

CHURCH

on the

COUCH



One Way Believers Work Out
Church Life in Homes

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In fact, the whole evening was different. I thought I might like it from the description on the website, but being there was something I wasn't prepared for.

Jim Elliff is one of several elders over Christ Fellowship of Kansas City, a network of churches which meets primarily in homes (www.ChristFellowshipKC.org). He is also president of Christian Communicators Worldwide (www.CCWtoday.org). Like churches that meet in buildings, house churches vary a great deal. Jim has written this simple story to help you see how one church attempts to work out its life together in Christ.



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Chapter 1

THE COUCH

It felt strange to sit on a couch and call it church.

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In fact, the whole evening was different. I thought I might like it from the description on the website, but being there was something I wasn't prepared for.

I had all but abandoned church life in the university, though I thought of myself as a Christian and had enough of the Christian language to demonstrate it. I did join a campus group for Christians which was essentially a meeting once a week with praise

music and a brief talk by someone either on staff or from the outside. I was occasionally motivated by what I heard, so this substituted well-enough for a Christian lifestyle.

There was enough emptiness in school to go around. People laughed, pretended to be unperturbed, and were mostly intent on conforming to whatever was the right way to talk and dress. I was into that also. But sometimes it all seemed boringly surface, often shameful, and a wasteful use of our parents' money; yet at other times, we thought we were just getting the requisite degree to get us through the future. We were only doing what we were supposed to do.

A few times I had some serious discussions with friends in the dorm about "life." We never put anything together except that Christianity was okay for some who liked it and that perhaps it helped some people cope with issues better. Other religions might do the same, we thought. We all

were put off by the kind of pseudo Christianity that we grew up with, and that we assumed our parents had experienced. Admittedly, none of us had talked seriously with our parents about their views on this, however. Later, I would learn that not all that was traditional was bad, but I had no love for it then.

When I got out of the university, I was a bit confused as far as where I should live. Most of my friends gravitated toward the city where they thought there would be more opportunities for work. My degree in computer science would provide me a job.

After submitting a few applications, I was able to get a decent start in programming. I got the standard apartment, shopped IKEA for some cool furniture which I put on my card, scoped out the fast-food restaurants nearby and the grocery store. I found the coffee shop I liked and felt I had gotten my life in order. My parents visited me and said little about my taste in this or that, but seemed generally positive. In the main, I was ready for “life,” however I would actually want to live it.

It was in this state that I attended that church which did not seem like church. It happened through a friend at work who lived in an apartment nearby. He was heavily involved in this group and was excited about it enough to invite me. For some reason I said, "yes," though I immediately was sorry I had done so. I checked out the website and saw that it wasn't going to be the typical church stuff, which I had already decided I would never do again, regardless of what my parents thought was right.

So, there I was. On the couch.

Chapter 2

HUH?

It turns out that this Christian group is one of several that meet in homes that all together call themselves a church. I mean, the meeting in the home is a church and all the little churches are one composite church also. I think I've got that right. Sometimes they call the smaller one a "congregation."

Well . . . whatever.

I returned another time a couple of weeks later, driving over with my friend. Actually, I wanted to be there. Somehow, this seemed intriguing and like some kind of answer for me, but I had a lot to learn as to why.

Same couch: my place almost every time I visited.

Now, here is what is hard to believe—this meeting is long. I mean, it's really long, but I actually don't mind. Usually they go over two hours, if you can imagine it. Then, after all that, they eat together and call it "The Lord's Supper." That lasts a long time also. The whole evening is from 4:30 or so to about 9:00 or 9:30 when we are going out the door. Actually, some people are still there when we leave.

These people are really excited about this meeting. It's an interesting variety of things, most of the times I've attended. They sing and play guitar and maybe a violin and a djembe or a piano. They pray—you would expect that, of course, but the praying is, well, very intense and the people act concerned that God is hearing. And most of the people participate. For instance, somebody tells a story from the Bible, somebody shares about an experience that took place in her life, a man may teach for a few minutes while Bibles are open, people may stop to pray

or sing again, and sometimes I've heard people confess sinful things they have done—genuinely, without seeming to be over the top. The lead guy always has a longer teaching, all kind of a dialogue, but right out of the Bible. People are asking questions and talking about the passage and how it applies to them.

