Households in Focus

God's Kingdom as Oikos Church Networks:
A Biblical Theology

by David S. Lim

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Many of us have a burden and passion to reach the world for Christ, but we need a biblical and theological clarity that matches that passion. What is God's mission *(missio dei)* for His church *(ekklesia)* among the various peoples and cultures of the world? I believe that very strategic answers can be found to that question by looking at the components which comprise the biblical concept of "kingdom of God." More specifically, I want us to look at the forms of community this kingdom can undergird, with special focus on House *(Oikos)* Church Networks (HCN) and especially their place in what are called Insider Movements (IM).

I begin by stating some basic theological premises, to establish that our kingdom theology is anchored in a shared orthodoxy.

- First, all things that God created (e.g., nature) are good and should be received with thanksgiving (Gen. 1–2; Ps. 24; 104; 1 Tim. 4:4).

- Second, by God's grace, and because humans were created by God in His own image (Gen. 1:26-28), all things that humans have made (e.g., culture) are also good (Ps. 8). Humans were given the creation (or cultural) mandate (Gen. 1:27–28; 2:1); this is why human work and production is good (Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:23; 2 Thess. 3:6–13).

- Third, human culture is marred, because humans disobeyed (i.e., sinned against) the Creator (Gen. 3). This resulted rather immediately in devastating forms of sin including deception, covetousness, and murder. In 1 John 2:16, the scriptures summarize the roots of worldliness which lead to sin as "the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life." There are other lists in the New Testament of the works of the flesh, but I see four main forms of sin: idolatry/materialism (also called greed in Col. 3:5); individualism/pride; immorality; and injustice).

- Lastly, humans and cultures have been redeemed in Christ, and thus may be sanctified by faith. That faith is expressed by prayer to God in Jesus' name and obedience to His word (1 Tim. 4:4–5) through love and good works (Heb. 10:24; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). And to buoy our hearts, and stimulate
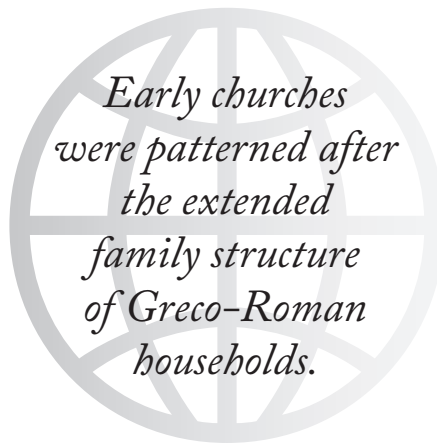
our faith, we are given an assurance by the Lord Jesus Christ that the church will prevail against the gates of hell. (Matt. 16:18–19; 24:14; Rom. 8:18–25; Col. 1:15–29; Rev. 21:24–27, cf. Gen. 12:1–3).

Biblical Vision: Kingdomization in House (Oikos) Church Networks

God desires His followers to make disciples of all peoples; He wants all of them to inherit eternal life—and to enjoy life, even now, abundantly, as they obey Him, their creator and king, through faith in His son, Jesus Christ. I prefer to call this "kingdomization" (or "societal transformation"), by which I mean that individuals, families *(oikos)*, communities, and institutions among the nations will be discipled into the norms and values of God's kingdom. Kingdomization is realized best through house church networks (HCN) that are growing in righteousness and justice, marked by selfless love *(agape)*. Righteousness refers to the right and moral relationships characterized by love between people—relationships which promote goodness and discourage evil. Justice (which is love in the public sphere) denotes right relationships where every person and community is given the authority, the democratic space, and the skills to participate actively in determining their destiny for the common good to the glory of God.

These Christ-following individuals and communities live in harmony and cooperation. They are empowered by servant leaders who serve as facilitators in the holistic development of their personal and communal lives. In this manner, they share their blessings with partners in other communities, establishing peace (shalom) among all the nations of the world. Isaiah 65:17–25 (popularly called the "Isaiah 65 vision") envisions a "new heavens and new earth" on earth, where death, marriage, and child-bearing still prevail. The first three verses describe the

New Jerusalem as a "city of joy" where life is celebrated and God is delighted. Verse 20 sees people living long lives, presumably with healthy lifestyles and good governance (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1–2), implying that the leaders are also godly and righteous. Verses 21–22 show a society where social justice prevails, where each one's labor is rewarded accordingly, following the prophetic ideal of "each man sitting under his own vine and fig tree" with no fears (Mic. 4:4) and with the Mosaic laws of gleaning and the year of Jubilee in force (so none will be poor, Deut. 15:1–11; Lev. 25). The next verse depicts prosperity passed on from one generation to the next, and finally, the last verse describes harmony among animals, humans, and

> *Early churches were patterned after the extended family structure of Greco-Roman households.*

the whole creation. And verse 24 hints at a mature form of faith in the generous God whose blessings do not need to be earned or pleaded for, religiously or otherwise.

