

# VISION AND STRATEGIES OF HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS IN ASIA

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In my humble estimation, the number of Jesus-followers in the house church networks (HCNs) in Asia surpasses the number of members in all the denominational churches in Asia combined today.<sup>1</sup> Although these HCNs are unknown or invisible to many, they are reaping most of the harvest among the unreached people groups (UPGs) more strategically and effectively. It is therefore very important to know what are the vision and strategies that their leaders have as they share Jesus in our various contexts in Asia. I hope this article will help clarify in what they are envisioning to do among the UPGs in our least evangelized continent, so we can work together with them in Asia's harvest.

Generally, the vision of the leaders in Asia's HCNs is similar to that of the "Global House Church Movement."<sup>2</sup> They believe that God has given us a simple yet effective master-plan which Jesus and the New Testament (NT) church used (Jn. 20:21). It is based on a simple doctrine ("priesthood of all believers") and a simple practice ("making disciples") in a simple structure ("HCNs").<sup>3</sup> In joining any "house church," we belong to global Christianity; because when any Christ-follower is baptized in Jesus' name, they automatically join the (invisible) universal Church and become members of every (visible) church in the world. Hence their common slogan: "Don't go to church; be the church!"

They envision that each HC meets weekly in "family devotions," like in the NT where each household (Greek: *oikos*) met with their slaves in their homes (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 5:21-6:4, cf. Dt. 6:4-9). Each HC is a complete church indeed – self-governing (with its own leaders), self-supporting (its own budget), self-propagating (its own mission program) and self-theologizing (its own beliefs & values, based on their reflection on the Bible).<sup>4</sup> Since each HC is a church, they see no need

to attend any other religious (worship or prayer) services. Why? Because the main expression of saving faith is "good works" (community services, not religious services = James 2:14-26; 1 Jn. 4:20-21) that demonstrate their love for God and for their fellows/neighbors locally and globally.

Now, there are five ways in which this vision has been actualized in Asia today: micro-church, simple church, everyday church, covenant community and disciplined nation.

## MICRO- OR MINI-CHURCH

"Honey, we shrunk the church!" That's the experience of those who have left their local church due to disappointment or disgust (the "dones").<sup>5</sup> Though they meet in small groups, many continue to use the liturgy that they used in the Sunday worship services from where they came: opening and closing prayers, singing, teaching of a preacher, collection of tithes and offerings, and even Sunday school for kids. If not taught to keep the group small and simple for rapid multiplication, they would naturally grow into a fellowship and eventually another local church.

The original ones (esp. those in China) and many in restricted areas became HCs mainly due to religious and/or political persecution. Unless taught the "Little Flock" ecclesiology and missiology of Watchman Nee and/or intense persecution persists, the HCs also naturally grew into large fellowships as large as a few thousand congregants, even if they remained unregistered with the government. That's why Asia's HCN leaders prefer that they all transition to the four other ways of being HC as soon as possible.

## SIMPLE CHURCH

Many mission workers have discovered that the best way to plant and multiply churches in "gospel explosion" fashion<sup>6</sup> is to do "Church Planting Movements (CPM)."<sup>7</sup> Churches are usually planted in small sizes naturally, for it is the main (if not the only) way by which rapid multiplication can happen in their mission strategy. Two of the popular approaches

1. On HCNs in Asia, see David Lim, "The House Church Movements in Asia." *Asian Missions Advance* 38 (January 2013), 3-7; and "Asia's House Church Movements Today." *Asian Missions Advance* 52 (July 2016): 7-12, also at <https://www.asiamissions.net/asias-house-church-movements-today/>; and Yalin Xin, "The Role of the Host Families in the Missional Structure of a House Church Movement," *Evangelism and Diakonia in Context*, ed. Rose Dowsett, et al (Oxford: Regnum, 2016), 315-324.

2. Popularized by the title of the book of Rad Zdero (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2004).

3. Sadly we have been trapped in Christendom structures, so that our churches become activity-centered rather than people-oriented. As our churches grow older and add more traditions, it becomes harder for us to practice "basic Christianity" (prayer, Bible study, fellowship and evangelism) in "basic Christian communities" (small groups, called "HCs")! We easily forget that "where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there's the church," and the Church exists on earth mainly in scattered (rather than gathered) mode!

