

OUR STORY

Transitioning to a Simple, Uncomplicated and Unhurried Church

By Forrest Erickson

October 2008 is a month I will never forget. Something happened that month that left me forever changed. The church I helped bring to birth eight years earlier was at a crisis point. We had tried everything we knew to be a church that reached out to people who didn't think God cared or who perhaps felt God was no longer relevant in a modern culture like ours. Our consistent cry to the Lord had been, "We are not asking to be like the church down the street. Just make us what *You* want us to be." Even as I prayed those words a thousand times, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what God wanted. But now I was having to admit that my vision for this church—and what I thought was God's vision—wasn't working out.

That's not to say God hadn't given us some successes. Among us today are beautiful trophies of God's grace—young adults and even a few older ones who discovered the love and tender mercies of God, some for the first time, others in a new and fresh way. Several of these are now leaders in the church. They are passionate and committed followers of Jesus who remind me every day of the remarkable goodness and grace of God.

We had also been able to offer in-depth Bible training in areas such as Christian world-view, missions, and personal finance. Each of these training sessions were 10-12 weeks long, yet they were well-attended not only by our church but by believers from other churches in the community. One well-known Christian ministry that sends speakers around the nation to conduct missions training allowed us to tailor their unique program to our particular audience of young adults. The training was an exciting success, with about a third of the audience coming from other churches.

In addition to these things, God had allowed us to have spiritual impact on the secular college campus where we rented facilities. We were able to build relationships with students, faculty and staff, several of whom came to faith in Christ through our witness to the Gospel. I was even regarded by some—unofficially of course—as campus pastor and welcomed as an off-campus adviser to the Christian club, whose student leaders I mentored over several years. On numerous occasions we set up our stage, sound system, and lighting equipment for college functions, always without asking or expecting anything in return. The college expressed its appreciation both publicly and privately. At one event I was presented with an award from the college president. And when we struggled to pay our rent, the college offered to 'comp' us several months of rent in return for having used our equipment and receiving our help.

But here we were, nearing the end of 2008, and I was making the most painful admission of my life: The church I was part of wasn't going to make it! The growth we had asked God for, the advancement we had worked so hard to make happen, the breakthrough that had seemed so close we could almost taste it, hadn't come. We were out of money. We were in debt. We were at a point where we knew we could no longer survive as a church unless God did something unusual and unexpected. Early that October I met together with our elders, dear men of God who had spent several years at my side praying and working for the success of this church. We decided to set aside the month to pray specifically for direction from God. Should we close our doors? Had God brought us this far only to let us fail? If He had something else in mind, would He open our hearts and minds to see it?

During this month God began to work in my heart in ways I hadn't expected. For the first time I began to seriously ask questions about the nature and functioning of the church. What did Jesus intend His church to look like? Who is supposed to lead the local church? If it is the elders, as I believe the Word teaches, where does the traditional and current emphasis on the role of pastor come from? Is that emphasis Biblical? And even more deeply troubling to me, why had I been willing to carefully search the Bible in defense of some doctrines while casually allowing both tradition and current practice dictate much of the teaching regarding the church?

Transitioning to a Simple Church

After a month of calling on God for guidance, we sensed He was giving us new direction. We began to lead the church through some major changes, transitioning from a church meeting on a college campus to a network of four micro-churches that gathered in homes. Each house church was led by an elder. This responsibility not only gave the elders the opportunity to regularly share and teach God's Word, it also taught them how to trust Jesus as the acting Head of the Church. And since the elders were learning how to become active participants rather than passive spectators, they were also able to encourage everyone else in the Body to do the same. At this point we also changed our name from RockChurch to Generation Church.

During this time of transition we agreed that my role would consist largely of visiting one house church each Sunday. At times I taught the Word, but often I simply listened and participated as the Word was being taught by others. As God's people began to open up and share the things they were learning about life and about the reality of Christ's presence and His grace, these gatherings became profoundly rich experiences for Julie and me.

Although in the months that followed we lost half of our members, as elders we remained convinced the transition we were experiencing had been orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. So we pressed on. In early 2010 we once again sensed remarkably clear guidance from the Lord. We felt God was telling us to bring the four micro-churches back together, this time into a single house church. Today, nearly three years after that October of 2008, Generation Church consists of about 30 people. We meet Sunday evenings from 5:00 until about 7:30, using the home of one of our elders. About once a quarter we give our host family a break by meeting in another home or by doing something different. One Sunday evening we gathered out in the beautiful Arizona desert. Another Sunday evening we participated in a service at the Teen Challenge Center in Phoenix. On Easter Sunday evening we brought music and a message to Home of Hope in Casa Grande. For the past three years, on the day before Christmas, we have helped out at the Phoenix Rescue Mission.

