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Homegrown religion



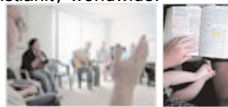
By BILL SHERMAN World Religion Writer
6/2/2007
Last Modified: 6/2/2007 5:53 AM

Christians find fulfillment, support in house churches

A dozen people sat in the living room of an apartment on Riverside Drive on Sunday morning.

JOY LEWIS / TULSA WORLD

Ellie Fenn crawls to her mother, Amy Fenn, as members of a Tulsa house church worship in Dora Iordanova's home. House churches account for much of the growth of Christianity worldwide.



Eyes closed, they sang worship songs to a guitar while a baby crawled around on the carpet, occasionally finding a seat on someone's lap.

They are members of a house church, Christians who have left the traditional church to worship in the intimacy of private homes, among friends and family.

Dora Iordanova, Bulgarian native who played host to Sunday's meeting, said she likes going to a house church because people know her and truly care for her.

"If you have a problem, or have had a bad day, you can share it. When I was in a big church, people didn't even know my name," she said.

John Fenn, leader of the group, and also overseer of two dozen house churches in several states, said that people meeting in house churches are finding fulfillment, but it's a different kind of fulfillment than they find in traditional churches.

"It's not the thrill of an illustrated message or a video. It doesn't appeal to the emotions. It's the fulfillment of rich relationships, true friendships, people who walk through life together, solving life's problems together."

Fenn is former director of Victory Bible Institute, which is affiliated with one of Tulsa's largest churches, Victory Christian Center. He is author of "Leaving the Church to Find God."

House churches account for much of the growth of Christianity worldwide.

They are the norm in parts of the world where Christianity is either illegal or persecuted. An estimated 80 to 100 million Christians meet in house churches in China, where Fenn says 1 million people are added to the church each month.

In the United States, the number of Christians who worship in house churches is growing rapidly.

Religion pollster George Barna found that 9 percent of American adults in 2006 attended a house church in a typical week, up from 1 percent a decade earlier.

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Barna, author of the best-selling book "Revolution," estimated that 20 million Americans attend a house church in a typical week.

He projected that figure to double in the next decade, as the house church phenomenon moves from the appraisal phase into the acceptance phase.

Fenn said the movement has been largely under the radar in Tulsa, and numbers are difficult to determine.

The movement is where the home-school movement was 25 years ago, just beginning to be networked, he said.

No two house church meetings are the same, Fenn said.

"It's spontaneous, it's fluid, it's organic."

Typically there will be some form of prayer, worship and study of the Bible, often followed by a meal.

But each meeting will be different, depending on who is leading it, the needs of those attending, and how the Spirit directs, Fenn said.

Worship can be short or long. Bible study is generally discussion-oriented, not sermon-oriented.

"House church can be messy, because people get to know one another, and people open up their lives," Fenn said.

"You have to be ready to help people, take care of those around you."

With no building or professional clergy to support, house churches can give liberally to missions and to those in need, Fenn said.

"We've given people cars, made car payments for people."

Each house church has a core group of people who make those decisions, he said.

"You don't have the difficulties you find in a traditional political structure," he said.

When house churches get too big, they split.

"You start losing the dynamics at about 15 to 20 people," Fenn said.

Brian Fenn, John Fenn's son, who played the guitar at Sunday's meeting, said he and his wife would be splitting off and starting a new house church this summer in Jenks with a younger emphasis.

Many large churches have cell groups, small groups within the church that meet in homes.

Fenn said cell groups differ from true house churches in that cell groups are part of a traditional structure that still emphasizes the large Sunday morning worship service.

At a time when denominational churches are losing members, the house church movement has its detractors.

"Some traditional pastors could view it as a threat, but it isn't," Fenn said. "We're going after people who won't darken the doors of a church."

He said that some traditional church leaders have labeled house church members as rebellious, or outcasts.

"There are some who are, but most just want more of God," he said.

Dr. Thomson Mathew, dean of School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University, said the house church movement is not a threat to the traditional church.

"The local church is doing well, and will continue to do well," he said.

"I believe it will grow, as well as the house church. It's not an either/or; it is both."

Mathew said large churches have the advantage of more resources to support missions and other ministries.

He said Barna's research should serve to remind large churches that they must make sure people's needs for close relationships and a sense of community are being met.

"Some churches are doing that well; others are not," he said.

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Data about U.S. house churches

Nine percent of adults attend a house church in a typical week.

One in five adults attends at least once a month.

70 million adults have at least experimented with house church.

Of those who attend church, 74 percent attend only a conventional church; 5 percent attend only a

house church, 19 percent attend both.

Of those who attend a house church, 27 percent attend weekly; 30 percent attend one to three times a month; 43 percent attend less than once a month.

Most likely to attend conventional church: women, people older than 60, residents of the Midwest, evangelicals.

Most likely to attend house church: men, home-school families, residents of the West, nonwhites.

Source: The Barna Group

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