

**FULFILLING THE GREAT COMMISSION THROUGH THE “HOUSE CHURCH”:
A CASE STUDY OF HOME CELLS OF THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST
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ABSTRACT

The study is an investigation of the effectiveness of the house church as an ecclesiastical model in fulfilling the Great Commission and accelerating church growth, using the home cell system of the largest Christian denomination in Ghana, Church of Pentecost (CoP), as a case study. The house churches in the New Testament played a critical role in the spread of the gospel in the Hellenistic-Roman world in the first two centuries. However, the house churches lost their relevance with the progressive institutionalization of Christianity as a public entity from the time of Constantine. They were suppressed in the Reformation times, but revived in the 20th century through the endeavours of the Church Growth Movement. With a large membership of almost three million, Ghana’s CoP has adopted the house church model by creating thousands of home cells as a supplementary or alternative system of shepherding and growing its global membership. The effectiveness of the system is, however, hampered by shortages of home cell leaders in many of the CoP areas, with some cases being very acute. It indicates a serious weakness in the home cell system that must be remedied.

Key words: *House Church, Church of Pentecost, Home Cells, Great Commission, Church Growth*

INTRODUCTION

The house church was key to the survival and growth of the early church and it has found strong advocates in contemporary church growth movements. The Church of Pentecost (CoP), the single largest Protestant denomination (in the Pentecostal category) in Ghana,² recently re-introduced what it calls home cells in an effort to boost numerical and qualitative growth, although features of the house church have characterized it since its beginnings.³

House church practitioners tend to define the term in accordance with their theological viewpoints. In the context of Acts Chapters 2 and 4, a house church may be defined as a group of Christians meeting regularly in a home for the purposes of carrying out all the essential practices of a church including fellowship, celebration of the Eucharist, prayer and teaching of doctrine. The house church of the early Christians was probably made up of a few families of believers that could fit conveniently into an average house. For larger gatherings to listen to itinerant teachers like Paul and Apollos, public halls were used (Acts 19:9).⁴

The early church grew significantly in the first three centuries of its existence, a period in which

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²J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Accra: Africa Christian Press, 2005), 23.

³Christine Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana* (Chichester, UK: New Wine Press, 1989), 46-47.

⁴During his 3-year stay in Ephesus Paul used the public hall of Tyrannus for didactic purpose. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 247.

purpose-built church buildings were virtually non-existent.⁵ The home was the arena of early Christian activity. Celsus, the arch-critic of the early Christians complained that, “it was in the private houses that the wool workers and cobblers, the laundry workers and the yokels ... did their proselytizing.”⁶ Church buildings followed mainly as an expression of the church’s official acceptance by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, yet it also led to the “legal end of the house church” under Emperor Gratian (375-383).⁷ Although Reformation theology affirmed the indispensability of the house church, Luther himself and state authorities in Europe suppressed it, possibly because of theological disagreements with worship services that were held in church buildings.⁸

John Wesley had significant success with his version of house churches called ‘societies’, which were “small organic fellowships of devoted Christians dedicated to service to one another and to sharing of their faith”.⁹ Church growth advocates seem to agree that an undue preoccupation with the larger church meetings at the expense of the first century style smaller meetings could lead to stagnation and decline in church membership. A return to the house church type meetings has therefore been cited as a factor for the survival of the church in China¹⁰ as well as in the rapid growth of what is now touted as the largest single congregation in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, in Korea.¹¹

In Ghana, the fastest growing charismatic church, Lighthouse Chapel International, operates small group meetings.¹² These developments have prompted the CoP to be more deliberate about the house church idea which has been important in its rapid growth since the 1960s.

The CoP prides itself as a church which grew from a third-world country, Ghana, and now has branches in about 99 countries throughout the world.¹³ It is therefore more of a budding global church than a Ghanaian church. The bulk of its membership is in Ghana, with the rest spread rather thinly across the globe. The beginning of CoP in Ghana bears some semblance to that of the early church as homes were part of the normal places of fellowship and worship.¹⁴ Over the years however, it has been able to establish a visible presence, indicated by church buildings, in almost every town in Ghana. The smaller meetings of members of Church of Pentecost have been labeled ‘home cells’, and could be the answer to the Church’s growth and missions drive questions. The Church is still in the early stages of implementing the home cell system to boost growth on all fronts, but the major challenge is the provision of adequate leadership for the numerous home cells.

With the case study approach, the paper thus seeks to examine the “home cell” system of the Church of Pentecost, highlight aspects that may need improvement, and explore the significance of the house church for contemporary church growth.

⁵Chris Morrison, “Historical Roots of the Modern House Church Movement,” *Thinking Theistically* (December 10, 2011): 2; accessed on June 1, 2017, <https://cmmorrison.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/house-church-roots.pdf>

⁶Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 251.

⁷Morrison, “Historical Roots,” 3.

⁸Morrison, “Historical Roots,” 3.

⁹Morrison, “Historical Roots,” 3.

¹⁰Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China”, *Church History* 74, no 1 (March 2005):passim.

¹¹Roy Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?* (Hants: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984), 150.