Kingdom Realization: Church (Ekklesia) in Every Household (Oikos)

The biblical vision of the kingdom of God is that His people (the church or ekklesia) will be structured as HCNs composed of "churches" (plural: ekklesiai) that meet in "houses" (plural: oikoi). The phrase *ekklesia kat' oikon* ("the church in the house") is found in four places in the Pauline epistles, referring to the households of Prisca (Priscilla)

and Aquila in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19) and in Rome (Rom. 16:5), of Philemon in Colossae (Philem. 2), and of Nympha in Laodicea (Col. 4:15).

The intimate linkage of these ekklesiai with existing households is also seen in 1 Corinthians 1:16, where Paul claimed that he baptized the oikos of Stephanas, and later in the same letter he commended the same household as the "first fruits of Achaia," who have "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (16:15–16). The letters also refer to other groups, not necessarily founded by the members of the Pauline circle, which were identified by the oikos to which their members belong (e.g., Rom. 16:10–11, 14–15). The conversion of a person "with (all) his or her oikos" is also mentioned several times in Acts, e.g., Lydia's (16:15), the Philippian jailer's (16:31–34), and Crispus' (18:8). (Interestingly, in the New Testament, ekklesia is always singular when it refers to house-fellowships up to *polis* (city) level, but becomes plural when it denotes regional level beyond a polis, like in Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1, 19).

The Social Pattern

The phrase ekklesia kat' oikon designates not only the place where the ekklesia met, for *en oiku* (in a house) would have been the more natural expression (cf. 1 Cor. 11:34; 14:35). Rather, it was most probably used to distinguish these particular household-based groups from *hole he ekklesia* (the whole church), which seemed to have assembled occasionally, especially for liturgical purposes (1 Cor. 14:23–40; Rom. 16:23; cf. 1 Cor. 11:20), or from the still larger configurations of the Christian movement for which Paul used the same term ekklesia (Meeks 1983, 75).

The early churches were patterned after the extended family structure of Greco-Roman households. As in most societies, the Greco-Roman culture used the home as the basis of social life and the prime center of religious practice. There was no place for isolated

individuals; everyone belonged to a household unit. In Roman times, although the oikos was subordinated to the republic, it remained a basic political unit: laws were enacted to preserve the authority of the head of the family. Augustus exploited the paternalism inherent in the household system to secure his authority, thus becoming the family head of the empire. Consequently, the empire became a macrocosm of what the oikos was in microcosm; it was viewed as a complex network of households which all loyally interlocked into one grand order under the authority and protection of the emperor (cf. Malherbe 1973, 69).

In New Testament times, the oikos was defined primarily not by kinship, but by the relationship of dependence and subordination. It was a community composed of immediate family members, freedmen-clients, hired laborers, tenants, slaves, and sometimes even friends and business associates (Meeks 1983, 29–31, 75–77). They were bound together under the authority of the senior male (or also female at least in the Greek mainland, (Lightfoot 1879, 56); interestingly, Prisca's name usually appears ahead of her husband Aquila) of each unit. Each oikos head ruled over all members and their decisions, including religious ones, were binding upon all of them (e.g., Matt. 18:23–34; 24:49; 25:25). We can therefore understand the norm of household conversions in the early church.

To be part of an oikos was to belong to a larger network of relations of two general kinds. In the most intimate strand was a vertical but not quite unilinear chain of interlinked, hierarchical roles, from the slaves to the household head. There were also the bonds between friends, clients, and patrons, as well as a number of analogous but less formal relations of protection and subordination. Between one oikos and others there were links of kinship and friendship, which also often entailed obligations and expectations. These

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connections were seldom formal. Both along and between these lines, there were often strong ties of emotional attachment and voluntary loyalty (Theissen 1982, 83–87; Judge 1960, 31–34).

For people with means, their houses had second-floors called upper rooms (e.g., Mark 14:15; Acts 1:13, 9:37, 39; 20:8), which were mainly used as guest rooms (cf. John 20:19, 26) and were also accessible by stairs from outside the building. Generally, the ground floor was used for storage and quarters for slaves, retainers, and servants, while the family lived on the elevated and partitioned portion. These houses seemed large enough to hold a maximum of about forty or fifty people (Murphy-O'Connor 1983, 155–158).

Household Religion

Since the oikos was made up of such diverse members in terms of social status, it needed strong bonds to keep its constituents united. Economic interests served in part as the cement for friends, clientele, and slaves; the latter also faced legal sanctions if they tried to break away. But, overall, there was the force of religion. The solidarity of the oikos was expressed in the adoption of a common religion, chosen by the household head, which served not only to integrate the members but also to mark off their boundaries from others who worshiped other gods. This unity was more enforceable in smaller oikoi than in larger ones. It also seems that it became more common in imperial times for different members to go their own religious ways (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12–16; Meeks 1983, 30–31).

