

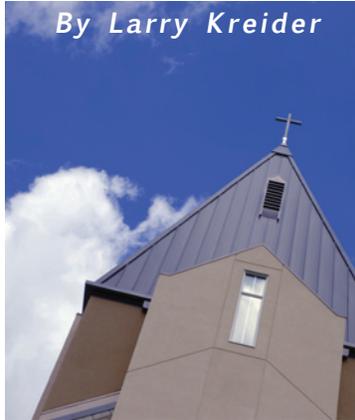
...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

# LutheranRenewal

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## Community Churches, Mega-churches, and House Church Networks

By Larry Kreider



### Community Churches & Mega-churches

The Lord is using diversified types of structures to build His church today. From the traditional church to the emerging house church networks, God's Spirit is being poured out on His people. Our God is a God of infinite creativity and variety; you see it in His creation, from the long-necked graceful giraffe to the multicolored butterfly. You see His variety in the shades of skin color of His people and the multitude of talents and gifts He gives. God has no interest in producing clones when He created our world.

It's my conviction that He continues to bless variety and creativity in His church today by the many different structures and methods He uses to accomplish His purposes. Although I sincerely believe the new house church networks, for example, are tailor-made for today's generation and will be a force in returning to the New Testament model of church life, I also believe God is using today's conventional church structures—what I call the community churches and mega-churches—to play their part in God's future plan. God will build His Kingdom regardless of our models, structure or plans.

Churches that operate within a more traditional setting and those that operate outside traditional structures are needed. It is a big job to equip the saints for ministry and bring the gospel to a lost and dying world. We need everyone to work together, allowing the new and the old to coexist and complement each other.

We will look at three necessary types of healthy churches found in the nations today: the *community churches*, the *mega-churches* and the *house church networks*. Their combined strengths will contribute to bringing about God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven!

### The Community Church

In nearly every community around the world, you can find what I like to call "community churches." Most of these churches meet in a church facility each Sunday morning, in addition to holding various meetings at the church building throughout the week. There are many styles and flavors of community churches. There is the Methodist flavor, the Baptist flavor, the Vineyard flavor, the Assembly of God flavor, the non-denominational flavor, the independent flavor; the list goes on and on. Some are Calvinistic; some are Armenian. Some are Charismatic in their worship expression, while some

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are traditional. Some churches are dispensational in their theology, while others focus on the here and now. Some churches are cell based, and others are not. Some are “seeker-sensitive”—geared for those new to Christianity—while others appeal to the mature Christian with extended times of worship and to the exercising of spiritual gifts. Nearly every Sunday somewhere in the world, I have the privilege of speaking at one of these community churches with their different flavors. I love the many unique expressions of the body of Christ. It would be boring if each expression looked exactly the same!

Although community churches range in size, they all have a clear target they are reaching—the local populace.

### **Community Churches Are Like Community Stores**

The community church reminds me of the local community store. Where do you buy your groceries? You probably shop at a local grocery store in your community. It might be an independent store, or it could be part of a large chain of stores, but it is the store closest in proximity to where you live. You may personally know the clerks, and you know where specific items are shelved.

Some neighborhood stores, like community churches, are larger than others, but they still feel like a community store. This store serves your local area. Very few people in your neighborhood would drive a long distance to get their groceries. Some even walk to a corner grocery store.

Likewise, very few people will drive long distances to worship with other believers who gather each week at their community church facility. Proximity and ease of access are a big part of the very nature of the community church.

### **More Choices: The Mega-church**

Thirty years ago, nearly every church in America was a community church (generally a church of 50-1,000 in attendance). There were very few exceptions. Then something happened. American Christians and pastors started to hear reports about churches in places like Seoul, Korea that were massive.

This new mentality led to a wave of mega-churches mushrooming across America. Many implemented cell groups to help them grow.

Victory Christian Center of Tulsa, Oklahoma, is a mega-church that has had cell groups for 20 years. Their weekly Sunday worship attendance is 7,700 and they are one of the few churches in the world that will break through the 1,000 cell group mark.

Not only did mega-churches spring up in major metropolitan areas, they also appeared on the rural scene. Today, at least in the United States, it is not unusual for people to drive for an hour or more to attend worship services at a mega-church. Mega-churches have much to offer. There are ministries for every member of the family: twelve step programs for those with addictions, Bible schools, concerts, youth ministries, singles’ ministries. You name it, almost anything is available. The mega-church phenomenon has changed the face of the church in America.

Popular Bible teacher and bishop, T.D Jakes, started his mega-church upon relocating his family and 50 other families from West Virginia to Dallas, Texas, to establish a new church called “The Potter’s House.” Within 18 months, it grew to more than 14,000 worshipers! It is one of the nation’s fastest-growing mega-churches. There are about 189 churches with more than 3,000 average weekly attendance nationwide.