Our experience has taught us that 25-35 people, including children, is an ideal number of people for a house church, provided the house can hold that many persons. A church this size is small enough to allow broad participation throughout the meeting, yet large enough for us not to feel uncomfortable if some have to be gone on a weekend. Though Jesus has promised to be present with the smallest handful of people, somehow we feel more comfortable when the room is full.

Less Rushed, Greater Simplicity, More Participation

We have learned much about what it means to be the Church—and we are still learning! Most western believers are not accustomed to meeting together for two or more hours at a time. Yet for us it now seems quite natural and fitting! All week we rush from one activity to another, worried we will be late for the next thing on our list. There is something liberating about an unhurried meeting with Jesus! I can't remember the last time I checked a clock during our weekly gatherings. Somehow, the timing seems always to be just right.

We have also become a less complicated church. Take, for example, our weekly Sunday evening gatherings. People are warmly greeted as they step in the door, but nothing is formal or particularly structured. Everyone is welcome to stop by the kitchen counter to grab a cup of coffee or some juice and a snack. Most arrive well before starting time and linger long after the last prayer. The conversation is interspersed with laughter, and people easily move from one person to another, catching up on the week or getting to know new arrivals.

Shortly after 5:00 we ask everyone to find a seat and we call on God for his blessings. We invite Jesus—Head of the Church—to do whatever he chooses among us that evening, even if it is different than what we expected or planned. We ask God to give us a keen sensitivity to the voice

of His Spirit and the ability to discern anything that does not come from Him. Then we sing for a while—no sound system needed (something new to us)! The musicians who lead us are capable and the music is powerful and draws our hearts toward God. But it, too, is simple and uncomplicated.

Because we believe broad participation in our gatherings is Biblical (1Corinthians 14:26-33), we give God's people opportunity to share their stories of His work in their lives. We encourage people to share, but only if prompted by the Holy Spirit. They readily respond by telling of answered prayers, insights into the Word, lessons learned, and experiences with neighbors, co-workers and friends. Sometimes the stories told and thoughts expressed lead us straight to prayer. If a need seems particularly acute, we may ask a couple of people to lay hands on the ones being prayed for. We freely petition God for his healing power over illnesses and his intervention in circumstances beyond our control, remembering that we call upon One for whom nothing is impossible. We continue to experience remarkable answers to prayer.

Teaching the Word

We also learn together from God's Word. Knowing we live in a time when truth is increasingly ridiculed or ignored altogether, we are concerned that God's people get a thorough grasp of the Word—with both head and heart. Our teaching typically lasts forty-five minutes to an hour. We resist the temptation to hurry. And we encourage people to ask questions or express observations (they always do!). We find—to no one's surprise—that God's people retain more when they actively participate in the study of His Word.

Sometimes we will take weeks or months to work through a book of Scripture, or even a chapter! At other times we will cover in a single evening a particular topic for which our people urgently need Biblical understanding. Of one thing we are certain: There is no substitute for the Scriptures! We often remind one another that the one sure way of discerning deception and error is knowing the Truth and following it with a whole heart. To this end we constantly encourage each other to read and study the Bible.

The Younger Ones Among Us

We are blessed with several babies and toddlers. Parents know their little ones are welcome to be a part of the gathering. We don't try to separate the little children from the rest of the group because we believe even small children—if given the opportunity—will learn and absorb much more than we expect. Naturally, if a baby is fussy or crying, a parent will take the child to another room for a few minutes, but there is something refreshing about having little ones present in the gathering of believers, quietly playing while the rest of us are singing, praying and studying the word.

Beyond a handful of children, Generation Church consists of teenagers, young adult singles, young married couples, a couple in their forties, and a few of us a bit older than that. The mix of ages, we feel, is exactly as God would have it. We do not offer Sunday School classes, catechism classes, or youth groups because we believe it is the parents' responsibility to instruct and nurture their children. Older parents who have raised or are raising godly children know a key part of their ministry is mentoring younger parents and encouraging them to develop good parenting skills. And the elders recognize that one of their most important roles is to ensure that no one who needs mentoring is left out, especially teens and other young adults.