This oikos-based religion existed primarily as the worship of small statues of household deities who were expected to protect the members from sickness and calamity, as

well as to insure economic prosperity. This household religion also took the form of astrology, hero-cults, and the veneration of ancestors. Little temples and shrines were constructed in many private residences (Aguirre 1965, 154). Nevertheless, there also seemed to exist a prevalent longing for universalism which extended also to religion. Tolerant syncretism and religious pluralism prevailed in the first and second century of the Roman Empire. During this period, the imperial order was open and easily assimilated all religions, including Judaism and Christianity (cf. Judge 1960, 73–75).

This was true also in Jewish culture. The oikos (Hebrew: *beth)* was traditionally the socioeconomic, educational, and religious unit of the Jews. It was the entire realm of life for women. Since every male was expected to marry, Jewish societies assumed that no one should be without a family. Among the father's duties were to provide for his family, to obtain spouses for his children, and to teach his sons the Torah. In the earlier periods, religious activities, especially presiding over the Passover meal, were carried out by every Israelite household head. But with the development and consolidation of Israelite religion, it became customary for priests to be employed, especially in the larger and more important sanctuaries, and, after the exile, exclusively in the temple.

In New Testament times, the Pharisees taught that religion, particularly the purity laws, ought to be observed outside the temple, even in the oikos. Pious Jews had to wash before coming to the table: "the table in the home of every Jew was seen to be like the table of the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple," (as a literal interpretation of Ex. 19:5–6), and "the table of every Jew

possessed the same order of sanctity as the table of the cult" (Neusner 1975, 29–31). This may have prepared the early Jesus-followers to practice the priesthood of every believer in "breaking bread" in every oikos!

The church in the oikos was thus the basic unit of the early church, and its nucleus had been an existing household. As I mentioned earlier, each oikos was much broader than the nuclear family and included not only immediate relatives, but also friends, business partners, clients, hired workers, tenants, and slaves. But the house-church was not simply the oikos gathered for worship; it was not coterminous with the household. It seems that other preexisting relations, such as those with common trades, were also included, and new converts were certainly added to the existing house-churches. Moreover, there were groups which were formed in households headed by non-Christians, like the four referred to in Romans 16:10, 11, 14, and 15, not to mention Caesar's household (Theissen 1982, 82–87). Conversely, not everyone in the oikos necessarily became a Christian when its head did, as in the case of Onesimus.

As God's kingdom permeates and overpowers the sinful world to restore all things unto himself in and through faith in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15–23, etc.), it expands from house to house in all residences and workplaces, for where (King) Jesus is, there is heaven (the kingdom of God realized on earth). The incarnation shows that His missional pattern is an infiltration/subversion approach—starting from one household (of peace), and spreading from oikos to oikos. Consequently, any persecutor who wants to destroy the church has to do it from house to house, too (Acts 9).

The Oikos Mandate
By locating and focusing His kingdom and His people (ekklesia) in global networks of households (the oikoi),

God not only ensures definitive success for His redemptive plan, but also restores His original plan for a fallen creation through faith in Him who makes all things new. He empowers them to be His "new creatures" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17–19) who will fulfill His creation mandates: to reproduce from one generation to another and to have dominion over every living thing, to work for their sustenance and flourishing (Gen. 1:26–28). This also fulfills God's covenants with Abraham that through him every oikos on earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3, cf. Gal. 3:14, 29), and with the children of Israel that they will be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6, cf. 1 Peter 2:9–10; Rev. 5:10).

The observance of the Sabbath … actually has a tremendous social benefit, too.
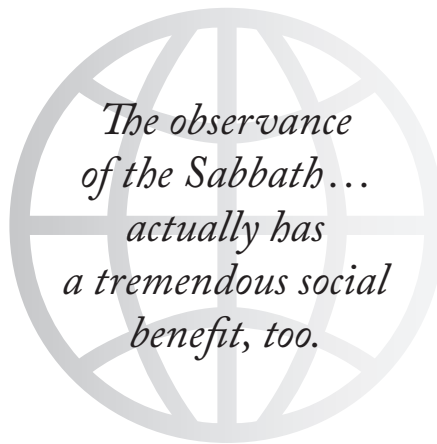
1. Reproduction
This first creation mandate is to be fruitful and multiply, to perpetuate human life through marriage and child-rearing. This can be seen in four of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), which highlight the importance of the oikos as God's basic unit for the preservation and multiplication of the human race. The first four commandments on how to love God require only simple religiosity—uniquely different from the sophisticated practices of other tribes and nations. Love for Yahweh has four basic practices: confession of faith in Yahweh as Creator and Redeemer; no idols or graven images; no words or actions that dishonor God; and the keeping of the Sabbath rest every seventh day.