4. Doctrinal purity is nurtured through each HC's Bible reflection (Ac. 17:11), for the Holy Spirit will lead them into all truth (Jn. 16:14). On fear of heresy, see Dave Coles, "Doesn't Rapid

Multiplication Increase the Possibility for Heresy?" in 24:14 – A Testimony to All Peoples, edited by Dave Coles and Stan Parks (2019), and Jeremy Weber, "Christian, What Do You Believe? Probably a Heresy About Jesus, Says Survey," *Christianity Today*, October 16, 2018.

5. The "dones" have left the church, but retained their faith, while the "goners" have left the faith for good, both for various reasons.

6. See <http://btdnetwork.org/rapid-kingdom-advance-how-shall-we-view-it/> for a treatise on their rationale for "rapid multiplication."

7. For more information on the 24:14 Coalition, see [www.2414now.net](http://www.2414now.net).

are “Training for Trainers (T4T)” which equips each convert to disciple five new converts in six sessions, and “Disciple Making Movements (DMM)” which focus on obedience-based discipleship through “Discovery Bible Studies (DBS).”<sup>8</sup>

The HCs of these CPMs usually retain some practices of Christendom traditions, too, like adult baptism (although some allow household baptisms that include infants), regular Lord’s Supper, singing/music, manualized small group meetings, and even regular celebrative gatherings, that may be foreign to the local culture. Since most are in the “church-planting mode,” there is a concern for numbers, usually because these “missionaries” (with or without “tentmaking” platforms) are accountable to their sending or supporting churches. So there has been concern to count and monitor up to the fourth and fifth generation of “discipling downlines.”

This has contributed to the reports of “kingdom movements” (KMs) to reach the UPGs in the world today (centered on the lists made by Joshua Project), usually in English (West-centered) missionary publications. This has helped promote cross-cultural missions (and the HCNs produced by such) among the Western (and Westernized) churches. Yet in their goal-setting, their vision is still to set up a network or association of Christ-followers separate from the religious or secular culture of the people being reached. Through this approach, the uncontextual HCNs have proven to be incapable of winning the entire tribe or community (for people movements), as they almost always become self-marginalizing and self-isolated, especially in restricted contexts (which is usually the case among the unreached).

#### EVERYDAY CHURCH = KINGDOM LIFESTYLE

Therefore all leaders of the major HCNs in Asia have a third understanding of being “everyday church.” In the early 90s, many church-planters who have been working in the “saturation evangelism” strategy of Discipling a Whole Nation (DAWN) were learning from the underground HCNs in China. They soon discovered that their view overlaps with that of Frontier Missiology birthed by Ralph Winter (and USCWM, now Frontier Ventures and William Carey International University) and David Cho.

This has developed into the strategy to simply form HCNs that believe “following Jesus” is not a religion,

8. See David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements, How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (WIGTake Resources, 2004); Steve Smith with Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (WIGTake Resources, 2011); Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, 2012); David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (WIGTake Resources, 2014); Jerry Trousdale & Glenn Sunshine, *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus’ First-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church* (DMM Library, 2018); Trevor Larsen, *Focus on Fruit! Movement Case Studies and Fruitful Practices* ([www.focusonfruit.org](http://www.focusonfruit.org), 2018); Victor John with Dave Coles, *Bhojpur Breakthrough: A Movement that Keeps Multiplying* (WIGTake Resources, 2019); Dave Coles & Stan Parks (eds), *24:14 – A Testimony to All Peoples* (24:14, 2019).

but a lifestyle (Rom. 12:1-2; Col. 3:17). Each disciple views their whole life as worship or offering of love to the Lord (1 Th. 5:17; 1 Cor. 16:14). Each believer’s house is an “everyday church,” and God’s mission is to transform communities through incarnation, infiltration and subversion, so that all buildings in the world will be consecrated for God’s use “from house to house.” HCs multiply naturally through “friendship evangelism” by simply sharing their Christ-centered faith and lifestyle with their neighbors, relatives, and friends – doing direct ministry and witness in their neighborhoods and workplaces. In Asia we call this strategy “Disciple Multiplication Movements (DMuM),” as originally conceived by Dawson Trotman of the Navigators, as well as promoted in today’s online blogs of Victor Choudhrie, Wolfgang Simson and Frank Viola<sup>9</sup>