¹²Emmanuel L. Nterful, “Church Expansion Through Church Planting in Ghana: A Case Study of the Lighthouse Chapel International Model” (MA Diss., North-West University - South Africa, 2013), 83.

¹³CoP website:<https://thecophq.org/index.php/statistics/> date accessed: 23.04.2019@ 8:13 pm. The growth statistics of CoP for December 2017 indicates the Church currently operates 20,863 local assemblies in 2,253 districts in 99 nations under the leadership of apostles, prophets, evangelists and senior pastors. The membership of the Church worldwide is estimated at about 3 million, with children constituting about 988,086. The CoP can boast of 2,386 ordained ministers and 130,959 unpaid church officers (elders, deacons and deaconesses) at all levels and across the globe. Following a massive growth of CoP in Benin and Cote D’Ivoire, the CoP in those two countries has become two autonomous.

¹⁴Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana*, 46-47.

The Great Commission and the First Century House Church

The term ‘Great Commission’ is the “summary label” of Matthew 28:18-20, coined by a Dutch missionary, Justinian von Welz (1621-88), and popularized some 200 years later by Hudson Taylor.¹⁵ It is the instruction and authorization Jesus gave to His eleven disciples to “make disciples through initiation into the embodied life of God in the church by baptism in the triune name and through teaching what they had learned from Jesus about faithful obedience.”¹⁶ Roy Pointer argues that although the term ‘church’ is not mentioned in Matthew 28, it was clearly implied.¹⁷ To him the Great Commission therefore is the biblical foundation for the existence and form of the church. In other words, “the Commission to ‘make disciples’ is a call for church planting, and the basic mandate for church growth”.¹⁸

The relationship between the Great Commission and the house church is usually traced to the nature of the first century church. Michael Green observed:

One of the most important methods of spreading the gospel in antiquity was by the use of homes. It had positive advantages: the comparatively small numbers involved made real interchange of views and informed discussion among the participants possible; there was no artificial isolation of a preacher from his hearers; ...¹⁹

A major characteristic of the earliest church is that members met in homes for all the major activities that define church, including teaching of doctrine, fellowship, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and evangelism (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35).²⁰ In Jerusalem, they also held larger teaching meetings in the temple complex. Kevin Giles claims that the house church was an essential part of the church planting strategy in Gentile territory. He observes:

Luke, in his account of Paul’s ministry, indicates that his [Paul’s] mission strategy in the Gentile world was to go first to the synagogue and there to argue that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. When he was driven out, he would then begin meeting in the home of one of the new converts with those who had accepted his gospel.²¹

The house church was therefore the crucible for nurturing a new church and the home was also considered suitable enough for carrying out every activity of the church. All spiritual gifts were thus more fully utilized, since women were not barred from having oversight or leading the house church.²² Although, those who started traveling around with the gospel were Jews, used to building synagogues for meetings in the diaspora, as church they did not make it a practice of building places of worship. They would rather meet in homes of members of the church. For larger temporary meetings, they rented public places.²³

The Church Growth Movement and House Churches

House church principles range from those that focus on the strengths of smaller group meetings for some church activities to those that insist that the church is that group of believers which meet at home and nothing else. In this section some benefits of the house church that make church growth practitioners consider them indispensable are examined.

¹⁵ Robbie F. Castleman, “The Great Commission Ecclesiology,” *Themelios*, 32, no 3 (April 2007): 68.

¹⁶ Castleman, “The Great Commission,” 68.

¹⁷ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 27-28.

¹⁸ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 27.

¹⁹ Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 251.

²⁰ See Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 251, 263. The New Testament house churches include Jason’s house at Thessalonica (Acts 17:5); Titus Justus house (‘situated provocatively’ opposite the synagogue) in Corinth (Acts 18:7); Philip’s house at Caesarea which hosted visiting preachers including Paul and his company, and roving charismatics like Agabus (Acts 21:8); Lydia’s house turned to the first house-church in Europe (16:15), and the jailers house in Philippi, which became an evangelistic centre (16:32-40). The house church activities included prayer meetings (12:12), evangelistic Christian fellowship (21:7), Holy Communion services (2:46); planned and impromptu evangelistic gatherings (10:22, 16:32) for teaching (5:42) and follow-up (18:26); all-night meetings for prayer, worship and teaching (Acts 20:7).

²¹ Kevin Giles, “House Churches,” *Priscilla Papers* 24, no 1 (Winter 2010): 6 accessed June 1, 2017.

²² Giles, “House Churches,” 7.

²³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Church* (New York: Scribner, 1859), 127.