Cost is Down

Facility costs are a huge drain on any church that must rent or purchase property and erect buildings in order to have a place to meet. Skyrocketing costs associated with owning land and buildings is one of the reasons so many churches fail. If, however, we are willing to adjust our

perceptions about what makes a church, a new world of opportunity opens to us. A house church, for example, has no rent, no mortgage, no upkeep, and no utilities to pay.

In Generation Church the couple who opens their home to us each weekend joyfully and sacrificially exercise their gift of hospitality. When this family's house becomes too small to hold us all, we will branch out with a second house church. We believe when the time is right for a second group, God will have another family eager and ready to let their home be filled with His people one day each week. Perhaps eventually we will have a network of several house churches in the Phoenix metro area. The good news is that we will never have to spend a dollar on land or buildings.

Another costly feature of traditional church is paid leaders. While missionaries, church planters, evangelists and maybe a handful of others have few options other than full support from God's people, most leaders in house churches do not require such support. Early in our transition from traditional church to something more simple and less expensive, I made it clear that I would be willing to find other part time jobs so that my wages would not be such a strain on our small church. It didn't matter to me whether God opened a door in a secular field or in some ministry capacity. It wasn't long before the Lord raised up a unique and wonderful opportunity. Desert Rose Church, a small group meeting a few miles away in Tempe, heard what Generation Church was doing and asked if I would work with them, too. Desert Rose meets Sunday mornings and I have been meeting with them since August, 2009, and the two churches graciously split my wages. Both groups know I am willing—if God opens the door—to pick up yet another job that could reduce even more the amount of money both churches contribute toward my salary. My reasoning is this: The other elders in both churches have outside jobs while sharing in the ministry, so why shouldn't I? If all the elders, each according to the gifting of the Spirit, share substantially in the ministry of leading and equipping God's people, as Jesus intended, the load on any one person is manageable even while generating income from other sources.

Typically, small churches have little left over at the end of the month after paying their pastor, making the monthly mortgage payment, and setting aside funds needed for the maintenance and repairs of their building. House churches, on the other hand, don't have to face these sorts of financial pressures. They can use the offerings of God's people to feed the hungry, rescue the abandoned and the addicted, help the orphans and widows, and support church planters and other missionaries. In our situation, if I can help the two churches I work with to reduce the amount needed to pay me, more funds will be available to support ministries that absolutely must have the churches' financial help to exist. When churches meet in homes and church leaders are willing to become "tent-makers," there is a huge reduction in funds required for things that don't necessarily make the local church a better church. This means small churches are not only able to survive but to actually *thrive!*

Tradition or Scripture?

It is not easy to buck tradition. This is particularly true in the Church. When it comes to church buildings and full-time pastors, we rarely question the origin of these traditions or ask ourselves if they were God's intention when he gave birth to the Church two thousand years ago. Have we considered, for example, that for three hundred years after the Church began, it met predominantly in homes and during that time experienced phenomenal growth?

While the New Testament doesn't tell the Church *where* it should meet, there certainly isn't any hint that homes are somehow less than ideal places for the Church to gather. We don't find the Apostles urging local churches to erect their own meeting facilities to accommodate growth. We do know that when God's people meet in homes or other small venues, there is greater opportunity for intimate fellowship, caring for each other, accountability and participation. Fewer persons in each church need not limit the size of the Body of Christ in a community. *There simply needs to be many more micro-churches, or house churches, in every neighborhood!*

Furthermore, there is no teaching in the New Testament that promotes the concept of a church bringing in a professional "pastor" from outside the local community and outside the local group of believers to lead the Church. While Paul points out that an elder who directs well the affairs of a church may be paid (1Timothy 5:17-18), the idea that such a person was a professional minister or part of a special class of trained pastors or clergy is foreign to his teaching.

Seeing God at Work

I was raised in a godly home where everything revolved around Jesus. While we, like all families, had our share of struggles, God *really* was the center focus of our lives. Church was never some religious add-on. It was an interwoven and natural part of life. As I write this I can look back on sixty years of following Jesus, with more than thirty of those years serving the family of God in the typical and traditional role of "pastor." Yet here I am, saying that in all those years I did not experience anything that matches the joy and freedom we are experiencing now in a simple, uncomplicated church that meets in a house. There is something liberating—indeed, exhilarating—about giving control to Jesus, not orchestrating every moment, or doing the same thing week after week. We say to the Lord, "If you should prompt us to do or say something, or if you wish to change what we are doing at the moment, please help us to have minds that are sensitive to your voice and hearts that are willing to obey you immediately."