I've never been in any kind of church meeting like this before.

Sometimes they take a break so everyone can use the bathroom, which is welcome when you've been drinking their coffee through the meeting. Some, if they want to, take their babies upstairs to be looked after for the last hour. But some parents keep all their kids in the entire meeting. Then, they start up again right where they left off. It keeps moving so that the time passes before you know it. Even the grade school kids seem to stay engaged, for the most part.

The meal starts with one of the men saying something from the Bible and praying while we stand around in the kitchen area. We all eat the food that has been brought by the people. At the end of the line was some grape juice that people pour and take to the table, but my friend told me not to take that yet. I quickly became known for bringing exotic chips or packages of cookies (Hey, I don't cook yet!). Then, in the middle of the meal, someone at each table stops the group, passes around some special flat bread, prays, and then we keep on going with our conversations. Coffee, dessert, more talk. Then we leave.

You can imagine that I had lots of questions about how all this was going down. How could I describe it? I told my friend on our way home that these meetings are "authentic." That is, this is a very genuine group of people, and their way of gathering is totally natural and sincere.

It was around the table at the time of the Lord's Supper that I had a conversation one Sunday evening that stunned me. I found out from the two men talking with me that usually people who don't know Christ aren't even invited to the meetings. I acted surprised, just as you would. I thought anyone ought to be able to come. But they had different ideas. I swallowed a bite of pizza, and, with a look of amazement uttered a profound, "Huh?"

I guess they didn't hear me say that.

Chapter 3

THEY DIDN'T WANT ME?

“They said they didn’t want people like me to come,” I said to my friend at the coffee shop the next day after work. “That stings.”

“Well, you are misunderstanding what they meant. I know they really enjoy having you there. They’ve told me so. They were just letting you into something that is very special to us. We think that church gatherings are mainly to be ‘believers meetings.’”

I had been quiet during the meetings I had attended, except during the mealtime, when everyone talked freely together. It was true that I had wondered about whether or not I was a believer in Christ after

seeing the way these people live and participate. It was also true that I was intensely interested. To have to drop this pursuit right then would be sad to me. "In fact, I'm really troubled by this."

"Actually, we do like to have 'seekers' attend the meetings," said my friend. "We aren't trying to fill up our homes with people who are not truly interested, but we are concerned to reach out to those who want to learn more about Christ."

"OK, so I am interested. I guess you would call me a seeker. I would love to know for sure I'm a Christian. And, I do like what I see and want to be part of it all. But why is it so bad to have just anybody come?"

"Well, it has to do with the way we feel we should conduct our meetings. If we had a number of unbelievers, we would tend to change the way we do things. We would meet for a shorter time, for sure. And we would abbreviate and alter everything accordingly. We would have to be more conscious

of them, and, in a way, entertain them for the time they are here. That is, if we wish for them to come back. We just think that is the way most other churches are, like the churches most of us have come from. We are hoping this church will be different. In other words, if our church meetings are mainly about evangelizing people, as is true for most churches, then we would have to change much that is precious to us that only true believers actually love.”

“I see. But don’t you try to reach out to those who are not Christians?”

“Oh, sure. We have several members who do a number of things to reach out to such people. Some of our people even go on the streets downtown to talk to people. Others have open Bible discussions at their work place. Some go to nursing homes and prisons. A few value attending other churches where the truths that have transformed us aren’t discussed as much in order to build genuine friendships. We

want to sincerely learn how they think, to encourage those who seem to be true Christians, and to have deeper conversations with others who wish to talk about these important things. And, we all try to speak to people wherever we are—neighbors, work associates, school friends, acquaintances at the coffee shops—just like you’ve seen me do before. The elders of our church don’t start these evangelistic ministries. Rather, they come from the people themselves. The pastors just tell us not to ask for any money if we start such a ministry, and not to expect all the church to be involved.”

“I’ve certainly heard many of the people in our congregation talk about evangelistic encounters. In fact, in some cases we know the names of people that they regularly talk with—and we pray for them.”

All this was beginning to make sense. My friend thought of me as a seeker. Perhaps I was less of one at first, but now I am truly a seeker and hope to find out just what it means to become a follower of Christ.