Donald McGavran is considered the father of the Church Growth Movement which was launched in the early 1960s to identify factors that make churches grow and to encourage churches to implement them. For him church growth essentially meant “durable church membership growth”.²⁴ According to McGavran, “church growth insists that evangelistic effectiveness be measured by the number of men and women, boys and girls, who become lifetime, responsible, practicing Christians in ongoing congregations.”²⁵ Other definitions which attempt to further analyze church growth into as numerical, conceptual, incarnational and organic categories may have taken a cue from McGavran.²⁶ He focused considerably on starting and sustaining the momentum of numerical church growth in mission areas. The first in three classes of church growth success methods that he presents hints at the indispensability of house church principles. This class of methods focuses on growth in the immediate vicinity of existing congregations, in which, among other things, “members invite their friends to study the Bible in their homes”.²⁷

Watchman Nee, a Chinese churchman is credited with the survival of the church in China during the revolutionary years. His work predates that of McGavran and was essentially aimed at fulfilling what he believed to be the New Testament pattern of the church, rather than church growth *per se*. However, his work eventually led to church growth in China. In his book, *the Normal Christian Church Life*, he argues: “In the New Testament there is only one method and one alone for dividing the Church into churches, and that God-ordained method is division on the basis of locality.”²⁸ Nee does not countenance Christian denominations and describes any church in a particular locality that does not include all the Christians in that area as a sect. He however makes allowance that a local church could be started in a home, and when it grows and a larger meeting place could not be afforded, it should spread out into several homes within the same locality.²⁹

Nee’s type of churches is now called the “little flock”, and as a standard, maintains fellowship in homes. Nee advocates the small church meeting at home because it fosters a warm family atmosphere, rather than the chilling formal atmosphere of church buildings. Members of the house church naturally feel that church interest is their interest; material loss in scraping together the meager means of a nascent church to acquire a building for worship is prevented. Furthermore, it serves as fruitful testimony to neighbors; children are surrounded by spiritual influence from early days; it is good at surviving persecution; and it is the necessary link for starting churches which may progress to add larger meeting places for joint meetings.³⁰

Steve Atkerson, a Baptist pastor-teacher and author, is so convinced about the theological imperative of the house church that he “has transitioned from mega-churches to mid-sized churches to Roman villa sized churches”.³¹ In the editor’s introduction to the book, *House Churches: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural*, Atkerson gives a common sense reason for sticking with the house church: “house churches are cheaper, simpler, smaller or more revolutionary.”³² He further argues:

God intended the typical church to be living room sized. The letters which were written to the various New Testament churches were in fact written to house churches...To attempt to apply

²⁴ Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (New York: Friendship Press, 1970), 16.

²⁵ Letter dated October 10, 1987, in Gary L. McIntosh, “The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran,” *McIntosh Church Growth Network*, March 16, 2015; accessed June 5, 2017, <http://www.churchgrowthnetwork.com/freebies2/2015/3/13/the-life-and-ministry-of-donald-a-mcgavran>

²⁶ Pointer, *How Do Churches Grow?*, 23-31.

²⁷ McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 128.

²⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 54.

²⁹ Nee, *Normal Church Life*, 167.

³⁰ Watchman Nee, *Normal Church Life*, 168-167.

³¹ “Biographies,” New Testament Reformation Fellowship, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://ntrf.org/index.php/about-us>

³² Steve Atkerson, ed., *House Churches: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural* (Atlanta: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2008). His reason is derived from Chris Gonsalves, a Harvard scholar and business expert, who argues that “successful new products offer features that customers value because they are cheaper, simpler, smaller or more convenient to use.”

New Testament church practices to a contemporary large church is just as unnatural as pouring new wine into old wineskins...³³

In the same edited work, Stephen David advances ten reasons for the house church. In the “one another ministry” of the house church, everybody has opportunity to exercise spiritual gifts; members know one another intimately and are better able to hold one another accountable; it is easier to hold the Lord’s supper at every meeting, and everybody brings something to share; the church organization is very simple, since control does not extend beyond the eldership of one congregation; it makes room for bi-vocational leaders, thereby optimizing the church’s leadership resources; it gives unbelievers, who are less likely to walk into recognized church buildings all by themselves, easy access to the gospel in a home; it is well fashioned to survive persecution; members are well-nourished and motivated to start new fellowships as their number increases; discipleship and leadership development are accelerated as all members are always in touch with the more mature leaders; it is best suited for taking care of the poor and sending people into missions as money that would have been used to acquire and maintain expensive places and buildings are saved.³⁴

Holding a similar position as Atkerson is Wolfgang Simpson. In the introduction of his book, *The House Church Book*, he writes:

I posit that over the centuries man has changed or transformed the organization of the scriptural church of Christ as well as the leadership structures of the scriptural church of Christ when it was not needed or intended to be changed by its founder. These changes have shifted the church away from its earlier strengths as well as its early doctrine or writings.³⁵

C. Peter Wagner, who was introduced to the Church Growth Movement by McGavran, reports arriving at the need to stimulate growth through using existing congregations after data obtained from both crusade and saturated evangelism showed no convincing levels of growth after a few years. He sees the key to church growth as what he calls “body evangelism”, which is essentially, vitalizing both the outreach and fellowship life of existing churches to make them capable of reproducing themselves. Wagner suggested the formula for a healthy growing church as: “*Celebration + Congregation + Cell = Church*”.³⁶ The *cell* is a group of 3-12 that provides the personal intimacy function of the church. The *congregation* numbers between 40 and 175 and provides the social function, while the *celebration* of larger than 175 provides the worship function.³⁷

On what causes churches to grow, Christian A Schwarz, a German church growth scholar, mentions “holistic small groups” as one of the eight (8) important factors.³⁸ He contends: “If we were to identify any one principle as the most important, then without doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups. They must be holistic small groups which go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying its message to daily life.”³⁹

Paul Yonggi Cho, Pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church established in 1958 in Seoul, South Korea, successfully operated the home cell system (a variant of the house church) to grow the membership of his church. From some 2,400 members in 1964, the membership skyrocketed to 150,000 in 1980 and 520,000 in 1986, with a projection to 1 million in 1989.⁴⁰ He operated a ‘web of love’ throughout the church with over 20,000 small groups existing in the mid-1980s as “centres of spiritual growth, pastoral care and evangelism”.⁴¹ On the phenomenal growth of his church, Yonggi Cho explains: “Just as the physical body

³³ Atkerson, *House Churches: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural*, Editor’s Introduction.