The fourth commandment which establishes the observance of the Sabbath as a holy or rest day, although commanded by God to honor His rest on the seventh day after creating the universe the prior six days, actually has a tremendous social benefit, too. It especially impacts the household (oikos) including slaves and guests. They have weekly free time together to eat (or fast), pray, reflect on God's word, play together, and rest together! Surely this is a rhythm of life just as important as daily sleep. During the rest of the week, fathers (and today also many mothers) have to go to work, and hence have little time to be with their children during their pre-teenage years. Observance of the Sabbath therefore serves to help prevent many social ills that otherwise could be caused by juvenile delinquents who might grow up to become undisciplined and even criminal adults!

Among the other six commandments that teach us how to love our neighbors, three of them also benefit the oikos directly. The fifth commandment explicitly demands that children honor and respect their parents, thereby instilling in them a sense of duty and responsibility toward authority figures. This surely goes a long way to helping preserve order in society. The practice of filial piety is greatly needed in post-modern societies where parental authority and discipline have been disregarded. The oikos in HCNs is indeed God's pattern for inter-generational survival and the flourishing of humankind on earth.

And in the seventh and tenth commandments, God preserves marriage and family life, forbids adultery, and especially the coveting of a neighbor's wife, servants, or possessions. As the West enters a post-Christian stage, the sanctity of marriage and relevance of family structure (oikos) have been threatened and greatly weakened. Social ethics are proving necessary for a just relationship between males and

females, as well as for a safe and secure haven for children to grow up in. Without this moral standard, the sexual promiscuity of both men and women (including those in the LGBTQ community) caused by uncontrolled erotic desires have wrought social havoc, and even wars, in various communities in the world up until this day.

2. Production

The second mandate is to have dominion over creation. As each person seeks to survive and thrive in society, they must each find a vocation or calling that serves the common good. Adam and Eve, the first couple God created, were the seed of an oikos, and He placed them in a flourishing garden or land that He had prepared beforehand. Together they were to preserve and develop this earth (Gen. 2:15). Even after the fall, when work became hard labor (Gen. 3:17–19), their work would sustain their life and oikos, but would also help build a sustainable community as they used their skills and talents to create and innovate from one generation to the next.

This is economics (oikonomia), which means "the management of a household." If our oikoi are managed biblically, then we will not be subject to the consumerism, market manipulations, and financial meltdowns orchestrated by the god Mammon. Instead, the economy will be "kingdomized," which means that there will be honesty, transparency, moral integrity, and equitable distribution of resources to all in need. Like the Macedonians, even those experiencing severe afflictions and in deep poverty themselves will voluntarily overflow with generosity for others in great need (1 Cor. 8:2). HCNs should take the lead in re-engineering the global economy and assure abundant life for all—starting with every oikos-church. Just one encounter with Jesus resulted in the total transformation of Zacchaeus, a wealthy but corrupt man. After that encounter, Zacchaeus gave away half of all of his

*B*elievers in house church networks are becoming entrepreneurs through biblical principles of wealth management and job creation.

wealth and chose to make a four-fold restitution of money to those whom he had cheated. How our world would change if all Christian fellowships (ekklesia) and households (oikos) began to live like the early followers of Jesus in Acts 2:42–47. House-churches are the key for changing the economics of the world (Acts 2:44–45; 4:34; Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 3:3–5).

Today, just one percent of the world's families own more than fifty percent of the wealth of the nations while the rest of us all work for those elites. This is because they know how to make money work for them. Even though we as believers are called to be the head and not the tail and to lend to the nations (Deut. 28:12–13), Christians remain the tail because the church does not teach sound biblical stewardship principles other than its teachings on tithing. God owns everything in this world, and we are called to be His wealth managers so that there is equitable provision for all. Millions in and around churches all over the world are ravaged by poverty and its devastating consequences. It is not the governments, multinationals, or billionaires who will change the financial profile of the world. They are the problem, not the solution.

Through biblical principles of wealth management, job creation, and social entrepreneurship promoted in today's HCNs, new believers are turning into entrepreneurs. This economic transformation is giving them abundant life and also making them rulers over their polis (city) (Luke 19:11–27). "The earth is mine and all the silver and gold is mine" (Hag. 2:8) and "all the cattle on the thousand hills are mine" (Ps. 50:10). "The heavens and the highest heavens belong to the Lord but the earth he has given to

us" (Ps. 115:16). Subduing the earth includes the stewardship of its wealth.

I believe house-churches will become economic powerhouses fueling spiritual, social, political, environmental, and economic transformation. Multiplication of disciples in HCNs includes financial and economic multiplication. Many of us are already leading in building the third (other than capitalism and socialism) alternative economic order called the Solidarity Economy, which equips and empowers the poor for social entrepreneurship and fair trade, so each oikos can have its own land (Lev. 25) and its own "vine and fig tree" (Mic. 4:4). Then their children will not be born into poverty (Isa. 65:23) but will enjoy peace (shalom) under good governance (1 Tim. 2:1–2).