The next week, I saw something that made an even deeper impression on me and was, again, a new experience.

Chapter 4

GOING UNDER

I had noticed that Sherry was talking a lot with the women each week following the meal. I guess I didn't know that she was a seeker just like me and had been attending for a while longer than I had. It turns out that she had just gotten assurance she was a believer during the week.

Everyone was very happy about this because they had been concerned for her. They had been praying for her privately, but occasionally during the meeting the group had even asked God to "please help her to know where she stands with Christ." I didn't really know what was going on until that night.

That evening, the pastor had her sign a membership agreement, which was read to the people. It contained only things that the Bible already says the believer is to do, I discovered, so it isn't a set of church requirements that the leaders have made up. It assures the congregation that Sherry wants to obey the Lord, as a true Christian would. It reveals her desire to follow him.

The pastor changed things up a bit that night. He asked Sherry to tell about her journey to Christ. She did, not eloquently, but sincerely. I was moved by it and probably visibly showed that. Everyone else was wet-eyed as she talked. She seemed so happy to have yielded to Christ's lordship in her life. It turns out that she was to be baptized that night. I'd never seen a baptism the way these people do it.

After the shorter meeting, we all walked outside to the back yard where a plastic tub, kind of a horse trough, was sitting, filled with water. Sherry changed clothes in the house and then came outside where

the pastor said some words about what Christ can do for a person who comes to him. The people prayed for Sherry and sang. Then she sat in the trough. Strange again. Then the pastor put one hand behind her head and another on her hand which was holding her nose. He then lowered her back into the water. She got completely immersed. When she came up, the people cheered and began singing again. They were really happy.

That night the pastor said that Sherry would now take communion with us. He explained that previously she was not taking the grape juice and special bread that was part of the meal each week because that was a symbol only for Christians who are in union with Christ and the other Christians. Now I knew why my friend said I was to wait on doing that.

The truth was that Sherry had not been a part of the Body of Christ, the church, until she had fully chosen to follow Christ. She had been like I was still at that

point. Baptism was kind of a drama for believers to observe showing how new believers died to the old life and rose up to the new life in Christ. The pastor called it, along with the Lord's Supper, "ordinances," which he explained were things that Christ "ordered" the church to do as a symbol. I saw it clearly from then on.

I left that evening happy for her, but thinking very hard about myself.

What should I do?

Chapter 5

CAN'T GET YOU OUT OF MY MIND

I had once known a girl that I could not get out of my mind. But now I could not get Christ out of my mind. I didn't feel so confused like I had been. I knew that becoming a believer in Christ meant that I must follow him, believing fully in him, trusting in what he says, joining in what is important to him, loving his church and participating in it—without holding anything back. I wasn't just to be a student of Christ, but a disciple of Christ.

When we got together the following week, I blurted out during the open session, "I want to follow Christ like Sherry has." I immediately bowed my head for

some reason. I thought I had done something sort of bold for me and felt embarrassed. But, I lifted my head up again knowing that every one of these people had felt the same way in the past. This was a common experience for all of us. They were overjoyed and said so publically. And, they promised to pray for me.

Over the next couple of weeks, I talked with the pastor of our congregation and my friend several times about the cost of following Christ. They shared many passages of Scripture with me until I saw the basics well enough to know what was involved. It was all a matter of forgiveness and grace and what Christ provided when he died for people like me on the cross and was then resurrected. I must submit to Christ, and I also needed to trust him for the forgiveness I needed. I must turn away from my former lifestyle to Christ. I decided during that week, that Christ was all that he said he was and that I would follow him as my

Master from now on. I would receive his gracious gift of forgiveness. In a simple way, my decision was made and I was thrilled.

I immediately found new ability in my life to understand, to obey, and especially to love. “Life” was entirely different than before.

It’s at this point that I sat down with my pastor once more. He had some things to say about the church that I took to heart. I had never realized how important the church is to God’s plan for my life and for the world.

“A church is a body of baptized believers—people who have come to Christ and are willing to publically declare it through their baptism and through their open identification with him,” he said. “Jesus said if we deny him, he will deny us,” the pastor emphasized enthusiastically.

I had questions about following him in a local church like ours. “What’s involved?”

