

Brothers,

As most of you know, Barbara and I have spent the past several months praying and trying to determine how God is calling us to serve the Church. Because you are close friends and brothers in Christ, we want you to know that on May 30, we let the South Florida Church know that we would be leaving our job and moving to a different city. We really don't want to characterize this as "resigning" but rather, stepping out on faith and choosing to do the ministry in a different way than we have before. Many of you have encouraged us in different ways: expressing your support, offering advice, praying for us, and much more. We are both extremely thankful for the love you and so many others have shown us during a very challenging time in our lives. We are writing this letter to you all both to explain our thinking and to ask for your support as we begin a challenging but exciting new chapter in our lives.

Our Call

Put simply, Barbara and I feel called to plant an experimental autonomous house church that is ***unified and in fellowship with*** the ICOC churches within its geographical region. We hope that this church planting can and will be independently funded; Barbara plans to find a secular job, and I plan to raise funds to work as a house church leader and networker throughout the country and hopefully the world.

Our dream is to begin a house church somewhere in the United States with 6-12 people, work with this small group, and then transition slowly from that local focus to working with and supporting a network of house churches in a traveling "evangelist" capacity. Within three to five years, our hope is that we can have established a group of unified house churches within our local area and have begun to focus on expanding this network domestically and globally.

Why This Call?

Many of you have had the opportunity to read my previous letter which I sent a couple months ago, in which I outlined my thinking about house churches in great depth. To summarize, Barbara and I

love our brotherhood dearly and have great respect for the faith and love of so many within the brotherhood. Still, we believe that we have not reached our full potential and that we need to be open to experimentation if God is going to work effectively through us. In the business world, almost all strong and established corporations have research and development departments, so that they can innovate and adapt to an ever-changing world. In the New Testament, we see that the first Christians had to learn to adapt to new circumstances on the fly as the gospel spread from Jerusalem across the Roman Empire: the conversion of Gentiles, Paul's apostleship, and many others. In our world today, our brotherhood will learn the most about how to change the world if we are willing to listen to the Spirit and to question some of our own assumptions and practices.

We believe that the house church model which we are proposing has plenty of scriptural support and is evident in the New Testament's description of the churches of the first disciples. Moreover, we believe that it has great potential for effectiveness in our increasingly post-Christian world — a world that is very different from the world in which most of us were raised and baptized. The evidence is clear that our churches are not growing as they were twenty or thirty years ago; we believe that a willingness to experiment and try “out-of-the-box” ideas is part of an appropriately humble response to our present situation.

Why Autonomous?

Perhaps some of you are wondering why Barbara and I are hoping to plant a house church which is autonomous — that is, institutionally independent. To be absolutely clear, we have ***no desire to cut ties with our brotherhood***; on the contrary, we hope to be no less unified in our new roles than in our current ones. However, we do believe that a house church experiment will need to be autonomous to be truly effective.

One reason for this is very practical. The house church model which we envision includes not just a different way of “doing Sunday service,” but a different way of thinking about finances, and indeed a different set of financial priorities. House churches will allocate money to local staff, administration, facilities costs, benevolence, and

missions differently than “traditional” churches will. While it is entirely possible for different groups to be unified *spiritually* with different financial models, it is difficult for different groups to be unified *institutionally* with entirely different financial models. As a result, our goal is to establish a house church that is institutionally autonomous but one in mind and spirit with the other churches in its region. House churches may not be able to be a part of the same *organization* as “traditional” churches, but they are more than capable of being a part of the same Body — the Body of Christ.

A second reason is convictional, a matter of principle. Unity, as has already been noted, is not fundamentally a matter of institution, but of a common faith, baptism, hope, and God, as Paul notes in Ephesians 4. Part of what we have learned as a brotherhood in the past decade is that unity is not a matter of institutionalized worldwide hierarchy, but of cooperation and interdependence which preserves freedom in Christ. We believe that this lesson holds just as much in large metropolitan areas of millions of people as it does worldwide. True unity cannot be achieved through institutionalization; as many of us know, it requires much more! Thus, while we aim for autonomy, we aim no less for unity: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5.13).

