

House church folks share a meal together in our kitchen.



# CHURCH AND HOME

# House Church | BY SOMER GEORGE



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**O**n Sabbath morning I'm up early, baking oatmeal, straightening couch pillows, lighting candles. I haven't always looked forward to church, but now it anchors my week. I know that at 11:00, the door will open and the church will pour into our home, bringing food and laughter and maybe some tears. And while I might feel some stress about the crumbs on the floor or the well-worn furniture, I know that once the people come, my mind will be filled with things far more important.

The first to arrive are three young women, ages seventeen to twenty-three. I've known one of them since she was born, connecting off and on over the years. She's had her share of struggles—at home, at church, and most recently in her family's reaction to her having a girlfriend. About a year ago she tentatively began attending our house church, questioning God while des-

perately wanting to find Him. And she stayed, bringing her girlfriend with her.

Her girlfriend grew up in a non-religious home and knew little of Jesus, the Bible, or the ideas that we so often talk of. With her caring and open heart, especially for our children, we all fell a little bit in love with her. And she stayed, bringing her younger sister with her.

Her sister, a senior in high school, showed up: curious, bold, and full of life. She came that first time, that forty-five-minute drive to be here, and then again the next week and the next. She had found a home. And she stayed.

A young couple arrives, carrying a griddle and pancake mix. They had begun feeling disillusioned with church and often found other ways to fill their Sabbaths. Yet they longed for a community, a safe place to explore and to share and to grow. After visiting off and on for several months, they decided to make this their church,

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and then began to open up their own home for our gatherings. And they stayed.

The door opens again. It's my brother and his children. He is one of the co-leaders, skilled in leading music, or Bible studies, or children's stories, or just about anything else our untraditional congregation requires. He and his wife usually host our church at their home. Their quiet calming presence and welcoming home has enveloped us again and again. Another couple, also core

members. People sit on couches, chairs, pillows, and stools. It is far from polished, but certainly feels sincere. Guitars are passed around. Someone plays the piano. We even have a ukulele and a bongo drum.

Every week, one of the young women requests the song "Oceans." And the words are our prayer, my prayer: *"Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders, let me walk upon the waters, wherever You would call me. Take me deeper than my feet could ever*



**A typical Sabbath at house church. Sometimes the grownups are out-numbered by kids! We all enjoy singing together.**



**Somer's mom and a close friend practice foot washing at the river during a network gathering.**

members from the beginning, burst in the door, kids in tow. She has provided inspiration and depth both to our activities and our conversations, encouraging us to find a real God in the everyday moments of life. He brings a quiet observance, with bursts of enthusiasm and insight about God, as well as his skill on the ukulele.

Those staying in our home wander upstairs: my in-laws visiting for a week, and our adopted daughter and her husband and kids who have moved here to start a new life after years of drug addiction. Being part of house church has become part of their begin-again life. My mom comes today also. Her grandchildren run to her, vying for a spot on her lap. And everyone brings food.

Soon the counter is full, and someone is flipping pancakes on the griddle while we sit down and begin to sing. It's a mix of songs—old hymns, praise songs, contemporary Christian, children's songs complete with hand

wander. And my faith will be made stronger, in the presence of my Savior." The words wash over us all. And then we laugh as we try to figure out the next part of the song. This happens every week, and yet there is something comfortable and familiar about its imperfection. We are nothing here, if not imperfect.

Finally, we wind down the singing and prayer, aware that we started later than planned and people are getting hungry. Often we spend this early part of the day sharing our weeks and our walks with God, and study the Bible in the afternoon, but our leader for this month (we rotate responsibilities) has decided to mix it up a bit. She has each of the children read some verses from Matthew, and asks them questions about it. It is intended as a story for the children, but the adults can't help but jump in and discuss it too. There is energy in the room as we read and ponder together. And

though we have to cut the conversation short for the sake of time (and restless kids), we take a few moments to apply it to our lives. We are all left with the awareness that there is much more still to study and understand. Most of us are used to sitting with the complicated—with the questions. We take prayer requests and pray for each other's concerns, thanking God for His presence and for the invitation He extends to us all. And then it is time to eat.

doubts we all needed it to continue, so we pressed on, believing that God was in our midst and leading somewhere.

