

The Model of the Early Church

The church is nowhere defined in the bible but is described through a variety of different metaphors.

In the New Testament, the pictorial imagery used to describe the church was not structural or organisational but living organisms. Examples of this include a complex body made up of many parts, a family or household, a living temple, a flock of sheep, a vine, an olive tree, and others.

The church was an organic community of people who had encountered Jesus and now lived by His Spirit rather than a man-made construct based on a particular civic structure. The organic nature of the church was (and still is) an extension, or an earthly image, of the triune God.

The life of the church – as partakers of the divine nature - was founded on the perfect community and mutuality of the trinity.

“The ultimate basis for our understanding of the church lies in its relationship to the nature of the triune God Himself” theologian Stanley Getz writes.

Eugene Peterson said, “Trinity is the most comprehensive and integrative framework that we have for understanding and participating in the Christian life.”

The dominant metaphor for the church in the New Testament is that of the family. There are many hundreds of references to the church as “children”, “brothers”, “sisters”, “sons”, “daughters”, “family”, and “household”.

This wasn't merely a theological construct but had its outworking in the life of the believers and their expressions of community. The household was not just the nuclear family, but extended family, and also included all others who lived with, or were regularly involved with, the extended family – including servants, and even slaves.

In the early church, God regularly acted to save the whole household connected with a particular house or family. The household of Cornelius (Acts 10 & 11); the households of Lydia and the jailer (Acts 16); the household of Crispus (Acts 18); the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16). Other households of believers mentioned also suggest that salvation coming to households together was not uncommon e.g. the households of Aristobulus, Narcissus and Onesiphorus.

From the very beginning, the house/household served as the central sphere of church life. In the very early days of the first church, the church met in homes, with some of them also meeting in the temple.

Acts 2:46 “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”.

Acts 5:42 “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah”.

The temple was where the early Christians, as Jews, were used to meeting publicly. However, only a fraction of the church could meet there due to the physical limitations of the available space, and once many of the first believers returned to their home towns or countries – having been in Jerusalem for Passover – the majority of local believers would have been working throughout the day obviously.

There is no mention of using the temple beyond the very early days of the first church, but the use of homes continued and is referenced.

Interestingly, Luke's gospel begins and ends with scenes in the temple (Luke 1:5-23 and 24:50-53), but Acts begins and ends with scenes in houses or accommodation (Acts 1:12-14 and 28:30-31).

This paper looks at the early church, and its organisation, culture and practice – particularly in relation to the household communities which appeared to be the fundamental building block of each local church. While it is not intended to be an academic paper, or an exhaustive study of this subject, the aim is to briefly examine the core elements, and reflect on the way that the early church communities lived life together.

Church community settings

The general consensus among New Testament scholars is that the vast majority of early church gatherings took place in residential dwellings. For example, Peter Lampe, in his book *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* states emphatically that “there was no community-owned real estate in the first two centuries. The worship took place in private dwellings, in the homes of Christians who had room to assemble a house community.”

Similarly, Jürgen Becker, in ‘Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles’ concluded that “the house of antiquity, in the sense of a house as living space and a place for family life, generally became the founding centre of a local church, the locus of gathering for worship, an inn for missionaries and emissaries, a base for going out in mission, and the framework for a new Christian way of life.”

In his book ‘House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity’, Roger Gehring summarized the role of the house church in this way: “The house church served as a building block and building centre of the church at any given location, as a support base for missional outreach, as a gathering place for the Lord’s Supper, as a sanctuary for prayer, as a classroom for catechetical instruction, and as an opportunity to experience and exercise Christian brotherly love.”

As we look at the New Testament letters, we see references to churches based in homes/households. The Greek word used for house/home, ‘oikos’, can refer to a ‘household’ or ‘family’ or ‘clan’ but primarily refers to a ‘house’ or ‘dwelling place’ or ‘living-quarters’.

In Acts 12:12, after Peter was miraculously released from prison, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where he knew some Christians would be gathered for prayer.

In at least four of his letters, Paul indicates that believers met in the homes of individuals who served as hosts and patrons, and probably leaders, of church gatherings.