**Everyone is different, having varying needs, so it’s not unusual that some people love Wal-Mart while others seldom, if ever, shop there. The same is true when people decide which church to attend.**

If the community churches remind me of the local community store, I like to call the mega-church the “Wal-Mart superstore church.” Wal-Mart has taken our nation by storm. Twenty-five years ago I had never even heard of Wal-Mart since it was only a department store chain in the southern part of our nation. Then it invaded northeastern USA. Now Wal-Mart is everywhere. People will drive for an hour or more to shop at a Wal-Mart because they love the low prices, the huge inventory of consumer products and they can get all they need in one place all at the same time.

Everyone is different, having varying needs, so it’s not unusual that some people love Wal-Mart while

others seldom, if ever, shop there. The same is true when people decide which church to attend. Some love the mega-church while others feel lost in the crowd and prefer the smaller community church.

### **There's a New Church Emerging**

A new species of church is emerging throughout North America. In major cities as well as rural areas, a unique kind of church life is peeking through like the fresh growth of new crops pressing through the surface of the soil.

Hungry for community and relationship, people are learning the values of the kingdom by first-hand participation. They meet in small groups in homes, offices, boardrooms or restaurants. For them, church has become a way of life where discipleship and growth occurs naturally as everyone develops their gifts and “learns by doing” under the mentorship of spiritual fathers and mothers. I like to call this fledgling grassroots phenomenon “house church networks.”

They are called *house churches* because each one functions as a little church. They are *networks* because they work together to foster accountability and encouragement. Although the terminology *house church networks* may sound like a contemporary concept, they are not really new; in fact, house churches are as old as the book of Acts.

### **The Constant Need for New Wineskins**

Although there are already thousands upon thousands of healthy, vibrant churches throughout North America and the world, new wineskins are continually needed to accommodate the believers who do not fit into the current church structures. House church networks, many believe, will help to restore the simplicity of the New Testament church to the contemporary church.

I had the privilege of serving as a senior pastor of a church for fifteen years. In 1980, our new rural church plant in south central Pennsylvania grew from 25 people to over 1,000 within seven years. By 1990, we had grown to over 2,300. It was truly

a miracle of grace. Back then, we thought we had a radical outlook on doing church because we incorporated cell groups as our foundational structure. However, after several years, it became apparent that there was a sense of unrest in our growing church.

“The single most effective way to evangelize is to plant new churches.”  
Dr. Peter Wagner



I especially noticed this with some of the young people. They craved a new type of wineskin that would provide a more contemporary venue in which to get involved. They were saying the same kind of things we had said ten years earlier. “We are looking for something new. We need something that truly meets our needs.” Our ten-year-old wineskin had begun to age—it was past its prime for many of the younger generation. It didn’t take long to conclude that we must find ways to plant new churches (new wineskins) and begin the process of handing over the reins to the next generation. If we didn’t we would lose what we already had. How then could we reach out to our world and reap a harvest? As Dr. Peter Wagner has said so often, “The single most effective way to evangelize is to plant new churches.”

New house churches networking effectively together in our communities will give the opportunity for thousands of new churches to be planted *rapidly* all across the world. Many more new churches are needed to care for the harvest of souls coming into God’s kingdom.

### **House Churches Network and Reproduce Rapidly**

Some call the new wineskin emerging a “New Reformation” because it will radically change the look of *church* as we know it in our communities. This new kind of church meets in homes, where believers gather at least once each week to relate and minister to each other informally. These are actual churches, not just Bible studies or cell groups. They have elders, they collect tithes and offerings, and the leadership is responsible before the Lord for the souls of the people in the house church (Hebrews 13:17). Each “house church,” although a little church in itself, is committed to

**“That all of them may be one, Father,  
just as you are in me and I am in you.  
May they also be in us so that  
the world may believe that you have sent me.”**

John 17:21

network with other house churches in their city or region. This keeps them from pride, exclusiveness and heresy. Many of these house churches also meet together once every month or so for corporate worship and teaching because they recognize the need to be connected. The desire to network comes from a similar desire to receive oversight from spiritual fathers and mothers so they stay accountable.

Additionally, leaders are intent on the rapid reproduction of these house churches. When they outgrow the house or place where they are meeting instead of constructing a church building, they plant a new house church. Sounds a bit like the book of Acts, doesn't it?

I believe that within the next several years, house church networks will mushroom all across America. They will coexist and network with other more traditional community churches and mega-churches of our communities meeting in church buildings every Sunday. Our God will use and bless all three—community churches and the mega-churches and the house church networks.

I previously compared the *community church* to a community store and the mega-church to a Wal-Mart superstore. In describing a house church network, the analogy would be equivalent to the stores in a *shopping mall*. If the average store found in a shopping mall was taken out of the mall and let to stand on its own, it would die within a year. The normal store in a shopping mall needs the others to survive. Each specialized store flourishes together within the cluster of the others. Yet each store is fully a 'store' in its own right, despite being in a mall.