The pastor said that a very basic part of a commitment to Christ is to see the church as his "Body." To come to Christ is never divorced from church life, just as the body is never separated from the head of the body. In fact, Christ is called the Head of the Body. Once becoming a member, I was expected to participate in various ways following baptism. He showed me the membership agreement which we sign to remind us of several commitments we make to the church and before all the people in the congregation. I understood that this was designed by our own pastors though other churches may or may not write their own. I read this aloud slowly, asking questions along the way. Scripture passages were attached to help me think it through.

That next Sunday was my turn to share my story and to be immersed in the trough. Everyone was so excited. I shared in the bread and the juice that Sunday, understanding something that the pastor had quoted:

“Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread which we break, we who are many are one body; for we all are partakers of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

But there was more to learn, and I was eager to learn it.

Chapter 6

A WHOLE LIFE

Right off, I was invited to share in the other meetings of the church. I was ready. Sometimes people who come to the church as believers first are invited to participate in these other meetings prior to joining, but an unbeliever like me needs to wait. Now I was ready. To my surprise, not only do all of the members attend on Sundays, without exception, unless they are ill or out of town or have some other special reason, but the same is true for other important meetings.

That's perfect for me, because, after all, I gave my entire life to Christ. My time and my strength are his.

Here's what I had in store each week:

First, I was invited to the men's mentoring meetings. These are early morning meetings each week prior to the work day. Our group meets at a restaurant where we can order some breakfast along with our Bible study. Right now, we are working through the Gospel of Luke. And we are free to share about our lives and difficulties so that the others can pray for us and offer any advice. The pastor over our congregation leads us. He tells me that he doesn't prepare exactly, but just tries to ask the right questions to get us to observe, explain and apply the passage we are looking at. We usually read the section of Luke a couple of times and then have a probing discussion. I love it already. We also talk about life issues and sometimes a few of us stay behind for more personal discussions.

I also was invited to a Wednesday evening meeting that includes men from all the other congregations in our church. We fill a home with men and one of

the pastors leads us in Bible study for two hours. I can't believe there are such interested men all gathered in one place. I had never seen this before, so I have been amazed from the start. I get to hear from the other pastors, who are my pastors also. In other words, they make up the team of pastors who oversee the entire church, though each has his own congregation. They get to know me in these meetings, and I get to know them and all the others. We do this for six weeks, and then the women meet for six weeks. The youth join with us, or have their own meetings during these Wednesday evenings.

I understand that we will have retreats every year and other meetings from time to time. I found out that every six weeks, all the home congregations come together on Sunday for a large meeting in a rented space instead of meeting in the homes. During that time the elders prayerfully come prepared. Three or four of them get up to speak as they are led by God. And, as is usual for our church,

we eat again. I've also been told that occasionally a couple of congregations might join together for their normal Sunday meetings, just to increase relationships.

I understood from the beginning that I was not going to have the luxury of being lazy in this church. I had signed on as a true part of the Body, so the rest of the believers were not going to do well without me being at the meetings of the church. It was no sacrifice to do so, but if it were—I still would do it.

What is there not to like about all this time together? I've loved it so far. And, according to what my friend and others are telling me, that joy never leaves. These relationships become more and more important as life goes on.

But, I had never been to the larger gathering coming up the following week after I had become a member. What was this going to be like?

Chapter 7

MORE GOING ON

I could hardly believe the energy in the room when we met all the congregations together. We packed out our rented meeting place with the people from the whole church. Our church has congregations across the north side of the city. I saw that the people really loved getting the whole church together every six or eight weeks, to renew friendships and to hear from other pastors and leaders.

In this meeting, all those who play instruments help us sing. The music is much fuller in this large meeting, as you would expect. Our church doesn't make too much out of music. Nobody comes to our

church just for “the music,” like they do sometimes in other churches. But, for me, the sound of people singing enthusiastically is really worshipful and helpful to me as a Christian. When I visited with one of the pastors I had just met following our meeting, he told me that though music is important, it doesn't have the place in the New Testament that some churches give it. Actually there are only a few verses about music within the church meetings. The important thing, he said, was to sing the word, or the truth of Christ.