It is also liberating to remember that the gatherings of the Church are exactly that—the gatherings of the Church! God didn't ask us to cater to the expectations of church-hopping visitors or excitement-hungry seekers. We are not giving a program, doing a concert, or conducting a media event. We are God's people coming together in the name of Jesus to pray, to encourage one another, and to hear the Word of the Lord. People are not converted by our clever attractions but by a real encounter with the living Christ through the hearing of the Word and the witness of that Word in the lives of believers. This is what Paul alludes to when he writes, "*But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"*" (1Corinthians 14:24-25)

Freedom in the Lord also translates into joyful expectancy: "Lord, what might you choose to do among us that would surprise us and bring glory to your Name? And Lord, how can we be a blessing to those you bring our way?" God is full of surprises! I can't help but think of Chris. We first met Chris when he was a student and part of the security staff at the college where we used to meet. When we pulled our big utility trailer on campus to set up our stuff, Chris was often the one who unlocked doors to the facilities we rented. We had the privilege of introducing him to Jesus. I have never seen anybody so profoundly changed by God as Chris. A few years later Chris met Angela, a bright and beautiful young college student who had grown up in a culturally religious home but knew nothing about a personal relationship with Jesus. Chris introduced Angela to Jesus and now she is also a committed follower of Christ, studying to be a medical doctor. When we see them Sunday nights at our church gatherings, the love of God lights up their faces in a way I can't quite describe. A few weeks ago they got engaged. I smile every time I see them.

I think of another young student, also named Chris, who became a follower of Jesus. God has given him an amazing passion to speak about Jesus to people from other cultures and nations. This summer we had the privilege of sending him for three weeks to Indonesia to share Christ with students, many of them Muslims.

I think of James and Jennifer, a young couple deeply in love with life and with each other. Shortly before we met them, Jennifer discovered she had cancer. They both began seeking the Lord and God allowed us to be instrumental in this journey. Her death a short time later left a legacy of remarkable faith in God and James has now written a book about their experiences. Now God has

brought Krystal into James' life and the two plan to be married in March.

I think of Gabe and Emily who found Jesus through our ministry and recently made radical changes in their lives because of their encounter with the Word of God.

I think about Jonathan, another college student. Jon had been brought to the USA from Venezuela when he was five years old. When he turned eighteen he discovered to his dismay that his mother had never filled out legal papers for him. He was quite literally a man without a country! In the midst of constant worry and sometimes a paralyzing fear of arrest and deportation, Jon committed his life to Christ. Six months ago, in response to God's nudging, Jon returned to Venezuela. Now God has opened a door for Jon to get training with a missions agency in the country of his birth. As of this moment, he still has no legal papers in either the USA or Venezuela, but we know that God is moving powerfully in his life. On a recent Sunday Generation Church skyped with him for over an hour. We were filled with joy at seeing his radiant face and hearing the testimony of God very much at work in his life.

There are many more I could mention, both men and women. Every one of them is using his or her gifts to serve Jesus and his church. They are making a difference in the lives of others. I see it every day. Some of these are our leaders, who are among the most dedicated and committed persons I have met in thirty years of working with the Body of Christ. They give awesome amounts of time meeting with and mentoring younger believers in the truths of the faith.

While these accounts of new believers and older ones are not necessarily extraordinary, they are some of the reasons we are experiencing joy and excitement. We wonder what God will do next. Who will He place in our pathway to show the love of Jesus? How he will answer our prayers? In what way will He choose to display His power? What is He leading us to do or say?

We sense God is among us, moving in ways we don't fully understand, helping us to see His greatness in the midst of our weakness. We find ourselves urgently begging for whatever is on His heart. We are asking Him to show us how to care for each other sacrificially. We are encouraging each other to get into God's Word because we know too many of us still do not read or study it on our own. Some of us are over-extended financially and don't give much at all to God's work. We feel God wants to bring his grace into these and other areas, to change us and mold us into a people who continually seek after God with a whole heart. Aware that we are surrounded by people who need Jesus, we are asking the Holy Spirit to make us alert to spiritually-hungry people, whether neighbors, co-workers or friends. We pray for boldness to proclaim truth when people ask about the hope we have in Jesus.