The house churches function like these shopping mall stores. They are individual and specialized, yet they flourish only when they network together with other house churches.

I believe that God is doing an awesome thing in our day. He is restoring the unity He prayed for in John 17:21, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Walls that have divided denominations and churches for centuries are coming down throughout the world at an increasing rate. Pastors in the same town who never knew one another are finding each other and praying together regularly and supporting each other.

### **The Regional church**

Unity like this makes room for the regional church to emerge. What is a regional church? I believe it will be comprised of all types of churches—community churches, mega-churches, and house churches in particular geographical areas. These churches, of many different denominations, will work together to represent the church (the body of Christ) in a region.

I believe that God calls Christians from community churches, mega-churches, and house church networks to serve together as the regional church in every city in every nation. Together, we can reach the world!

This excerpt was taken from the book, *House Church Networks: A Church for a New Generation*, by Larry Kreider; © 2001 by House to House Publications; 11 Toll Gate Road, Lititz, PA USA 17543.

Visit [www.dcfi.org](http://www.dcfi.org) for more articles and resources by Larry Kreider concerning house churches and micro churches.



Larry Kreider currently serves as International Director of DOVE Christian Fellowship International (DCFI), a worldwide network of cell-based churches and micro (house) churches. During the past two decades, he has trained Christian leaders nationally and internationally to make disciples with the small group concept.

He has written several books, including *House to House*, a practical manual for home cell group leaders with spiritual insights for the church of the 21st century, *The Cry for Spiritual Fathers and Mothers*, *House Church Networks; A Church for a New Generation*, *The Biblical Role of Elders for Today's Church* and a new book just released entitled *Hearing God*.

He and his wife LaVerne, have been married 33 years, have four children, three grandchildren and live in Lititz, PA.

# From Renewal to *Missional*

By Paul Anderson

When charismatic renewal came to the church, a culture of renewal grew up around it. This included praying for and exercising gifts of the Spirit, prayer ministry with the laying on of hands, healing prayer, a different kind of worship, more free than the singing of hymns and gospel songs, and a host of renewal conferences and other events. Charismatics found that birds of a feather do flock together—and they flocked. They also saw that renewal changed the way church was done. Lighthouse churches were expected to rise up all over and the institutional church was expected to have a new face.

A history of the church will certainly contain a chapter on the charismatic renewal. Its impact in the Twentieth Century and beyond has been profoundly significant. And yet much of what we expected didn't happen. We hoped that people would "bloom where they were planted." Some died in their desert, while others left by the truckloads for more fertile ground in which to grow. One could argue that the charismatic renewal, as a movement in church history, is over. But, we must also realize that the DNA of the Spirit has been sown as a good seed that will rise up in a new place and in a new form.

And where is Lutheran Renewal moving now? From a renewal culture to a missional culture. A missional culture is one that takes the harvest seriously, that believes that we exist for those who do not yet know Jesus Christ, that we must go to their turf rather than making them come to our turf. In the renewal we took the life of the Spirit seriously, but few of us took the harvest as seriously.

## Comparing the Two

A renewal culture places the gifts primarily in the life of the church. In my experience of prophetic and healing ministry, it operated almost exclusively within the walls of the church. A missional culture sees the gifts as a primary means of evangelism. The book of Acts consistently shows the missional purpose of the spiritual gifts. With few exceptions, the church has missed this purpose.

A renewal culture prays, "Come, Holy Spirit." When the Spirit comes, they stay. A missional culture prays, "Come, Holy Spirit," and when the Spirit comes, they go. Pentecost began as a ten-day prayer meeting, which ended when the Spirit showed up. The Spirit doesn't come simply to upgrade our prayer meetings. God's *Missional Spirit* drives us out from our zones of comfort and familiarity to strategic places of challenge in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and social gatherings. We have not seen the world as a safe place, so we have stayed in our churches and encouraged those in the world to come to us.

A renewal culture intercedes for those in the harvest and prays for revival. A missional culture incarnates the presence of Christ in the world. Often our prayer meetings have been excuses for not going. We send God instead. We reversed the Great Commission!

A renewal culture, consciously or unconsciously, has continued the separation of the sacred and the secular. We have called pastoral ministry sacred, while vocations "out there" are often called secular. A missional culture breaks down the division between the sacred and secular. The kitchen is as sacred a space as the altar rail, and selling shoes is as sacred a calling as full-time ministry.

A renewal culture usually makes Sunday the big event. A missional culture says that Sunday is preparation for Monday. That makes Sunday a training event rather than a high-powered and time-consuming event to plan and execute.

A renewal culture says that we get the Spirit for us—for our healing, our gifts, our growth. A missional culture says that we get the gifts for them—the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive (Isaiah 61).