For years my friends and I had longed for a deeper spiritual experience, similar to one many of us had years before when we worked together at a summer day-camp. We wanted to go deeper with God and one another. We wanted to grow and learn. We were tired of the status quo, hollow traditions, and the cer-



Playing Bible charades. My daughter, Eden, rides the donkey during the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry while others wave branches and shout "Hosanna."

Today is one of our favorites, breakfast foods. There are pancakes and waffles with a wide array of toppings, baked oatmeal, apple crisp, and scrambled eggs. The kitchen and living room space are small, but everyone manages to get their food and find a place to sit or stand. The noise level is high; someone is playing the piano, people are talking, children running in and out. I stop for a moment and just watch. I want to take a picture to capture this. This chaos. This joy. This community. I think back to last week, one of my rare visits to "regular church." While I know that many find what they need there, I am acutely aware that without house church, I don't know where I would be. This is life-giving and full and I am infinitely grateful for it.

That's not to say that it has been easy. This church community did not happen overnight, and there have been times when we all doubted if it would continue. And yet even in our

tainty with which questions were answered and judgements were made.

Some of us started Bible studies and taught Sabbath School. We joined small groups and led song service. We got involved in outreach projects and VBS, but something still seemed to be missing. With young children and busy lives it was hard to maintain something when the heart just wasn't in it. Plus, our world views were shifting; we were questioning things we had always been told, and sometimes it felt that there just wasn't room for that in our churches.

Despite our struggles, we were not ready to leave the church either. Each of us valued the connection we had to the worldwide church and the community that church provided, as well as the many shared values and beliefs. And thus we each struggled with this personal dichotomy.

When the opportunity came for a friend from seminary to come to our area and facilitate a

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house church plant, we were ready to jump in. There were others interested as well. Everyone had their own reasons, but for our group it was twofold—we knew there were so many around us that wouldn't show up to a church building, but were in desperate need of community and a spiritual home; we also wanted that experience for ourselves and our families as well.

After some meetings, discussions, training, and a weekend retreat, four house churches were

enjoyed gathering as a church now and no one wanted to miss out. We were there because we wanted to be, not out of obligation, and for some of us, this was an important change.

In those early months and through the first year, there were many ups and downs. Our group had the advantage of having been friends before and shared similarities in our preferences and styles. Other house churches struggled more to blend personalities and approaches, and while



**We like to get outside whenever possible. Sometimes it is for worship, other times just to spend time with each other and enjoy creation.**

**Parents and children participate together in washing each other's feet.**

born. Each had four to six adult core members who divided responsibilities for hosting, leading, and facilitating the church experience. We began with an "incubation period" where we met once a month, and then twice a month, as we transitioned out of our traditional churches, and into this new way of being church. We met together as a team to talk about how to structure our time together. After several months of preparation, trial and error, and many conversations and prayers, we settled into a tentative routine, which continued to evolve.

Our previous churches were not happy to see us leave, although some individuals seemed to understand the value of this venture. At times we felt that people were looking negatively at us, as if we had "left the church." Yet for some of us this was the very thing that kept us from "leaving" the church.

One thing was clear to us all; we genuinely

new ones were birthed, others decided to return to a traditional church setting.

Our group plugged away. We met outside and inside, in homes and at parks. We tried studying a specific book, or a topic. We focused on the children, and we let them go play. We sang a lot some weeks and hardly at all on others. Occasionally there were interpersonal challenges that had to be worked through, other times we wondered what the point was of all this.

Sometimes there were six of us, other times fifteen or twenty. One member began an outreach to a local low-income apartment complex, and we were energized as we began to meet new people. And we were all tired. Sometimes we missed going to church and sitting in a pew without having to do anything. Other times we felt blessed beyond what we would have imagined and relieved to have a

safe place to share our experiences with one another and grow in our spiritual walk. Sometimes we felt awed with the work that God was doing, and other times felt discouraged that nothing seemed to be happening.

