is the fellowship? Who is welcome and who participates? How does one get involved? How could they, as guests, integrate?

Every aspect of church—the structures, systems, departments and ministries, every method used—shouts a message. When your church goes home in its multiple *households of faith*—with a simple theology, enthusiastic spirituality, caring service, the Spirit's powerful presence and using Jesus' reproducible disciple making methods—it will play a vital part in proclaiming God's eternal good news message. The message can be seen and heard in the method!

WHEN YOUR CHURCH GOES HOME

APPLICATION

1. What message do the current methods and structures of your church give?
2. In your circle, who might relate positively to forming a *household of faith*?
3. How might multiplying *households of faith* be cultivated from the campuses of Christian schools or the chaplaincy offices of Christian hospitals and businesses?

THANKS

Today there is a growing commitment to Jesus' idea of church and the insights of the apostles who sought to faithfully replicate what He had in mind. It is my prayer that *When Your Church Goes Home* will contribute to His mission and suggest possibilities for many who are grappling with the huge changes affecting church today.

Many have reviewed preliminary discussion papers and drafts of this book, and shared suggestions, comments, questions, concerns and fears—while encouraging me in writing this small book.

Thanks to David Lawton, National Director of Praxeis—cultivating disciple making and church planting in Australia and around the world; Phil Malone, Pioneers Area Leader for Diaspora Australia and New Zealand—now a neighbour in the inner-western suburbs of Melbourne and frequent early morning walking companion; Dave Milne, Crosslink Australia; Nicu Dumbrava, Discipleship Team Leader Australia, and Phil Brown, Oikos Leader—networking house churches in Australia. These people are all practitioners and networkers among disciple-makers and movement-leaders, and I am grateful for their insights, suggestions and endorsements.

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Very special thanks to Judy who has shared with me the life and experiences of church in its many forms and places. We hope and pray that this small book enriches your engagement in the life and mission of church, the body of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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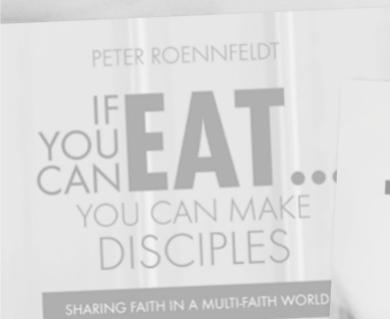
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Method?—Discovery Bible Reading in Households of Faith

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As many of us have known it, church has been disrupted. This has been a challenging experience, but rather than returning to church-as-usual, what are the opportunities for re-imagining church in our homes and communities?

Many people are re-discovering the possibilities of church at home, worshipping and serving in households of faith. So how can we ensure faithfulness, sustainability and witness when church goes home?

“Peter Roennfeldt has provided us with a practical guide to being and doing church at home. If you are wondering how to get started and what obstacles may need to be overcome, read and discuss this book with your team! It will arm you with excellent tools giving expression to biblical patterns to be and do church wherever you are—and, partnering with the Holy Spirit in a growing network of disciples and churches.”

—Dave Milne, Crosslink Australia

“In his characteristically fresh and accessible style, Peter Roennfeldt offers a compelling case for how ‘households of faith’ could function in the new era of restricted gatherings and movements. Grab some friends, commit to the Great Commission and watch God’s kingdom become tangible.”

—Nicu Dumbrava, Discipleship Team Leader, Australia

PETER ROENNFELDT (DMin) has spent his life sharing the gospel, planting churches and serving as a pastor to pastors. Having lived in four countries and equipped church-planting teams in almost 60, Peter now lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife Judy, but continues to equip and coach church planters, pastors and movement leaders around the world.