A renewal culture uses a different scorecard. It tallies up those who are filled with the Spirit, those



healed in their bodies or spirits, those who came forward for prayer, and how much we sensed the Spirit during rousing times of worship. A missional culture tallies up our influence upon the lost, whether the meeting made a difference to them. I say to my shame that I used a renewal scorecard almost exclusively during the eighties and nineties.

Could it be that the renewal will be even more powerful when it exists to accomplish the purpose for which it was given? Isn't it strange, for instance, that we can find very few churches that have a mature expression of the gift of prophecy? That is supposed to be our territory. For all our talk of the gifts, we still haven't come very far. Is it possible that the gifts will develop to their greatest expression when we exercise them outside of the church walls?

Acts 1:8 is pretty clear, and while the apostles wanted to hoard the Spirit to keep Him from going beyond Jerusalem, the Spirit of mission would not be controlled or cornered. He used persecution to send them out of their comfort. Let's face it: the Church is too cozy at church. It has insisted on inviting people to its sanctuaries, a message that

...the  
**Church** is too cozy  
at **church**.

the church was never given. It has confused the world, which has come to believe that the church's message is "go to church" rather than "Jesus is Lord." When the Apostles obeyed the Spirit, however reluctantly, the signs followed and the church expanded. Perhaps the greatest day for charismatic renewal is before us, as the church discovers anew that God is a missionary God, that He sent Himself, and that as we take up the cause, we will discover the power of the gifts that we have only seen in a limited sphere.

Revelation is often positional; that is, we don't receive new revelation until we go to the new place, until we step into the river and see the waters part. If signs follow those who believe, we go expecting the signs, not waiting for the tongues of fire so we can leave the upper room. The Apostles found that "God also testified to it (their message of salvation) by signs, wonders, and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will" (Hebrews 2:4). In this new day, I am convinced that we will discover more of what the power of the Spirit is really all about. Luke connects it with mission, not with

meetings. Or as a colleague has written, "Mission must have pre-eminence over renewal. Only then will renewal bloom into its full expression of authority and power."

So what does a missional church look like? Nate Johnstone, a graduate of our Master's Institute seminary, said that the most effective intersection with pre-Christians for him at college was not at Christian meetings which they had hoped others would come to but seldom did. It was going out for pizza or hanging together after a movie. Some of us didn't know that kind of activity could "count" for witnessing. But Nate discovered that it was the informal events of life that just happened, not the scheduled happenings, where things happened. That means that if we are too scheduled *at* the church, we don't have time to *be* the Church.

**God**

...sent **Himself**...

Michael Frost, who spoke at a Lutheran Renewal conference in September, told

us that they build missional practices into the disciplines they all agree to as a community of faith. All of their members commit to five practices each week. An example is that every week they will eat with three people outside their family unit, one of which will be a non-Christian.

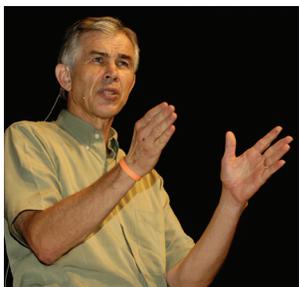
His seminar was one of the most enriching we have sponsored. He gave practical ideas on the call to "Go." Most of us have been led to believe that witnessing involves knocking on the doors of strangers, standing on street corners handing out biblical material, or sharing the gospel with our seatmate on a plane. Unless you are an extreme extrovert, those methods probably intimidate you. So, many of us feel guilty when we hear a message on evangelism. Frost encouraged us to be friends with the lost, praying strategically to know where we are to go. Many in attendance thought, "I can do that! I know how to invite someone over for dinner or for coffee!" (To hear Frost's entire seminar, please use the order form in this newsletter.)

John Paul Jackson, a renewal leader who spoke at our Holy Spirit Conference in 2004, has found that the gift of prophecy can work powerfully outside the doors of the church. And one of the values of a new young adult ministry that Lutheran Renewal has launched in the Twin Cities is that "your destiny is your mission." That means that ministry can happen in the midst of life, and that life is

ministry. Ministry isn't only for those who are up front on a Sunday morning. So when we help a young person discover and pursue his or her purpose, mission can take place in that context, whether in teaching, working at a teen pregnancy center or in an art studio.

Good works in the context of real life, especially life that we are passionate about (our mission, our destiny), prepare people to receive the good words, the Gospel. Or as Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men so they will see your good works and glorify your

Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). In the past, when we have instructed church members on how to serve in the local congregation, hanging out after the movies with not-yet-Christians wasn't on our list. But now it is, and we're beginning to see the difference it makes—in them and in us!



Paul Anderson,  
Director of  
Lutheran Renewal

"Let your light so **shine** before men so they will see your **good works** and **glorify** your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 5:16

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