³⁴ Stephen David, “Ten Reasons for the House Church,” in Steve Atkerson, ed., *House Churches: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural* (Atlanta: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2008), 95-114.

³⁵ Wolfgang Simpson, *The House Church Book*, (Tyndale House, 2009) xiii.

³⁶ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (California: Regal Books, 1987), 134-150.

³⁷ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 150-152. See Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (London: Hodder).

³⁸ Christian Schwartz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2000), 32. See Eric Kofi Adjei, “Effective Principles for Healthy Church Growth in the 21st Century: A Descriptive Measure of Lighthouse Chapel International – Ghana” (MA Diss., Christian Service University College, 2015), 35-39.

³⁹ Schwartz, *Natural Church Development*, 32.

⁴⁰ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 150.

⁴¹ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 150.

grows by the division of cells, so this church body grows by the division of cells.⁴² He declares his confidence in the house church principle in this statement:

It should be obvious, then, that with the cell system I can send a missionary anywhere in the world, and he can start a church. All he has to do is begin looking for needs, loving people and helping them, and very soon he has the nucleus of a home cell group. As each cell begins to divide, he soon has a church!⁴³

What Yonggi Cho identifies as the merits of the house church principle may be summed up as follows: it is the key to evangelism as the active cells in the communities attract new believers who find adequate care in the small groups; it creates a new kind of missionary who is able to meet human needs and follow up with the gospel; it creates a miracle church, that is a church which is sure to multiply itself through setting and achieving conversion and discipleship goals; it facilitates the exercise of authority with love since the leaders are in constant touch with the members, sharing their achievements and challenges in multiplying their cells.

The house church has therefore been considered essential to church survival and growth because it is regarded as a key to durable numerical growth. As a discipleship, fellowship and leadership development tool, the house church offers a natural, informal and caring environment that is essential for meeting personal needs, making even children disciples of Christ, and grooming disciples into leaders under closer family-style supervision. In terms of evangelism, the widespread house church meetings are able to bear testimony to more parts of the same community than the entire church meeting at one place only. Financially, the house church does not attract immediate rental and building costs that could be hindrances to starting churches. Rather, it allows for making savings to fund missions and is itself considered a very dynamic and cost effective way of starting and growing churches in mission areas.

Caution against Uncritical Application of House Church Principles

The rationale for the adoption of the house church principles has been established on Biblical grounds. Some believe that it is the Biblical form of the visible church. Others perceive it as means to an end - for church growth. But there is the need to be cautious on either side. It is doubtful whether the house church is the only intended form of the church. It is apparent from the Bible that “the church can be seen expressed at more than one level: in smaller or in larger fellowships, or even in gatherings like the one in Jerusalem (Acts 15), representing the whole church in order to deal with issues that concern all.”⁴⁴ The greater caution however is for the church growth school. Gaylin van Rheenen while acknowledging McGavran’s sincere call for the use of the social sciences in unlocking the church’s full potential, warns of a possible syncretism and the tendency for the approach to God’s work to become dependent on human strategy rather than the power of God. He warns:

Church Growth thinking begins anthropocentrically. The focus is on strategy development and cultural analysis with biblical passages appropriated to give validity to the perspectives. The Missional movement, on the other hand, begins theologically with the perspectives of the mission and kingdom of God.⁴⁵

However, whilst acknowledging the need for guidance of the Holy Spirit, one cannot ignore the human factor, in terms of knowledge and skills, in growing the church.

⁴²Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 150.

⁴³Paul Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge, 1981), 77.

⁴⁴ Edmund P Clowney, *The Church, Contours of Christian Theology* (Illinois: Intersity Press, 1995), 112. Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 109, have identified three church models in the New Testament: a purely *congregational design* based on the synagogue pattern, the house church design, and the *large attractional church* based on the Jerusalem temple assemblies of believers and unbelievers (Acts 2:46; 5:12).

