

## There's No Pulpit Like Home (Time Magazine, March 2006)

By Rita Healy & David Van Biema

On a Sunday at their modest, gray ranch house in the Denver suburb of Englewood, Tim and Jeanine Pynes gather with four other Christians for an evening of fellowship, food and faith. Jeanine's spicy rigatoni precedes a yogurt-and-wafer confection by Ann Moore, none of the food violating the group's solemn commitment to Weight Watchers. The participants, who have pooled resources for baby sitting, discuss a planned missionary trip and sing along with a CD by the Christian crossover group Sixpence None the Richer. One of the lyrics, presumably written in Jesus' voice, runs, "I'm here, I'm closer than your breath/ I've



conquered even death." That leads to earnest discussion of a friend's suicide, which flows into an exercise in which each participant brings something to the table--a personal issue, a faith question--and the group offers talk and prayer. Its members read from the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews, observe a mindful silence and share a hymn.



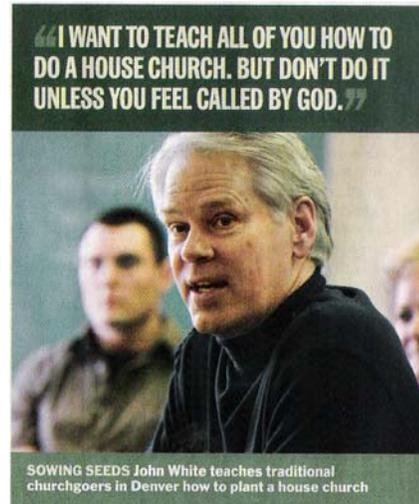
The meeting could be a sidebar gathering of almost any church in the country but for a ceramic vessel of red wine on the dinner table--offered in communion. Because the dinner, it turns out, is no mere Bible study, 12-step meeting or other pendant to Sunday service at a Denver megachurch. It is the service. There is no pastor, choir or sermon--just six believers and Jesus among them, closer than their breath. Or so thinks Jeanine, who two years ago abandoned a large congregation for the burgeoning movement known in evangelical circles as "house churching," "home churching" or "simple church." The week she left, she says, "I cried every day." But the home service flourished, grew to 40 people and then divided into five smaller groups. One participant at the Pyneses' house, a retired pastor named John White, also attends a conventional church, where he gives classes on how to found, or plant, the house variety. "Church," he says, "is not just about a meeting." Jeanine is a passionate convert: "I'd never go back to a traditional church. I love what we're doing."

Since the 1990s, the ascendant mode of conservative American faith has been the megachurch. It gathers thousands, or even tens of thousands, for entertaining if sometimes undemanding services amid family-friendly amenities. It is made possible by hundreds of smaller "cell groups" that meet off-nights and provide a humanly scaled framework for scriptural exploration, spiritual mentoring and emotional support. Now, however, some experts look at groups like Jeanine Pynes'--spreading in parts of Colorado, Southern California, Texas and probably elsewhere--and muse, What if the cell groups decided to lose the mother church?

In the 2005 book *Revolution*, George Barna, Evangelicalism's best-known and perhaps most enthusiastic pollster, named simple church as one of several "mini-movements" vacuuming up "millions of believers [who] have stopped going to [standard] church." In two decades, he wrote,

"only about one-third of the population" will rely on conventional congregations. Not everyone buys Barna's numbers--previous estimates set house churchers at a minuscule 50,000--but some serious players are intrigued.

The Maclellan Foundation, a major Christian funder based in Chattanooga, Tenn., is backing a three-year project to track Colorado house churching. The Southern Baptist Convention, with more standard-church pew sitters than any other Protestant group, has commissioned its own poll and experimented in planting hundreds of its own house churches. Allan Karr, a professor at the Rocky Mountain campus of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary who is involved in the poll, guesses that three out of 10 churches founded today are simple and that their individual odds for survival are better than those of the other seven. House churches are not known for denominational loyalty. That doesn't bother Karr, however. "I want the denomination to prevail," he says, "but I have an agenda that supersedes that: the Kingdom of God at large."



House churches claim the oldest organizational pedigree in Christianity: the book of Acts records that after Jesus' death, his Apostles gathered not at the temple but in an "upper room." House churching has always prospered where resources were scarce or Christianity officially discouraged. In the U.S. its last previous bloom was rooted in the bohemian ethos of the California-bred Jesus People movement of the 1970s. Many of those groups were eventually reabsorbed by larger congregations, and the remnants tend to take a hard line. Frank Viola, a 20-year veteran Florida house churcher and author of *Rethinking the Wineskin* and other manuals, talks fondly of pilgrims who doctrinairely abjure pastors, sermons or a physical plant; feel that the "modern institutional church does not reflect the early church"; and "don't believe you are going to see the fullness of Jesus Christ expressed just sitting in a pew listening to one other member of the body of Christ talking for 45 minutes while everyone else is passive."

More recent arrangements can seem more ad hoc. Tim and Susie Grade moved to Denver a year ago. They had attended cell groups subsidiary to Sunday services but were delighted to learn that their new neighbors Tim and Michelle Fox longed for a house church like the ones they had seen overseas. Now they and seven other twenty- and thirtysomethings mix a fairly formal weekly communion with a laid-back laying on of hands, semiconfessional "sharing" and a guitar sing-along. Says Tim: "We have some people who come from regular churches, and were a little disenfranchised. And people who joined because of friendships, and people who are kind of hurting, kind of searching. My age group and younger are seeking spiritual things that they have not found elsewhere."



Critics fret that small, pastorless groups can become doctrinally or even socially unmoored. Thom Rainer, a Southern Baptist who has written extensively on church growth, says, "I have no problem with where a church meets, [but] I do think that there are some house churches that, in their desire to move in different directions, have perhaps moved from biblical accountability." In extreme circumstances home churches dominated by magnetic but unorthodox leaders can shade over the line into cults.

Yet the flexibility of simple churches is a huge plus. They can accommodate the demands of a multi-job worker, convene around the bedside of an ailing member and undertake big

initiatives with dispatch, as in the case of a group in the Northwest that reportedly yearned to do social outreach but found that every member had heavy credit-card debt. An austerity campaign yielded a balance with which to help the true poor.

Indeed, house churching in itself can be an economically beneficial proposition. Golden Gate Seminary's Karr reckons that building and staff consume 75% of a standard church's budget, with little left for good works. House churches can often dedicate up to 90% of their offerings. Karr notes that traditional church is fine "if you like buildings. But I think the reason house churches are becoming more popular is that their resources are going into something more meaningful."

Evangelical boosters find revival everywhere. Barna says he sees house churching and practices like home schooling and workplace ministries as part of a "seminal transition that may be akin to a third spiritual awakening in the U.S." Jeffrey Mahan, academic vice president of Denver's liberal and institutionally oriented Iliff School of Theology, doesn't go that far, but he does think the trend is significant. American participation in formal church has risen and fallen throughout history, he notes, and after a prolonged post-World War II upswell, big-building Christianity may be exhaling again in favor of informal arrangements.

If so, he suggests, "I don't think the denominations need be anxious. They don't have a franchise on religion. The challenge is for people to talk about what constitutes a full and adequate religious life, to be the church together, not in a denominational sense, but in the broadest sense." Or as Jesus put it, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I."