3. Simple religiosity

What kind of spirituality is required of the men and women who will fulfill these two creation mandates in and through the oikoi? The answer must be: people who come to faith in Christ and who mature spiritually to the point of trusting solely in God and Him alone; and people whose faith begins by adapting to the majority religion (or non-religion) in their community. Ultimately, this faith of theirs develops into a simple but profound religiosity, with each person living a "love God and love everyone" lifestyle that embodies the Great Commandment for God's glory in obedience to His will (Matt. 22:36–40; Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 10:31). They are characterized by their commitment to justice and kindness as evidenced in their community services locally and globally. And they eschew hypocritical religious services which really don't please God (Isa. 58:1–12; Mic. 6:6–8; Amos 5:21–24; James 2:14–26; 1 John 3:16–18, etc.). They
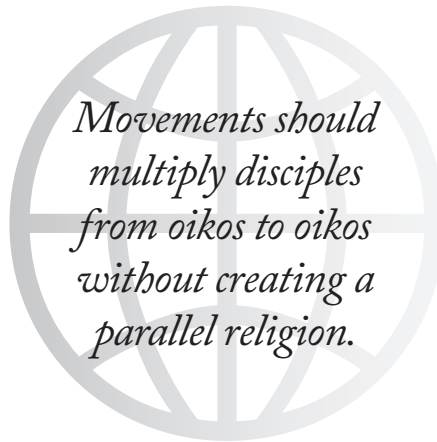
walk humbly with their God with confidence and gratitude for having everything good (for God is always near and loves them forever). They have a Christ-like, disciple-making lifestyle of "love and good works" (Eph. 2:10; 4:24; Col. 1:28–29; 2 Tim. 3:16–17)—as salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13–16; Phil. 2:14–16), without having to "act religious" or do meaningless religious rituals (John 4:21–24; Heb. 10:24–25; Luke 10:25–37; Matt. 6:1–18; 25:31–46).

This New Testament practice of simply setting up HCNs is not very different from that of the Old Testament commands for Israel, which show God's design for simple religiosity in each extended family resulting in a reached, discipled, and transformed people:

1. There were no local shrines or temples in each village and town in Israel.

2. There were no weekly Sabbath worship services. Synagogues as multi-purpose community centers came later in 200 BCE, for serving and teaching the Diaspora Jews (Lim 1987a).

3. There were no weekly or monthly collection of tithes and offerings. These were gathered only three times a year (Deut. 16:16). 1 Cor. 16:1–4 shows weekly collection in the early churches were mainly for immediate local needs, especially of widows and orphans (cf. Acts 6:1; James 1:27).

4. There were no full-time clergy. The Levitical priests were provided not just with cities, but also with pasture lands (Josh. 21). They were not exempt from being stewards of God's resources, thus they were shepherds and cowboys to produce livestock products for their neighbors, nation, and the nations (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6–13). This was how the priests and Levites naturally learned to be expert butchers for animal sacrifices in the Temple.

5. The Old Testament Jews were required to celebrate communally as a people in the national temple only three times a year (note: God's original design was a portable and transportable tabernacle) for what were called the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals (Deut. 16:16, para.):

    a. *Pesach* or Passover which celebrates the exodus from Egypt. This may be celebrated today as Easter or Holy Week.

    b. *Shavu'ot* or the Feast of First-fruits, as the week ending with the day of Pentecost. This Jewish festival

Movements should multiply disciples from oikos to oikos without creating a parallel religion.

could also be celebrated as a "church anniversary" of HCNs in each polis.

    c. *Sukkot* or the Feast of Booths which celebrates the harvest but also remembers the forty years of living in temporary shelters when the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness. Either Christmas or a harvest festival such as Thanksgiving could be substituted for Sukkot.

6. The actual teaching and obedience of the way of God's righteousness was done simply and naturally in the homes (oikoi) (Deut. 6:4–9).

When the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Assyrians and into exile in Babylon, their simple faith was passed on to their children. They had been admonished to flourish where God had transplanted them (Jer. 29:7–11). They practiced their faith in their homes—just as parents were responsible to pass on their faith to their children in their homeland (Deut. 6:4–9). When they returned from the exile, the second temple did not have to be as resplendent and marvelous as the first one.

Thus, God's kingdom is not "churchless spirituality," nor "religion-less spirituality," but simple religiosity. Its vision is to reproduce simple groups of Christ-followers without elaborate religiosity. It is simply to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Mic. 6:6–8, cf. Isa. 58:1–12; Amos 5:21–24). For those who would like to read more, the *Mission Frontiers,* 34:2 (2012) issue shows how the family is God's prime mission strategy for world evangelization. Also see the Appendix at the end of this article for a sample of how one HCN in Switzerland conceptualizes its kingdom vision.

Kingdom Mission: Disciple Multiplication through Insider Movements

To achieve this kingdom vision, God designed a simple plan for world transformation through the propagation of movements by HCNs. These are usually called insider movements (IM) or disciple multiplication movements (DMM), by which all communities and nations would be transformed into followers of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. The best (most biblical, strategic, and effective) ministry should incarnate faith through a movement inside the existing socio-religio-cultural structures, one that avoids creating new structures. That movement should multiply disciples from oikos to oikos, without creating another organized religious

system parallel or counter to that of the religion or ideology which dominates their contexts.