Our Commitment to Unity

There are several ways in which we hope to maintain a spirit of unity with other churches if we are able to begin a house church, which are worth briefly noting. We see continuing to support HOPE and foreign missions as one possible way of demonstrating our commitment to unity; in addition, we certainly hope to worship together with other churches at special services on a regular basis as a means of celebrating and fellowshiping with them. We also believe that it could be very beneficial for our campus and teen disciples to participate in campus and youth and family activities, and we are committed to exploring other paths to unity as they become apparent to us.

Why House Churches?

Why bother with house churches at all? This is a question which I have attempted to answer in great depth in my previous letter, but it deserves a brief answer here.

As far as the mission is concerned, Barbara and I believe that house churches could be extremely effective vehicles for the spread of the gospel. Our American church model — with buildings or facility rentals, campus and teen ministers, and everything else — simply cannot be imitated by most churches in other parts of the world, especially fledgling churches. House churches are cost-effective, flexible, imitable, and scalable. Effective house church plantings can cost literally zero dollars, as has been proven multiple instances in Latin America! House churches may be our only realistic means of reaching people in rural or underdeveloped parts of the world.

Even in the First World, however, we believe that house churches could be extremely beneficial. Many Americans are “post-Christian,” and have become disillusioned with the traditional churches in which they grew up. Many of these people show no interest in “going to church” — as our slowing numerical growth demonstrates. House churches would strike many of these people as obviously different from most other churches, as well as more communal and interactive than traditional churches. Rightly or wrongly, many post-Christian people, especially young people, reject traditional church as “inauthentic.” House churches are one way for us to strive to become all things to all men.

We believe house churches could be a way to add another “tool” to our toolbox. How much more might we be able to expand our outreach to the lost if we had both “attractional” churches (for the most part, our current model - members invite the lost to a large, inspiring church service in some centralized location) AND “missional churches” (what we are proposing - small groups that bring church to the community)? How many more people would we reach if we offered more than one way for the lost to experience “church”?

Not that we envision house churches as a mere evangelistic tool. On the contrary, we believe that the primary benefit of house church may be to the disciples themselves. As much as our churches call every

member to participate and to be a disciple, the reality is that many members do not see how they can contribute to the church when they have no visible role to play on Sunday morning. Even though we sincerely fight against this tendency, in all our churches, the burden of discipling and evangelizing often falls upon the shoulders of the very few rather than the many. This is not God's plan; God desires that the Body build itself up in love (Ephesians 4.16). We believe that a house church model has the potential to empower and equip many of our members so that they may mature in Christ more than ever before.

Most importantly, the churches described in the New Testament were house churches, and the apostolic church and missions model was a house church model. The New Testament churches had no buildings, and met together most often (though not always) in houses or smaller groups. While we do not believe that every detail of the apostolic model needs to be imitated exactly, we do believe that there is wisdom in that model from which we can still learn today.

At the very least, we believe that those disciples who believe in experimenting with a house church model should be allowed to do so. We do not believe that this is the "right way" or the "only way" nor do we think everyone needs to do this; but we do believe in healthy, unified experimentation and in allowing our spiritually strong members to exercise their freedom in Christ.

Our Focus

Our primary focus in beginning a house church ministry would be to see the members of that ministry grow and mature in Christ. We believe that the apostles' number one goal for their churches was spiritual maturity. Consider, for instance,

Ephesians 4.11-16:

And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the

stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole Body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the Body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The purpose, not just of shepherds and teachers, but of *apostles and evangelists*, is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ.” Maturing the saints was the number one priority even for the apostles and evangelists! And the mark of a mature saint is his ability to build up the Body of Christ, so that the Body may become full-grown — “so that we may no longer be children” spiritually. The Body, “when each part is working properly ... builds itself up in love.”

Our main focus with our house church ministry will be equipping and maturing the members of that ministry. We believe that aiming for spiritual growth will lead to numerical growth as well, and that lasting numerical growth is impossible without spiritual growth.