⁴⁵ Gaylin van Rheenen, “Contrasting Missiological and Church Growth Perspectives,” *Missiology.Org*, January 17, 2011, accessed June 2, 2017, <http://www.missiology.org/mr-34-contrasting-missional-and-church-growth-perspectives>

The Home Cell System of the Church of Pentecost

The Church of Pentecost (CoP) is without doubt the single largest Pentecostal Church in Ghana.⁴⁶ CoP identifies with the classical Pentecostal tradition, but as Asamoah-Gyadu observes: “CoP has acquired a unique indigenous character marking it out as different in outlook from, say, the Assemblies of God, whose American imprint ... is still quite obvious.”⁴⁷

The CoP is one of the three ‘Apostolic’ churches that emerged from the indigenous prayer movement initiated in Ghana (then Gold Coast) in 1917 by Apostle Peter N. Anim (1890-1984), and his short-lived collaboration with James and Sophia McKeown, missionaries of the Bradford (UK)-based Apostolic Church. Disagreements over faith healing caused Anim to part ways with the McKeowns just two years after their arrival.⁴⁸ The Anim faction was named Christ Apostolic Church. The McKeown faction continued for many years with the UK-based Apostolic Church until disagreements arose between James McKeown and the Apostolic Church over prophecy and directives, culminating in his dismissal from the Apostolic Church in 1952. Three Apostolic Churches thus emerged in Ghana (then Gold Coast): *Christ Apostolic Church* (led by Apostle Anim); *Apostolic Church of Gold Coast* (being the faction that stayed with the UK-based Apostolic Church); and *Gold Coast Apostolic Church* (the secessionist group led by McKeown), renamed the Church of Pentecost (CoP) in 1962 after protracted litigation over the name ‘Apostolic’.⁴⁹

For over 50 years the CoP has grown, expanded and internationalized its mission. As at December 2014 it operated in 91 countries with a total membership of 2,626,902, of which 2,251,109 were in Ghana. Of the rest, 148,087 were in Cote d’Ivoire and Benin, who are now autonomous or independent of the Church’s central Missions Directorate in Accra. The remaining 227,706 were spread out in 88 countries across the globe.⁵⁰ Twenty (20) out of the eighty-eight (88) countries in which the CoP had mission stations by the close of 2014 were selected and evaluated with respect to major challenges faced and home cell activity.⁵¹ The results are as presented in the Table 1.

Table 1: The Membership, Main Challenges and Home Cell Reporting of Some Church of Pentecost Mission Stations outside Ghana⁵²

| Continent / Regional Block | No. of Countries Sampled | Countries with place of worship challenge | Countries with Home Cells | Total Membership of Assemblies | Percentage Ghanaian (%) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Africa | 10 | 7 | 3 | 18,579 | 5.22 |
| Europe | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2,868 | 89.68 |
| South America | 3 | 2 | 1 | 561 | 14.97 |
| Middle East | 1 | 0 | 1 | 160 | 100.00 |
| North America | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4,504 | 89.25 |
| Asia | 1 | 0 | 1 | 320 | 40.63 |
| Total | 20 | 12 | 7 | 26,992 | |

Twelve (12) of the countries sampled reported problems with obtaining, maintaining or paying rent for meeting places as their main challenge. Of the African countries, Central African Republic and DR Congo

⁴⁶For an extensive account of the genesis of the Church of Pentecost, see E. Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Centre for Charismatic and Pentecostal Studies, 2001).

⁴⁷Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 23.

⁴⁸Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 25.

⁴⁹Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 26.

⁵⁰The Church of Pentecost General Headquarters, *41st General Council Meetings Handbook* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2015), 31-35.

⁵¹The Church of Pentecost International Missions Office, *Mission Reports January –December 2014* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2015).

⁵²CoP, *Mission Reports January –December 2014*.

stated that 77% and 50% respectively of the missions grants received from Accra were spent on places of worship. Congo Brazzaville reported: “five of our temporary church buildings were destroyed and we have turned those assemblies into home cells”. Argentina stated that the reason for the decline in their membership was that “this period we concentrated on the church building.” Difficulties associated with places of worship thus seem to be a drawback against the success of the international missions of the Church. Interestingly, the development of the Church in Ghana was never bogged down by any such concerns, nor was money sent from abroad to facilitate the construction of church buildings.

As at 2014, the mission countries’ reporting did not include a format for reporting on house churches or home cells, but some mentioned them in various contexts in their reports. Of the 20 countries sampled, only seven (7) mentioned any home cell activity. As noted earlier, Congo Brazzaville mentioned home cells as the remedy for their assemblies whose temporary structures were destroyed. For Brazil, the home cells were “very effective for discipleship”, and for Cameroon the home cell was the “main vehicle for opening new assemblies”. In Burundi the home cell system was being implemented on a pilot basis, while China and Dubai had opened eight (8) and three (3) home cells respectively.

It could be concluded from the sample examined that the CoP home cell system has been in experimental stage as a mission tool for a number of reasons. First, the Missions Directorate was not even required to report on it. Second, those engaged in it treated it either as a last resort mission strategy or an untested means of missions.

On the home front in Ghana, the home cell concept has been receiving a strong boost in CoP in recent times. Two ministers of the Church, Rev Dr. Stephen K. Baidoo and Rev. Samuel Gakpetor, have been at the forefront of this move since 2008. Currently, they serve as Chairman and Secretary respectively of the National Discipleship and Leadership Development Committee (NDLDC) which manages the home cells. In their book, *Learn How to Grow Your Church*, they observe that the home cell concept “has been the secret behind the growth of the Church since its inception” and the fact that the founder of the Church, James McKeown, did not introduce Home Cells into the Church officially does not mean that he did not believe in the small group concept.⁵³

In the foreword to the same book, Opoku Onyinah, Chairman of the Church of Pentecost (2008-2018), posits that the primary means of developing a disciple is to help him to observe all that the Lord has commanded us, and “the only way to do this is in the context of a smaller-sized group or one-on-one”.⁵⁴ With this conviction, the Church’s leadership instituted measures to reinvigorate the home cell system. For example, the NDLDC was constituted as a way of further strengthening the relationship between lay leadership development and the home cells. Also, an elaborate home cell and Bible Study reporting system was designed for monitoring purposes.