The ekklesia—made up of all Jesus-followers, each one of whom is a temple of the Holy Spirit—should seek to work together in kingdom mission, even when it's a partnership or venture as small as two by two. By His grace, they seek to realize His reign on earth until He returns to establish His eternal kingdom (Rev. 12:10–11; 15:3–4; 21:1–5, 22–27). These Christ-followers should aim to disciple all peoples in all societies to follow His will as people of His shalom in a kingdom of light. This should be done through holistic and transformational ministries, which include both evangelism and sociopolitical action, along with signs and wonders (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 4:18–19; Rom. 15:18–20; 1 Peter 2:9–10) that result in family and community conversions to Christ. Such was the missionary method of Jesus Christ and the apostles, often called disciple-making, as they modeled servant leadership, which persuades and equips people to voluntarily live according to God's will (Mark 10:42–45; Eph. 4:11–13; 1 Peter 5:1–3).

The IM Model of Jesus
Jesus birthed HCNs by training and sending His original twelve disciples to catalyze IMs wherever they went. He sent them out with authority (empowerment) among the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:5–6) to find persons of peace (heads of oikoi) who were discipled to multiply Jesus-followers in their community (Luke 10:6, cf. vv. 1–21). Besides using His own oikos in Nazareth, He ministered from the oikoi of Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum; of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany; Zaccheus in Jericho; Mary the mother of John Mark in Jerusalem, etc. In Jerusalem, even Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were His disciples, and perhaps through them, Gamaliel, all of whom were entrenched in the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish sociopolitical structure of his time.

*T*hey did not create a clergy class, nor construct a religious building, but an indigenous DMM of house churches.

In order to disciple Samaria, He reached out to an immoral Samaritan woman who had come to Jacob's well to draw water, and upon her conversion, empowered her to gossip about Him to the city elders (John 4). After two days of teaching these new leaders, He left them, never to return, nor did He leave any of His Jewish disciples with them to pastor these new converts. Instead, Jesus discipled and empowered the Sycharian believers to multiply themselves, and to set up contextualized HCNs among their compatriots in other Samaritan villages and cities.

In order to make disciples among Gentiles, Jesus' person of peace in Decapolis (a metropolis of ten cities) was a teenage demoniac (Mark 5). After casting out the demons into the pigs (note that the town folks begged Jesus to depart from them immediately because their hog industry was in jeopardy), the teenager asked to be His thirteenth apostle. Jesus told him "No," and instead told him to return to his friends and gossip about what had happened to him (no need for any evangelism training class). When Jesus returned to Decapolis (Mark 7:31–8:13), He taught the 4,000 heads of households (oikos), and similarly left them never to return. Nor did He leave any Jewish disciples to pastor these new converts here either. This was how Jesus planned His international kingdomization movement—through DMMs by insiders.

The IM Model of the Early Church
This was also how the apostles replicated HCNs that were contextually sensitive and multiplying, that then moved across the Roman Empire and beyond by the power and corrective guidance of the Holy Spirit. The insider movement among the Jews started in Jerusalem in the form of disciple-making from house to house (oikos) without having to separate from early Judaism's formal structure of synagogues, the temple, and their religious practices (Acts 2:41–47; 4:32–37).

It spread naturally southward to Africa through an Ethiopian convert who was a proselyte of Judaism (Acts 8), and as some traditions indicate, eastward as far as the Indian Empire by Thomas, northward as far as Armenia and perhaps to Moscow by Andrew, and westward as far as Algeria by Matthew and Bartholomew, all who may have just followed the trade routes of the Jewish diaspora. As for Paul, within seven years of three missionary journeys, he could testify that he had no more regions to disciple "from Jerusalem to Illyricum" (Rom. 15:18–20), and while in Ephesus for two years, the word of God spread to the whole Asia Minor (today's Turkey), both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:1–10).

Within a few years of such movements, they had literally turned the Roman Empire upside down (Acts 7:6 KJV). They did not create a clergy class, nor construct or even rent a religious building, nor hold regular religious services except to break bread weekly in their homes. It was the teaching and practice of the apostle Paul (perhaps the best model of a cross-cultural missionary) not to plant a growing local church, but an indigenous DMM in house churches that were formed by converts who did not have to be extracted and dislocated from their families and communities (1 Cor. 7:17–24). With consistent contextualization ("becoming all things to all men," 1 Cor. 9:19–23) by outsiders or expatriates, he just needed to disciple a person of peace and his oikos, from city to city. Almost every new

Jesus-follower can be equipped and empowered to be a person of peace—if they are not extracted from their family and community.