The main model used by the Philippine Missions Association (PMA) is the formation of “Company 3 (Co3),”<sup>10</sup> where Christ-followers are trained to just make two (local) disciples who will in turn be empowered to make two disciples,<sup>11</sup> in a binary system akin to “network marketing.” Another model is the “Effective Tentmaking Made Simple,” where tentmakers have been sent mainly into China (and later also to anywhere), after being trained to do “friendship evangelism” and “disciple multiplication” (in groups of 2-6) without extracting their converts and disciples to leave their religious (folk Buddhist) practices or atheist (Communist) affiliation.<sup>12</sup> This is similar to the “triplets” vision of India’s main HCN.<sup>13</sup> Where no church exists, HC practitioners would just befriend and disciple a “person of peace” (Lk. 10:4-9), who usually starts an informal group(s) with relatives and friends to discuss how they can love God and love their neighbors. They aspire to convert the entire village by winning the village (or tribal) leaders to Christ. These community leaders will then persuade the religious leaders to worship God in Jesus’ name – thereby transforming the existing religious structures

9. [www.reformation.eu](http://www.reformation.eu); and <https://frankviola.org/2019/01/17/insurgencypodcast/>. Also see the main Philippine HCN’s website: [www.stargrassgroup.com](http://www.stargrassgroup.com), and my website: [www.asdecs.academia.edu/DavidLim](http://www.asdecs.academia.edu/DavidLim).

10. Conceptualized and explained in Robert Claro, *A Higher Purpose for Your Overseas Job* (Makati City: Church Strengthening Ministries, 2003).

11. Filipino IMs developed in some ministries among Roman Catholics in the 1980s, and then among Muslims and “espiritista’s” (spiritists) in the 2000s.

12. Since 2001, my handout “Effective Tentmaking Made Simple,” ed. Ana M. Gamez, *Blessing OFWs to Bless the Nations* (Makati: Church Strengthening Ministry, 2012), 108-111 teaches, “We also emphasize that our strategy is to plant an IM that equips disciples to multiply simple biblical Christianity – contextualized, holistic and transformational ‘indigenous churches’ that are truly replicable: self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-theologizing (cf. 1 Cor.7:17-24). We are planting ‘churches’ that will be copied by future generations of Christians, so we should avoid transplanting denominational churches (= complex Christianity) which are often non-contextual (= foreign-looking), hence have almost always produced marginal Christians who are separated from their communities – despised and rejected by their own family and friends, not because of the Gospel but because of extra-biblical forms and practices.”

13. Victor Choudhrie, *The Church in Your House*. [greettheeklesia@gmail.com](mailto:greettheeklesia@gmail.com).

into multi-purpose buildings for good governance there, without constructing another religious structure in the community. We call this “zero-budget missions” that set up “zero-budget churches,” which follow the contextual “Insider Movement (IM)” approach used in Frontier Missiology.<sup>14</sup> The existing religion will be gradually (sometimes immediately) transformed – rejecting unbiblical (sinful & demonic) beliefs and practices, while retaining biblical ones (1 Tim. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 7:17-24), as a community en masse.

And where churches already exist, HC leaders will seek to bring the pastors and lay leaders together in unity, so they can partner together to influence the leaders in their village or town/city to serve the needs of the poor. Hopefully all Christ-followers will be teaching and submitting to one another, learning to work as fellow servant-leaders (usually called “elders”) who share common convictions on the essential doctrines, and allowing (and delighting) in the diversity of views on non-essential ones. HCNs will slowly lessen “celebrations” from weekly to monthly to quarterly, and eventually to just 3 times a year, as was instituted in the Torah (Dt. 16:16): Passover (for Holy Friday and Easter, Christ’s death & resurrection), Tabernacles (for Christmas, Christ’s birth), and Pentecost (for church anniversary, when the first baptism was done in each locality).

## COVENANT COMMUNITY

Yet there is a fourth understanding of HCNs: HCs can show their love for one another through sharing resources together (1 Jn. 3:16-18). They can collect and spend their own funds (so-called “tithes and offerings”), usually for benevolence to address needs as they arise. For mature ones, they can express their communal generosity through managing a “common fund,” like the economic koinonia (“fellowship”/ communion) of the missionary bands of Jesus (Jn. 12:6; 13:29) and Paul (Ac. 20:33-35). Their disciples learned to do likewise, as the first church in Jerusalem with 3,000 new converts practiced koinonia “from house to house” (Ac. 2:42-45; 4:32-37; cf. 2 Cor. 8:14-15).