We asked ourselves the hard questions, “Why are we doing this? Are we doing enough? How can we disciple people? How do we get people to come? Do we even want more people to come? Do we need to be more structured? Less

come together and worship. This gathering is often more traditional, with song service, a children’s story and a sermon. Then we share a meal and mingle together with others who are also committed to doing church in a new way, albeit more or less traditional than our own. These meetings each have a flavor of their own, often differing significantly from one month to the next.

Back at our own little gathering this week, we reconvene after lunch, sitting around the



Children and adults share in communion together during a network gathering at a nearby camp.

structured? Are the kids getting what they need? Should we be teaching doctrine or is it OK to just focus on inductive Bible study and discussion?” The questions really were endless, and of course they continue still with new ones arising.

The relationship with the conference and the local church was complicated at the beginning. It began with the local church paying part of the house church pastor’s salary, but eventually it made sense for him to be employed as a third pastor at the local church, with the task of “overseeing” outreach, which includes house churches. We are still members of our local church and are encouraged to pay our tithe there.

We have thus far had a great deal of autonomy and space to make decisions and choices about how we operate. Every other month our house church pastor organizes a Sabbath “network” gathering, where all the house churches (now five, including one Spanish-speaking, and one Eritrean)

living room, waiting for our afternoon time to begin. Our facilitator is sitting on a kitchen chair, in jeans and sweater, several notebooks on her lap. She begins to talk, and we all grow silent. She tells us that she has been thinking this week about the fact that everyone has a story, but that she had begun to feel angry at God because she didn’t like hers very much. It wasn’t a straightforward conversion story like we often hear in church, but instead a twisting, turning, often painful, questioning type of story. A story where God does show up, but not in the way He is expected, and sometimes in ways that feel barely enough.

With courage, and the belief that stories are worth sharing and that we can see God when we look closely enough, she began to speak: a difficult and frightening childhood, a secret escape where God used an unlikely person to save her and her family. A slow, agonizing loss of her sis-

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ter, someone we all knew and loved. Where was God in those last excruciating moments? She wove her story of suffering with a story of redemption. It was in the little moments that God showed up with reminders of his love.

As she spoke of kneeling in front of a wooden cross and being reminded that He too suffered, one of the girls got up and quietly left the room, tears streaming down her face. The story continued, and our brave speaker encouraged each per-

gradually finding God; or He was finding her, and she was overwhelmed by His love and kindness. She offered to share her story sometime, though it might be short.

I found myself thinking, *this is church*. God is here with us in a way that we cannot understand. I find myself wanting to hold on, to grasp it, but if anything, I've learned that God cannot be grasped, not in that way. He can be touched, but the minute we try to hold on to Him, to expect

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**Our first communion together as a house church. Isaac is reading about the first supper from a Bible book.**

son to consider their own story with God. Where did they find God, how did He find them? When was He there, and how? Were there times that He seemed not to be there? What was that like?

People began to share their experiences of encouragements from God, signs of His presence and His personal care. There was a reverence in the room, as if something sacred had just been spoken. People wiped away tears. Someone volunteered to share next week. There was talk of the way that God moves outside of the boxes we try to keep Him in; how we are grateful and sometimes a little scared at how much bigger He is than we are. He is not as contained and simple as we might sometimes wish.

Then on to more laughter and sharing. The one who left was found by her sister and they returned together. Her heart had been touched. She had not known Him before, but she was

something of Him in a particular way, He exceeds that and surprises us.

So in this experiment that we call “church,” we move forward, trusting when we can, doubting at times, but holding on for the ride, not sure where He is taking us, but mostly certain that we want to go. Knowing that He means us no harm, and will most likely take us somewhere uncomfortable and beautiful, and better than any of us could imagine for ourselves. ■

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