IM Models Today

To disciple means to equip Christ-believers with just three spiritual habits and skills: (a) communing with God through prayerful meditation *(lectio divina)* to turn His word *(logos)* into a word *(rhema)* to be obeyed; (b) making disciples through leading a house church (ekklesia in oikos) with fellow believers in biblical reflection and sharing (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26), whereby each one learns how to do personal devotions (cf. Acts 17:11); and (c) doing friendship evangelism to share what they have learned of God and His will with their networks of non-believing relatives and friends, usually one or two persons at a time.

These reproducing believers can be produced through mentoring (or better, discipling) by disciple-makers (servant leaders) who seek to equip *all* believers (cf. Eph. 4:11–13) right in their house-church meetings, usually in their residences and workplaces, for a season. Thus, today we can find like-minded partners in the various lay-led movements, like campus evangelism (especially Navigators), marketplace ministry, business-as-mission, and tentmaker movements globally, as well as mission agencies (mainly Western, mostly in the International Orality Network) that do church planting movements (CPM) that avoid conventional church planting and church growth that practice extraction evangelism.

Conclusion: Contextually Sensitive and Multiplying HCNs

It seems clear that the most prominent biblical pattern for realizing God's kingdom is through movements of HCNs that are both inside (contextualized) and multiplying. It is a pattern in which every new convert to Christ can be discipled to evangelize and disciple the nations. The Great Commission is

given to *all* believers. This is the priesthood of every believer in actual practice (1 Peter 2:9–10; cf. Ex. 19:5–6). Each believer can and should be discipled to become a disciple-maker and to catalyze movements wherever he lives and works. It is possible to plant and program the right DNA into new converts, so that they will grow and develop into reproducing followers of Christ and transformational agents of God's kingdom. They will form networks of house-churches for the rest of their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As those with the burden and passion to reach all peoples with the gospel, let our mission be to foster HCNs with simple religiosity—that express a contextualized, holistic and transformational quality that

Transplanting foreign denominational structures marginalizes Christians from their communities.

is truly replicable: self-governing (with their own leaders), self-supporting (their own resources), self-propagating (their own witness), and self-theologizing (their theological and ethical sensitivities). In so doing, we will be developing churches that will be copied by future generations of good quality Christ-followers.

We should avoid transplanting denominational structures (mimicking the ideals of Christendom) which are often de-contextualized (foreign-looking, if not actually foreign). This foreign imposition has almost always produced marginalized Christians who are separated from their communities. They are despised and rejected by their family and friends, not because of the gospel,

but because of their insistence on extra-biblical forms and traditions which emerge from extraction evangelism.

So, even if it seems proximate and convenient, let us *not* encourage our new converts or disciples to attend an international fellowship or denominational church, except on special occasions. We should just focus on movements—contextually making disciples and multiplying simple churches —for where two or three believers are gathered prayerfully, there is the church (Matt. 18:19–20). We should encourage our disciples to just gossip Jesus and form small disciple-making groups (ekklesiai in oikoi) among their friends and kin in their neighborhoods and workplaces—and allow each to become a movement that results in a HCN. They are simply to do this spiritual "network marketing" of the gospel from city to city—till the whole world knows and obeys Jesus.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, let's catalyze movements in Asia and beyond, partnering in our conviction that the harvest is indeed plentiful (Matt. 9:37–38), that our King Jesus is indeed building His ekklesia, and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (16:18–19). Let's finish the Great Commission together in our generation, expecting each oikos to be blessed in house church networks that send disciple-makers to bless the nations through insider movements—in each of their unique cultures. **IJFM**

Appendix: The Menorah Vision

Concerning the kingdom of God and particularly church movements, God gave me a vision about the menorah (Ex. 25:31–40). Years ago, my friends and I received a vision that was a forerunner to this one. This became a basic apostolic vision and a building plan for house church movements in eastern Switzerland. With the menorah vision, the first forerunner vision was simplified and clarified.

I saw the golden lampstand with its seven branches. A flame was burning on each branch. In my spirit, I heard the words: "Each flame will glorify my name. Each flame will generate churches."

The middle stem speaks of family and generations. God promised Abraham that He would bless every clan in the world (Greek: oikos, everybody who belongs to a house, houses as communities) through him (Genesis 12:1–3). This promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God wants to build His church in every biological family (family church). This was the hub of the early church. Whole families were to be saved (Ex. 13:3; Josh. 24:15; John 4:53; Acts 10; Acts 16:31–34; 1 Tim. 5:7–8). They should worship, love, and serve the Lord together. Jesus knows about the deficiencies and separations in families (Matt. 10:35). Still, He wants the central flame to burn in every family through countless generations (Ex. 20:5–6).

Each family has a different spiritual legacy which they and their descendants can impart. This results in a family calling. Not every family member will live in the same calling. Maybe only some of the children will walk in it. A family choosing for a certain work of God becomes more evident if the calling is carried out over several generations. In the life of Abraham, we see a family legacy. In Isaac, the family calling appears, and in Jacob and his sons the choosing of the family becomes obvious. This choosing is seen in intellectual, social, economic, artistic, mental, or spiritual achievements. Well-known family names stand for specific achievements.