Historically, many revival movements formed such covenant communities, like the Celtic missions led by St. Patrick that got the British Isles disciplined, and especially the Anabaptist tradition of the Reformation that produced the Moravian, Mennonite, Quaker, Amish and Hutterite communities. These were mostly in rural areas, since they were mostly farmers who chose simple and sharing lifestyles. But these were soon overwhelmed and marginalized by Christendom that naturally has power through their institutional resources and centralized structures. Today some youth movements, like Operation Mobilization (OM) & Youth With A Mission (YWAM) form “apostolic teams” (mobile covenant communities) that try to reach communities holistically, but only a few teams

14. Cf. Harley Talman, and J. J. Travis (eds.). *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2015).

have been able to form self-governing sustainable communities effectively, so that the teams can move from place to place as soon as possible.

Today some HCNs in Asia, esp. those in China, India, South Korea and the Philippines have started to form covenant communities, too.<sup>15</sup> They are organizing social enterprises where 5-10 families can share resources and invest together. In the Philippines, Lausanne Philippines, Stargrass Coalition and Asian School of Development & Cross-cultural Studies are spearheading “Mission 2025” which promotes “Cooperatives as Mission (CAM)” where DMuM is combined with cooperative development in and through their decentralized grassroots structures. They are mentoring HCs to become “savings groups,” which will eventually become “faith-based cooperatives” (or communes). As they save, plan, invest and share profits together, they can become self-sustainable and use their extra funds to multiply covenant communities as widely as possible.

Practically, they seek to form small savings groups of about 10 HCs each that grow into federations of cooperatives in a zero-budget decentralized structure (cf. Ex. 18:21’s leaders of tens, 50’s, 100’s and 1,000’s). Small is beautiful, because it empowers more (if not all) people to become servant-leaders, and the more gifted ones can gradually rise to serve as facilitators and coordinators in local, regional, national and even global levels – from the bottom up (cf. Mk. 10:42-45). Then God’s kingdom shall have come on earth, for there will be no more poor (Isa. 65:21-23; Dt. 15:4; Acts 4:34) and no more corrupt officials (Dt. 17:14-20), and all can become one big family, with one Father in Jesus’ name. It will not be perfect (Judas failed, and Ananias & Sapphira, too), but it will be significant and substantial.

## DISCIPLED NATION

Thus the result gives us the fifth type of HC vision, on a global level, where entire nations (panta ta ethne) become HCNs – for the majority of their citizens had been effectively evangelized and disciplined, and their righteous leaders had legislated and implemented economic koinonia as “law of the land,” like the Jubilee laws in the Torah (Lev. 25, Dt. 15) and as envisioned in the prophets (Isa. 65:17-25; Mic. 4:4).<sup>16</sup> This legislation exists today in the form (with various names) of Solidarity Economy, Social Democracy, or Welfare State.

Today, all of the “top 20 nations in the world” enjoy the fruits of the advocacies of past generations of Christ-followers. Most of them are in Europe: foremost may be the Scandinavian countries, esp. Norway (mainly through Hans Nielsen Hauge), United Kingdom (John Knox, John Wesley & William

15. This has become the main discussion of the Asian Society of Frontier Missions, which has been meeting annually since 2009-2019.

16. Note that people still die, get married and bear children in this scenario.

Wilberforce) and her former colonies (Canada, Australia and New Zealand), Germany, etc. Their values and structures have now been replicated by non-Christian nations in Asia (largely through the influence of individual Christ-followers, too), like Japan (Toyohiko Kagawa), South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Israel (with kibbutzim), and even Communist countries like China (Sun Yat Sen), Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (with village structures called “communes,” like Switzerland’s cantons).

What all of the secularized (formerly majority Christian) nations just need are revivals, which actually have always been simply a return to HCNs, where God is part of ordinary conversations. What the non-Christian countries (which enjoy cooperativized and humanitarian benefits) need is just simple DMuMs, too. They all need to understand and believe that the roots (or foundation) of the fruits/blessings of peace/shalom that they now take for granted are based in the Judeo-Christian worldview that everything good comes from the Creator-God who loves all, especially those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6; Jn. 3:16), and has revealed Himself in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (1 Tim. 2:3-5).

## CONCLUSION

All leaders in Asia’s HCNs welcome all these five outworkings of the HC vision. But obviously they prefer the third, fourth and fifth types, for these three are the most effective ways for the Church to sustain revivals and maintain the multiplication model for world evangelization and transformation. May we

all attain the conviction that the HC vision is the way forward, not just as the “factory reset” of the “better normal” triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but mainly as the “default mode” of the “first/original normal” that God designed to actualize His redemption plan for fallen humanity and creation to be reconciled to Himself through the cross of the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. “Father, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” – not perfectly but essentially – by Thy people in and through the exponential replication and sustainable forms of HCNs until every family on earth will be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:1-3)!



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