By December 2014, the Church reported operating 44,200 home cells in Ghana, averaging 762 in each of the 58 administrative areas of the Church in the country.⁵⁵ In an exercise to evaluate their viability, one area from each region of Ghana was selected and their home cell reports examined for what they perceived to be their challenges. The results are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: The Main Challenges Facing Home Cell Operation in the Church of Pentecost⁵⁶

| REGION | AREA | MAIN CHALLENGE | OTHER IMPORTANT CHALLENGE |
|---------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ashanti | Abuakwa | Inadequate cell leaders | |
| Accra | Anyaa Ablekuma | Nil | |
| Volta | Aflao | Lack of cell leaders | Improper places for cell meeting |

⁵³ Stephen K. Baidoo and Samuel Gakpetor, *Learn How to Grow Your Church* (Accra: Journagrafx, 2013), 60.

⁵⁴ Baidoo and Gakpetor, *Grow Your Church*, vii

⁵⁵ Church of Pentecost General Headquarters, *41st General Council Meetings Handbook*, 33.

⁵⁶ The CoP National Discipleship and Leadership Development Committee, “Compilation of 2016 Area Half Year Reports”.

| REGION | AREA | MAIN CHALLENGE | OTHER IMPORTANT CHALLENGE |
|-------------|--------------|--|------------------------------|
| Eastern | Afram Plains | Inadequate cell leaders | |
| Central | Agona Swedru | Inadequate teachers | |
| Western | Asankrangwa | Shortage of literate committed leaders | |
| Brong-Ahafo | Berekum | Shortage of Bible studies teachers/leaders | |
| Upper East | Bolgatanga | Dormancy during rainy season | Migration of trained leaders |
| Northern | Sawla | Migration of cell leaders | |
| Upper West | Wa | Lack of teachers | Lack of cell meeting places |

An overwhelming shortage of leadership was reported as the major challenge facing the home cell system in the Church. Table 3 shows the leaders that are available to the Church for prosecuting the home cell system.

Table 3: Church of Pentecost Home Cells in Selected Areas with their Actual and Potential Officers⁵⁷

| REGION | AREA | ASSEMBLIES | MEMBERS | CELLS | CELL LEADERS | MALE OFFICERS |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Ashanti | Abuakwa | 245 | 35,381 | 907 | 812 | 1,125 |
| Accra | Anyaa Ablekuma | 98 | 18,918 | 377 | 565 | 468 |
| Volta | Aflao | 434 | 45,153 | 1060 | 1,051 | 1,109 |
| Eastern | Afram Plains | 175 | 17,786 | 379 | 320 | 326 |
| Central | Agona Swedru | 236 | 35,115 | 715 | 895 | 936 |
| Western | Asankrangwa | 355 | 46,514 | 1,332 | 1,001 | 1,439 |
| Brong-Ahafo | Berekum | 334 | 52,728 | 1,179 | 1,107 | 1,282 |
| Upper- East | Bolga | 510 | 51,959 | 944 | 835 | 560 |
| Northern | Sawla | 167 | 15,722 | 266 | 309 | 171 |
| Upper- West | Wa | 469 | 11,954 | 796 | 376 | 446 |
| TOTAL | | 3,023 | 331,230 | 7,955 | 7,271 | 7,862 |

Of the 10 selected areas, 70% had deficit in terms of cell leaders. At Abuakwa, of the 907 cells that were existing, there were 812 cell leaders. This indicates a deficit of 95 cell leaders and cell leader to cell ratio of 1.12, which is more than one. The Wa area had the worst situation, with a deficit of 420 cell leaders, a figure higher than the existing number of cell leaders. The cell leader to cell ratio for Wa could be estimated at 2.11. This means that a cell leader, aside catering for his cell in the Wa area would have to cater for another fully established cell and a nascent one.

Other areas such as Berekum in the Brong Ahafo Region, and Bolga in the Upper East Region experienced deficits of 72 and 109 respectively. In all, a total deficit of 641 was recorded across the 10 areas studied, suggesting an average cell leader deficit of 6.84 and a cell leader to cell ratio of 1.1. The deficits and ratios in cell leaders means that cell leaders would have to cater for their own cells plus others.

⁵⁷ The Church of Pentecost General Headquarters, *2015 Executive Summary Reports* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2015).

Without this, some of the cells would not have leaders to themselves. In either situation, the sustainability of the cells could be in doubt. Hence, the need for some lay officers to be assigned additional roles as home cell leaders. For instance, in the Ashanti Region, Abuakwa with 245 Assemblies has as many as 1,125 male officers. This suggests that a potential 95 of these officers could be deployed into cell leadership roles. The same applies to Aflao with as many as 1,109 cell leaders as against 434 Assemblies. Other needy areas such as Wa, Asankragua and Berekum could follow suit.