In 1 Cor 16:19, Paul sends greetings from Aquila and Priscilla, “Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house”.

In Col 4:15, Paul sends greetings “to Nympha and the church in her house”. In Philemon 2, Paul addresses his letter to Philemon “and to the church in your house”. In Rom 16:5 he asks the readers to greet the church in Priscilla and Aquila’s house, and in v23, he sends greetings from Gaius, whose hospitality both Paul and the whole church at Corinth enjoy.

Paul’s mission strategy in the Gentile world appeared to be to go first to the synagogue to preach Jesus as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but once rejected, to begin meeting the new converts in

the home of one of them. An example of this can be found in Acts 17:1–9 where having left the synagogue in Thessalonica, Paul met with his converts in the home of Jason.

Acts 20 tells us that Paul went from home to home, providing instruction for believers. This suggests that the whole church in Ephesus did not currently meet together as a whole, or not often enough for Paul to communicate sufficient teaching to the whole church in one gathering.

Romans 16 provides further support for the concept of multiple household-based communities in each city. Conventional research has traditionally seen three house churches, but Lampe's research presents a case that Paul may have known of seven groups of Christians, maybe eight, by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in late November, 56 A.D.

Even at a cursory glance, Paul greets the church that meets in Aquila and Priscilla's house, and it appears that each of the other names clustered in the greeting is a small network of Christians in Rome. There is nowhere any indication of a central location for the different groups scattered over the city, in fact many commentators believe that Paul's letter to the Romans was to a mix of Jewish based and Greek based communities based in different households and that the letter was aimed at addressing some of the divisions between them – particularly chapters 14 and 15.

While Paul mentions churches that met in people's houses quite often, there is no mention in his letters of churches meeting in any other setting. The only reference to another setting is the use of the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, which was possibly a school hall or similar and available during the middle of the day during the extended midday break. It is speculated that this was used by Paul to train and send out delegates across Asia Minor. Generally, though, there is little evidence that Christian communities were able to rent or buy facilities for financial, socio-religious, or political reasons.

Gehring's research led him to the conclusion that cities with groups of house-based communities included Philippi, Thessalonica; Corinth, Cenchræ, Ephesus, Rome, Colossae, and Laodicea.

Obviously, the size of the house-based groups varied with the capacity of the homes the local Christians lived in. For some, the capacity may have been less than 15 people. Others more wealthy families could probably cope with 20-30 in various rooms, whilst those with courtyards or gardens, would have been able to handle larger numbers. Clearly, the climate facilitated gatherings outside in courtyards and gardens where these were available.

There certainly would have been some wealthier converts as Acts highlights that among the early converts were a number of prominent women from Thessalonica and Berea, some of whom were probably also wealthy, and Lydia at Philippi was a dealer in purple cloth (the fashion of the day). Erastus at Corinth was the city's director of public works. Paul writes to Timothy at Ephesus to instruct those in the church who were rich.

We don't know how large the homes of people like Cornelius, Simon, Gaius, Crispus or Stephanus, Priscilla and Aquila, Philemon, Apphia and Archippus might have been – but we do know that they, and thousands of others like them, were bases for Christians meeting together.

These household communities gathered together when they could, around long working days and weeks – most would have worked six days a week - and slaves would have had to meet together within the household setting of their owner when they could.

These were gospel communities meeting together around four key elements: The Apostles' teaching, partnership (fellowship), breaking of bread, and prayer. The descriptions of community life and

gathering that Paul writes about would therefore have been with this in mind and worked out in this setting.

For the next 300 years these small church communities, meeting in homes, multiplied around the world. “The gathering of Christian believers in private homes (or homes renovated for the purpose of Christian gatherings) continued to be the norm until the early decades of the fourth century when under the tutelage of Constantine, the Christians began erecting the first basilicas” - Bradley Blue in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting— Volume 2*.

Yet, when Paul wrote to the churches, he appeared to write to the whole church across the town or city, which would have been made up of many household communities. In Romans he appears to address the prominent leaders of these groups in the city, or at least the ones he knew personally.