Finally, we feel a constant urging from the Holy Spirit to remind each other, and particularly the younger believers among us, that difficult days lie ahead. We feel so strongly that the followers of Jesus need to be alert to the deceptive schemes of the devil. We are reminded of Paul's words to Timothy, *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons* (1Timothy 4:1).

Do simple, uncomplicated churches have a future in America?

In a nation where bigger is better and where churches of several thousand worshipers are almost as common to the landscape as school buildings and strip malls, one might ask if small and simple churches will ever become widespread practice in America. According to the Barna Group, an organization that gathers data on religion and culture in America, between 6 million and 12 million Christians already meet in house churches every week. In 2009 the Pew Forum conducted similar research and found that 9 percent of Americans participate in home gatherings.

While numbers in themselves do not signal a movement from God, we should be aware that

something significant is happening in this country that may be the work of the Holy Spirit. When tens of thousands of believers across America forsake institutional models of the church in favor of something more simple, more organic, more intimate, and much less expensive, it is legitimate to ask why. Is it simply a fad? Are we jumping on somebody's bandwagon? Or are Christians from every walk of life across America so unsettled by what they see taking place in the Church that they are beginning to look for alternatives?

Can anyone deny that we have adopted layer upon layer of tradition and practices that were not part of the New Testament Church? And that these traditions and practices now cost the Church billions of dollars every year? Church buildings, professional pastors and staff, programs of all kinds, special vestments, seminaries, Bible Schools, Sunday Schools, youth groups, elder boards, deacon boards, trustee boards, choirs, worship teams, outreach teams; the list goes on and on! The first century church had none of these yet exploded with growth.

While the Scriptures may not deny us the freedom to devise all sorts of church roles, offices, boards, programs and ministries, are we sure these things make the church better? More loving? More effective? Or more passionate about serving Jesus? Is it possible we traded the radical simplicity of the early Church—which necessitated complete dependence on the grace and power of God—for devices of our own wisdom and choosing?

Every week more Christians in America—some new to the faith, others mature, long-time believers—are thrilled to discover that church can be simple, uncomplicated and unhurried. They are excited to learn that under the headship of Jesus Christ, the church can be capably led by godly and humble elders. They are delighted to know Jesus is the Guest of Honor at every gathering and the Holy Spirit is welcome to move in the group as He desires. They are overjoyed to find that participation is open to everyone. They are moved by prayer that is simple, spontaneous and powerful. They enjoy studying the Word thoroughly and digesting it carefully, always with the freedom to ask tough questions or share insights. They realize that intimacy, accountability, and camaraderie help make the church healthy and strong. And finally, they feel confident that if they bring along a friend who doesn't know Jesus, it will almost be impossible for that friend to leave the gathering unaffected by the warm family atmosphere, the clear and gentle instruction, the praises lifted to God, the earnest prayers of His people, and the simplicity of the gathering.

Though Generation Church still has struggles learning how to conduct itself as the family of God, some really good things have happened in the almost three years since we began this journey. Without question, not having to rent facilities makes meeting together much less expensive. And we have certainly become less complicated as a church. We are also much less hurried in our meetings and participation is much broader and deeper. I think we are also more accountable to one another. Perhaps we realize more clearly how dependent we are on each other in the Body. But what impresses me the most is this: I really believe we are becoming much more dependent upon God! Our numbers are too small to create even the smallest blip on the church radar screen, so anything we do or accomplish has to come from the Lord, not our own strength. Jesus is present in our midst in more powerful ways than we have ever experienced. We are more in awe of Him than ever before. We are astounded by His grace. We are blown away by His love and patience. We are moved to tears by His willingness to forgive our sins and to pour mercy into our lives every day. Nothing is ours. Everything is the Lord's. And in this process of experiencing the glory of God's goodness among a very small group of people, we are discovering that God is no respecter of size. Small churches—even very small churches, the kind that meet in homes—can be nourishing, healthy, vibrant, and tenderly loved by Jesus.

If you wish to respond to the above article with comments or questions, you may contact Forrest at forrest@azgeneration.com. Forrest served for thirty-three years in the traditional role of pastor but now serves as a preaching and teaching elder (1Timothy 5:17) with two small churches in the greater Phoenix, AZ area. Both churches practice elder leadership where all the elders actively serve as overseers, shepherds (Acts 20:28) and teachers (1Timothy 3:2). One group of believers meets Sunday morning in its own facilities. The other group meets Saturday or Sunday evenings in a home in Gilbert.