The Role of Home Cells in the Church of Pentecost

The reasons for the adoption of house church principles by the Church of Pentecost are captured in its sensitization document as: “to combat the inactivity of the Church members and overdependence on pastors and elders to enable the new Christian to come to a place of parenthood and disciple new believers which will in turn promote multiplication of membership and cells.”⁵⁸ Apparently, the clergy and other ordained officers felt overwhelmed by the pastoral care needs of the members and were using the cell system primarily to bring in more lay leaders to participate in the work.⁵⁹ According to Baidoo, the “main purpose was to close the back door of the church,” that is, to strengthen the Church’s capacity to retain members.⁶⁰ This rationale explains why home cell leadership in the Church was largely drawn from the lay membership rather than the ordained officers. The qualification for home cell leaders was spelt out as follows: “being Spirit filled, dedicated, enthusiastic, having good testimony, living like a Christian and having sustainable income.”⁶¹ In an interview the NDLDC Secretary of the Church of Pentecost, Gakpetor, said:

We did not make any deliberate effort to put officers in charge of the home cells. We actually wanted every person who was willing, available and had capacity to lead the cell to be allowed to lead when there was the need. This seems to have allowed the widespread establishment of the home cells.⁶²

Interestingly, the order of priority displayed on the cover of the sensitization document is church growth, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, care and concern, and pastoral care.

Church Growth

The home cells of CoP, as small groups, are potential church growth instruments.⁶³ They facilitate increase in church membership as they grow and divide. It is therefore appropriate that the CoP is strategically revisiting the house church principle in pursuit of church growth. What is needed is nourishment for the cells. It requires mature and gifted persons to lead and resource them. The CoP has an established tradition of carefully appraising the character and gifts of maturing Christians before ordaining them as officers. The Church also operates two major 4-day annual leadership training programmes: the *Leaders’ School* for all officers and potential officers, and the *All Officers Retreats*.⁶⁴ The quality needed for membership growth through cell multiplication would be obtained if such leadership development strategies are deployed to systematically train cell leaders. This may ensure that home cells as house churches are not taken over by unhealthy leaders or false teachers.⁶⁵

An important aspect of church growth is missions, especially outside the country. However, in the deployment of house church principles, there appears to be no definite strategy for CoP mission fields outside Ghana. As Gakpetor observes:

⁵⁸ Johnson Agyemang Baduh, *Get Ready to Start Home Cells* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2012), i.

⁵⁹The Church of Pentecost ordains elders, deacons and deaconesses as unpaid officers. Only the clergy is paid.

⁶⁰ Interview with Dr. S. K. Baidoo, Chairman, National Discipleship and Leadership Development Committee, May 5, 2017.

⁶¹ Agyemang Baduh, *Start Home Cells*, 13-15.

⁶² Rev. Samuel Gakpetor, conversation with Seth Asare Ofei Badu, May 4, 2017.

⁶³ Cf. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994); Steve Atkerson, ed., *House Churches: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural* (Atlanta: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2008); C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (California: Regal Books, 1987), 134-150; Christian Schwartz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2000), 32.

⁶⁴ The Church of Pentecost General Headquarters, *Policy Affirmation* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2017), 4.

⁶⁵ See Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 115.

Organizing Home Cells in the missions' stations is yet to take off fully. Currently, it is the missionaries who have had some training in the concept from the home church (Ghana) that seem to be implementing it. Also the church's branch in the USA regularly receives and adapts our Home Cell materials, and appears to be carrying on with the Home Cells system. We are looking forward to collaborating with the International Missions Directorate to train leaders of our foreign branches in Home Cells development.⁶⁶

A more deliberate effort may have to be made towards incorporating the house church principles in the church's missions' drive. This could release finances to sponsor more missionaries or missionary activities rather than church buildings. Growing churches from house to house allows the new church to gather the critical mass of members needed for continuity before attracting attention with their buildings.

Evangelism

Church growth experts have championed growth through the vitality of the existing churches over mass crusades or saturation evangelism, which are essentially sporadic. Yonggi Cho however indicates that evangelism through the house church principle was likely to take place only if the house churches were properly oriented in that direction with regular growth and multiplication targets and motivation.⁶⁷ For the CoP in Ghana, it has been suggested that Cell members must be able to map out their catchment area, and target families deliberately with prayer and planned visitations and invitations. Once this is done the cells would take responsibility for evangelizing their communities. Real evangelism that results in conversion growth benefits the Kingdom of God, and is more likely to sustain the momentum of church growth than transfer growth which happens by simply attracting other Christians. Roy Pointer reports of house churches in UK, thus:

many... house churches have experienced tremendous numerical growth through the transfer of Christians attracted by their worship and activities. One prominent house church leader has estimated as many as ninety per cent! Tragically these churches often fail to realize that new people are not new converts and consequently neglect their evangelistic responsibilities.⁶⁸

The above observation underscores the need for CoP to ensure that the home cells exercise their evangelistic functions in their local communities to enable them win and grow their converts in the Church. To this end the Church must "encourage prayer for people and circumstances outside the immediate concerns of the group."⁶⁹

Discipleship

Discipleship is the didactic process of helping new converts to grow to become full functioning members of the church. In the CoP this is initiated in the new converts' class and is sustained throughout the members' life in all shades of the church's programmes and activities. To this end also, home cell and Bible study outlines are centrally prepared for weekly small group studies throughout the Church in Ghana. This is intended to ensure uniformity in transmission of doctrine throughout the church, in an environment that facilitates intellectual engagement. Currently, home cell activities are essentially for worship, prayer, Bible study, sharing testimonies, and solving small group problems.⁷⁰ For more effective discipleship, the scope of the home cell activities may have to be expanded and the leadership accordingly strengthened.