The menorah has three arms on the right and three arms on the left side. They are connected to each other; the flames on the right side point to local people and ministries. And the flames on the left point to mobile people and ministries.

The flame at the right side of the middle stem stands for the man or woman of

Each family has a different spiritual legacy which they and their descendants can impart. This results in a family calling.

peace. They live in our neighborhood or in the same area–people of peace who are known for doing good deeds in the neighborhood (Matt. 10:11–13; Luke 10:5–12). Our heavenly father leads us to find them (2 Sam. 6:10; Ruth 2:1–3; Est. 2:7–9; Luke 19:1–10; Acts 16:13–15). In the course of time, they get to know Jesus Christ and they open up their homes. Depending on their calling, their houses become places of personal evangelism, prayer houses, healing houses, music scene hangouts, sports clubs, schools, etc. Sooner or later, organic churches evolve in some houses. This doesn't mean that every house of peace will be a house church, though. The dynamic of such houses often leads to neighbors who become door-openers to your own calling.

The flame at the left side of the middle stem stands for our workplace. This should be the place where we live out our calling. That's how the kingdom of God functions! This flame and the flame of our local neighborhood are joined through the semi-circle formed through the branches. Often we find the local man or woman of peace through our jobs. Through practicing our professions, we can lead people to Jesus and disciple them. New churches evolve. The Apostle Paul got to know Aquila and Priscilla through his profession as tentmaker (Acts 18:1–3). Soon after that, a local house church formed in the house of that couple. After this experience, they joined Paul as team members in his mobile team.

The flame at the right side is the man of peace who symbolizes the spiritual family (house-church). It's assembled by God himself. It goes beyond the own family members and is formed of several married and single people. It is headed by spiritual fathers and mothers (deacons,

house-parents). They are accountable to Jesus, just as the other lamps of the menorah. A church should not exist by itself, but should multiply and be linked to other houses or traditional churches in the neighborhood.

The semicircle leads us to the left side. This flame stands for mobile apostolic teams. What do these teams do? They take action in social fields and regions. They do the work of pioneers. These teams make contact with new people. New churches develop. They concentrate on training and releasing future leaders, who again on their part train others (2 Tim. 2:2). At the same time, they observe if these leaders are fit for local or for mobile functions and duties, and train them according to their callings (workplace, gifting, etc.).

The local house churches join a network. ***The network is led by elders. This is symbolized by the external right arm of the menorah.*** The elders should have a spiritual stewardship over the city and give protection to God's people (Acts 11:27–30). In the pioneer stage, the apostles appoint them (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Later on, the elders appoint the next generation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–4). Often they exercise their gifts in ministries as described in Ephesians 4:11. God wants to empower the local churches and also build new local churches through them.

On the opposite side of the semicircle, the external left arm is symbolic of the men and women who serve as part of a mobile five-fold ministry. God calls and sends them as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. They help grow the body of Christ into maturity. They serve in teams, and, together with the local elders, they bear the spiritual responsibility for the region (Acts 15). They give spiritual protection to God's people.

The basic principle of the Menorah-Vision is this: the supporting pillar is the family. The external lamps are associated with this middle stem. The farther out the flames are from the middle, the greater their spiritual responsibility. The ones active on the left side carry the responsibility of "a sent one" (Acts 13). The ones active on the right side are responsible for "gathering in" (Acts 28:23–31).

God predetermines leadership profiles. He knows which flames should be burning in which stages of our life. If we follow Jesus, we are all called to disciple others (Matt. 28:16–20), and so we are all leaders (of course exceptions are possible). We are a common royal priesthood. That is God's conception (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Usually people have mandates with several emphases. We need to recognize which flame needs oil (the Holy Spirit) right now. Each of the seven flames has to do with leadership.

If we have Christ in our hearts, our desire should be that all of the flames are burning worldwide. We are asked to have oil for our flames, to support everything else, but not to be involved in everything. The fact that all lamps burn at the same level shows the equivalence of all positions (Gal. 3:27–29).

The original menorah was made of one piece—one talent of pure gold. This speaks of heavenly abundance and unity. The base on which the shaft rests also has a prophetic meaning: ***the base stands for the one God.*** In the Old Covenant, the twelve ancestors were built on it. In the New Covenant, there are twelve apostles. Prophets were aside them (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 18:20; 21:12–14). That's how the completion of the body of Christ comes to pass. In the kingdom of God, everything has its order. The lamps, the buds, the blossoms, the cups, the wick trimmers, and the trays also have prophetic meanings, but that would go beyond the scope of this article.

This vision of the menorah is for the purpose of facilitating the growth of movements in the kingdom of God. It helps us see where particular ministry focus already exists and where there is a lack. It unveils how individuals are positioned and how movements are arrayed before God.

Source: Marco Gmuer and friends (2012) www.inderweidverlag.ch.

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