What is surprising me weekly is that so much else goes on in the church that you don't know about until you are involved more fully. People are always getting together to read the Bible, to help each other with projects, to carry out some ministry, or just to enjoy each other. Last week I helped one of the men improve the water runoff situation around his home. And, some of the men close to where I live got together spontaneously at the coffee shop just

to talk. At that gathering I found out what drives this kind of thing.

It turns out that the elders try very hard not to dictate everything that goes on in the church. It's part of the philosophy to encourage all kinds of gatherings or ministries or evangelism without the need to get approval. Sure, the elders would talk to groups if they met for sinful reasons, but the people who are members have demonstrated that they can be trusted. I like that. Added to all of this is a lot of hospitality. Some people ask other members or guests or acquaintances to come to their apartments or houses very often.

There are other one-off opportunities I've found out about. For instance, men who are interested can go with a couple of the pastors as they lead retreats in other churches in other parts of the country. I'm planning to be involved in one of these soon because I would like to build some deeper relationships with those who go and to see what

other churches are doing that have been informally connected with us.

Well there's more, such as the annual picnic/softball game and the Bee Creek gathering in the fall, which meets at an old tobacco barn and surrounding park. And I've been told about the annual retreats as well. I love the opportunities to know the larger church through all these means.

Chapter 8

GOING DEEPER

Here's what I've found so far: somehow, in this context of meeting in homes and interacting with other congregations that meet in homes in our network, I'm growing as a new Christian way beyond what I expected.

One friend told me that he had looked around a lot for a church here in the city. He had visited some of the interesting and innovative churches, but one contrast drew him in to our church. He found that he could never get close to the pastors in the other churches he visited. They seemed to be good men, and some of them excellent at teaching, but even if there were a number of them working together, he

could rarely if ever sit down with those pastors and build a relationship, discuss issues and experience the pastoral care that he needed. This was God's way of leading him to us. Perhaps that doesn't appeal to everyone, but to him, and to me, it is very important. He said that one Sunday evening he was sitting down with the pastor in the house congregation he is now part of, drinking coffee and conversing deeply as the evening was winding down, when it dawned on him, "I've never been able to do this with any other pastors, yet I do it weekly now." They call these men elders, or overseers or pastors, which means shepherds. That's a good word for them—shepherds. They seem to watch over our souls like one who has to give an account to God. That makes such a difference.

But pastoral care is just one aspect of church life here. I've been learning even more about the significance of thinking about the church as a body. Just like our human bodies are made up of all kinds

of pieces—arms, legs, mouths, hands, and even small intestines—the Body of Christ is made up of many different members. Each one of us has at least one gift to share, a job to do. When I became a Christian, I wasn't simply assigned a seat in the audience to watch a small, elite group perform on stage. No, I was called into a community in which every person is just as important and needed as the rest. How has God gifted me to help the Body grow? That's the question I'll be thinking about as I start my new life in Christ.

I know that our church isn't perfect. There are problems that have to be dealt with as there are in any church. Some members have even been removed for sin issues in their lives in the past. It's not many, but enough to let you know that this group is serious about obeying the Head of the church. They take following Christ seriously. They work on growing spiritually. They expect God to help as we pray for each other. And they want to bring

others into this kind of relationship with Christ that they are enjoying.

Last Saturday, my first friend in the church wanted to meet with me privately. I was happy to do it. He started very humbly to tell me about how he had struggled with a sin in his life and was helped a year ago when another friend in the congregation had confronted him. He wanted to help me also to overcome in this area, and I was willing and wanted the help. I don't think I've ever known a group of people who cared that much to talk about ongoing issues in believer's lives. I must admit, I feel protected by that, cared for, and more courageous about the future.

The pastor of our congregation described our church life in this way: "We are far from perfect, and sometimes embarrassed about how slow we are to listen and obey, but for reasons we attribute to God's grace, he has given us true Christians who want to follow Christ. They certainly stumble, and the new ones are often full of questions, but the

enthusiasm the members have to keep on pursuing spiritual maturity and sacrificial ministry makes the church appealing without the pressure to be clever or constantly innovative.”

And what he said is exactly what I’ve observed and believe.

The preceding material is an informal description of the congregations of Christ Fellowship of Kansas City (www.ChristFellowshipKC.org).