Fellowship

The membership of the CoP home cells is pegged at fifteen (15), excluding children. The home cell is thus CoP at the micro level, making Christian fellowship a face-to-face relationship. The house church/home cell, therefore, engenders the perception of the church as a family. It fosters a sense of fellowship which

⁶⁶ Samuel Gakpetor, Conversation with Author, May 4, 2017.

⁶⁷ Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups*, 77-78.

⁶⁸ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 30.

⁶⁹ Pointer, *How do Churches Grow?*, 149.

⁷⁰ Baidoo and Gakpetor, *Grow Your Church*, 85-87.

tends to be missing in congregational churches often seen as institutions. Quarshie has observed that a “sense of anonymity and alienation” often prevails among city dwellers.⁷¹ For many in the Ghanaian cities, “social integration and living an integrated life are giving way to fragmentation: life is no longer easily appreciated as one whole but is fast becoming atomized into its social, professional and religious segments.”⁷² Thus for many city dwellers ‘family’ now is the trade groups, professional bodies or the church. The urban church is expected to be a foster family, creating the African sense of community that makes the church become the ‘family’ that the migrant or city dweller has left behind in the rural area/homeland. In the city house church the African Christian should be able to experience the good old sense of ‘we-feeling’ which is expressed by Mbiti as: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”⁷³ Indeed the church should be a home away from home. This is what the Christian fellowship in the house church could help to facilitate.

Pastoral Care and Concern

The rapid and massive membership growth of CoP has made Pastoral care and concern a critical need. This need for pastoral care in the CoP was articulated as follows:

There is the need to improve on pastoral care: Lukewarm members who are supposed to be encouraged by leaders are seldom visited. The church has lost a lot of members and even continues to lose more. Pastors and officers are therefore to make conscious effort to get close to the members in order to know their condition and help them.⁷⁴

Pastoral care is perceived as the exercise of spiritual oversight by the more mature leaders of the church. This requires mature leadership which involves entrusting cell leadership responsibility to ordained officers. The *Bible Study Outline* adopted for use by the CoP in 2004 specifies that the person who can lead a home cell group must be “One chosen, called by God and recognized by the Church (Acts 13:2-3).”⁷⁵ In the spirit of the Bible passage cited, the recognition by the Church is ordination. Considering the abundance of ordained officer in CoP, it may suffice to make the cell leadership an integral part of the duties of a Church Officer. However, with the myriad of needs in the African situation, leadership of home cells in terms of pastoral care could be democratized. The African ideals of communalism could be creatively harnessed by the CoP to significantly augment the effort of the assigned Church Officer.

CONCLUSION

The house church in the New Testament era aided the spread of the gospel in Palestine and the Mediterranean world in the first two centuries. The rapid multiplication of house churches enabled the early disciples of Jesus Christ to fulfil the Great Commission in their time with the limited resources at their disposal. However, with the Constantinian revolution and attainment of *religio licita* status by Christianity, the Church became well-endowed as a state institution. As great efforts were made by the church to exert public influence, the house church idea was relegated to the background. Even the Reformation did not make any significant difference, despite the numerous practical benefits the house church had engendered. In the 20th century the house church made a come-back through the work of Watchman Nee, Donald McGavran, Paul Yonggi Cho and others.

The adoption of the house church idea in an era of mega-churches may seem out-dated in the 21st century, but on the contrary that is exactly what is needed to ameliorate the inherent deficiencies of mega-churches, enhance qualitative church growth and sustain numerical growth.

The Church of Pentecost with its home base in Ghana has embraced the house church idea, undaunted by the apparent theological and practical challenges. With the multiplicity of growing

⁷¹B.Y. Quarshie, “Mission in African Cities Today: Some Pointers from the Apostle Paul,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 17, no. 1 (June 2014): 39.

⁷²Quarshie, “Mission in African Cities Today,” 39.

⁷³J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108-9.

⁷⁴Church of Pentecost, *Policy Affirmation*, 22.

⁷⁵ Alfred Koduah, *Bible Study Outline* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2004), 3.

congregations, the CoP sees the house church as an effective system of shepherding its global mass of membership, now almost three million. Thus, thousands of home cells have been created out of the CoP in Ghana. The study has revealed leadership shortfalls which need to be addressed through recruitment, training and deployment. The strengthening of the ecclesiastical association or network of home cells with local and district assemblies of CoP would avert possible takeover by unhealthy leaders and false teachers, and also ensure that the leaders of the home cells receive “training, care, and oversight from theologically trained leaders.”⁷⁶ This will go a long way to sustain and consolidate the gains achieved by CoP.

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⁷⁶Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 119.

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