



# BACKGROUND DATA FOR MISSION

*Providing Data for Planning and Ministry*

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## A WHOLE OTHER DIMENSION

**P**ro-active mainline church leaders are known to watch the cultural and religious trends with an eye toward discerning anything applicable to their own context. As the mainlines continue to decline, new, relevant ministry approaches are sought. Much attention of late has been on the emerging, or emergent, church, and rightfully so. It appears another significant facet of church life in the US has largely gone under the radar however. If a recent study by the Barna Group is even remotely accurate, this form of “church” is larger than the United Methodist Church. Barna estimates that in a typical week, about 20 million adults attend a house church gathering. Granted some of these are also found in the institutional church (has a building...) but most are only active in house churches.

Wikipedia defines house church as “an informal term for a group of Christians gathering regularly or spontaneously in a home or on grounds not normally used for worship services, instead of a building dedicated to the purpose. Some churches meet in houses because they lack a conventional church building; these are not normally regarded as house churches as the intent is to eventually move to an offsite facility. Others meet in homes because they prefer to meet informally, because they believe it is an effective way of creating community and engaging in outreach, or because they believe small family-sized churches were a deliberate apostolic pattern in the first century and intended by Christ. Some, perhaps for several of these reasons.”

Like many movements there is considerable diversity amongst house church participants and

leadership. In general, however, they tend to be anti-institution and anti-ordination and hierarchy, believing that Martin Luther did not go far enough with the priesthood of all believers. “As a rule, house church gatherings are free, informal, and sometimes include a shared meal. Participants hope that everyone present will feel free to contribute to the gathering as and when they sense the leading of the Holy Spirit to do so. Leadership structures range from no official leaders, to a plurality of appointed elders: however, there is a deliberate attempt within most house churches to minimize leadership of any one person, and so having a pastor or leading elder (clergy) is generally frowned upon, in favor of a more plural responsibility of leadership diffused over several people or the members as a whole.”

While house churches and their astonishing presence in the United States may be new to many traditional church folk, this form of ministry is certainly not new. House church advocates note that the early New Testament church was of this form. In relatively more modern times, house churches have been present in China in mind boggling numbers for decades. Some informed estimates suggest there could be 150 million Christians in China, most in house churches. Early Methodism was comprised largely of house churches, back in those days when it was a vital, fast growing movement and was not yet institutionalized, so to speak.

Regarding the present context, Barna ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)) makes a profound observation about the changing religious landscape in the US. “By necessity, the transition from a nation exclusively offering a conventional church

experience to one that offers a choice between conventional church and other forms of spiritual experience is changing the rules and roles. New leaders are emerging to represent and guide house churches – people whose names are unfamiliar to the bulk of the country, but whose ministries will become more mainstream and well-known as time goes on. A new body of spiritual resources is being developed and utilized by the expanding house church community. House church adherents make greater use of Christian radio, Christian books and online faith experiences than do people engaged solely in a conventional church. In addition, new patterns of faith participation are being implemented. The traditional ways of thinking about and experiencing ‘church’ are rapidly being revolutionized by a form of ‘religious choice’ in which people are taking greater responsibility for their spiritual experience and development.”

So what does this all mean for the United Methodist Church? For one, though documentation is lacking, some of those leaving the fold of the UMC may be landing in house churches. On the other side, it is clear that millions are not considering a mainline church, given their disposition against the institutional church, and are joining the house church movement. In the least they represent part of the new and changing religious landscape, as Barna points out, and the mainlines ignore these changes at their own deepening risk of failing to connect with yet another apparently significant portion of the culture. This calls for creative, forward thinking on the part of the mainline church. There may be ways to do ministry which connects constructively with the house church movement, though it will require new attitudes and ethos.

Of course, some folks inclined toward house churches are so antagonistic concerning institutions, hierarchy, and ordination that reaching them will be very difficult. While the profile of house church participants is not complete, it is likely there is a portion for whom these objections are not issues however, but who really resonate with the other aspects of the house churches. The Wikipedia article lists several denominational groups who are networking in some fashion with house churches. This would seem natural for the UMC, given the early heritage as well as the many churches in the connection today which are house church size. 2300 UM churches have a dozen or less in attendance and 3500 have 15 or less. In

these days of difficult finances, perhaps some of these very small churches could find relief meeting in homes and not maintaining buildings.

As usual with innovative ventures several pluses and minuses immediately come to mind. On the plus side, as already noted, this may be a ministry opportunity which would be costly to overlook. House churches suggest a relatively easy, economical means to start ministries in underserved areas. Many new churches have started in houses so some may ultimately lead that way. On the down side, providing leadership to a constituency suspicious of conventional church leadership will be a challenge. (Leadership is always the challenge in any form of congregational development, however.) Denominations wishing to be involved with house churches will need to do things differently, implying change, which in turn nearly always implies resistance. Furthermore, there may be a difficult learning curve. Innovation is required, which always brings risks.

The house church development, with its attendant sense of anarchy and anti-institutional bias relative to the entrenched conventional church is reminiscent of the situation of the American churches in the early days relative to the institutions of Europe. The European intellectual and religious elite looked at disdain on the American experiment and the anarchy of the religious landscape there (which included early Methodism). Today Europe is highly secular, having seen the institutional church become totally marginalized, while the American church is still a significant presence. May we in the American institutional church today not make the same mistake.

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