We believe that house churches will provide a conducive atmosphere to this spiritual growth. Because house church gatherings will be smaller and more interactive, everyone will have the opportunity to participate. Regular times of corporate prayer will be more logistically feasible; eating together and celebrating the Lord’s Supper together will nourish and deepen relationships. This growth will not happen overnight; because so many of us are so used to our current model, we will need to get used to a totally different way of thinking about church. But we have hope that house church ministries can lead to renewed spiritual growth within our brotherhood.

None of this is to say that spiritual growth is impossible within a traditional church setting; all of us have come to faith and matured in

Christ within the traditional model. However, we do believe that many of our older, non-staff members are being underutilized. And we see the reduced numerical impact that we believe is accompanying a diminishing spiritual maturation within our brotherhood.

We certainly do not think that we have all the answers. However, we do believe that the time has come for deep self-examination and bold experimentation. Our prayer is that a house church model can become part of our solution moving forward.

Our Three Year Plan

What, in detail, is our plan? Of course, we have not figured out all the specifics. However, we do have a rough three year plan in mind. Something like the following, is what we envision:

- Beginning with 6-12 disciples in a house church
- Meeting regularly on Sundays for a meal and short lesson, accompanied by responses, conversation, and prayer
- Meeting at least once or twice during the week for Bible study and prayer
- Meeting about once a month in a larger service with other disciples in our metropolitan area
- Supporting and attending HOPE events
- Integrating our campus and teen disciples into broader campus and youth and family ministries
- Devoting regular time to serving the poor, including meeting together on Sundays in parks, at nursing homes, or in other similar places
- Devoting significant resources to benevolence, both within the Church and outside
- Not tolerating persistent, unrepentant lack of discipleship within our house church — as evidenced not only by sexual sin but also by a lack of love or greed

- Seeing our house church split and multiply at a frequency somewhat dependent on the demographics of where we end up living
- Reevaluating our model after three years

As far as our specific roles, this is what we envision:

- I, John, am seeking funding to work full-time as a house church leader and networker. I will begin by organizing my own house church, and plan to spend my first year focusing on that house church and ironing out any “kinks” that may come up.
- I plan to create a website of materials for house churches and house church leaders and blog regularly on that website with updates.
- Over a three-year period, I plan to transition from a local house church leader role to a traveling house church networker and planter role. My hope is to see an elder or elders appointed to lead the house church with which I am working so that I may devote myself more fully to a broader outlook, and so that the house churches which we have begun may become financially and spiritually self-sufficient.
- Barbara will seek secular employment and work with me in an unpaid capacity.

What We Are Asking

First and foremost, we are asking for your prayers. We are also asking for your encouragement, advice, and support, from which we have already benefited greatly.

In addition, we are asking for your “blessing” to allow us to consider establishing such a ministry in your area. We do not want to begin a house church ministry anywhere where local leaders will not be comfortable with, and even excited about, the idea of such a ministry. We do not want to tear down bridges within our brotherhood, but to reinforce them.

Finally, we are asking you to consider supporting us financially. While Barbara will be seeking secular employment, my hope is to work full-time implementing a house church model. In particular, I am hoping

to raise enough money to be supported within that role for the next three years, at which time we will reevaluate our model based on what we have learned. If your church is willing to support us, or if you or anyone you know is willing to do so, we would love to work with you.

Conclusion

This letter has covered a lot of ground in a short amount of time. It is intended as a summary, not as an exhaustive explanation of each point. We hope that it can begin many fruitful and constructive conversations with all of you.

We know that our proposal can seem kind of “out there” at first glance. House churches are different and unfamiliar, and scary as a result; however, we believe that they are totally necessary at least as an experiment within our brotherhood. We believe that someone needs to be willing to try something that is genuinely “out of the box.” We are committed to unity, but also to freedom in Christ, freedom which allows us to experiment within apostolic parameters. Our hope is that house churches can not only lead to spiritual growth for house church members but also to greater unity among all parts of our brotherhood and to the further spread of the gospel in the twenty-first century.

Again, we are grateful for your partnership in the faith and look forward to hearing all of your thoughts.

Love,

John and Barbara