In the references to house-based churches in 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Phil 2, and Rom 16:5, Paul uses the phrase *hē kat’ oikon ekklēsia*. This is often taken to mean that Paul considered each gathering of Christians in someone’s home to be an *ekklēsia*, a church. However, others have argued that *ekklēsia* here refers to all believers in a locality or city and the preposition in the phrase indicates that the members of the church of the locality are distributed into various home-based groups. In other words, each city/locality-wide church is made up of a number of household-based gatherings.

It is quite possible that the Corinthian church was made up of a number of household-based church groups. Certainly, several people appear to have been mentioned to with reference to the church at their house, or as hosting the whole church, or as significant households which suggests that this may have been the case.

In 1 Corinthians 14:23 Paul begins with the phrase “If, therefore, the whole church comes together.” This suggests that at times “the whole church” i.e. all the believers in Corinth met together in one place (these may have been occasions for the whole church to eat and remember Jesus together) and at other times the believers gathered in smaller home-based groups.

Gehring concludes his introductory chapter with his simple, yet defining characteristics of church structure... “A *house church* is a group of Christians that meets in a private home. A *local church* consists of all the Christians that gather at a geographically definable location (e.g., town or city). The terms ‘local church’ and ‘house church’ refer to the same group only if there is just one single house church gathering at that specific location.

It seems likely therefore that all the believers in any given town or city would have met most often in household-based communities and only met all together more occasionally when suitable premises were available.

Church community gatherings

In Acts 2:42 right at the beginning of the church it records that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to partnership (fellowship), to the breaking of bread and to prayer”. It goes on to say that “they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”.

When Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians (3:16) he instructed them to “let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts”.

Writing to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:26) Paul wrote “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation”.

The household community gatherings then were where believers met for prayer, worship, instruction and breaking bread together. In keeping with the concept of community and family, Paul’s expectation and teaching was that these were very interactive times where everyone had a contribution to make and all would be involved with teaching and admonishing each other.

Early church literature, along with Paul’s teaching – particularly Paul’s descriptions and instructions in chapters 11 to 14 of 1 Corinthians - provides a great picture of what these gatherings might have looked like:

1. They met for several hours, perhaps more, ate together, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, worshipped, prayed together and for each other, used the gifts of the Spirit to encourage and build each other up, and instructed one another – all in loving community;
2. The meal was central to the fellowship and household atmosphere of the meeting. It gave them the opportunity to share food with each other, and to foster relational harmony.
3. During the meal, they broke bread and shared wine from the cup to remember Jesus. This was the setting for the Lord’s Supper, rather than a strange interlude in the middle of a formal meeting;
4. In common practice, the meal also became a benefactor meal for the poor, through excess food being taken out into the local community, connecting unbelievers into the heart of the community and their life together;
5. Each person was to consider bringing a contribution to the meeting: teaching or exhortation from the Word, song, hymn, spiritual song, etc; The apostles teaching, passed down orally, or through copies of letters, would be read and/or repeated, and then discussed amongst the group. As was usual for the time, and specifically as Jesus commanded, the early disciples focused on obedience to Jesus and holding each other to account.
6. There was to be order to the time, and everything should be done so that the church may be built up – in other words they were to serve each other, not, as appeared to be the case in Corinth, to demonstrate their own spiritual giftedness.

Eating together was (and still is) a major part of Middle Eastern culture and clearly seems to have been at the centre of early church life. Meeting in homes obviously facilitated this and the pattern from the beginning in the Christian community appears to have been of all the members of the house-based churches bringing food and shared it all together.

Hospitality, eating together, and sharing the Lord’s Supper, was at the heart of day-to-day life and culture and helped to form the identity and relational nature of the community.

Teaching was a key element of these small, simple meetings and most likely took an informal form. Like most teaching in the culture of the time, teaching was probably conversational, discursive and interactive - dialogical as well as didactic – based on the public reading of Scripture. Copies of Paul’s letters themselves would have been delivered and read.

In teaching within the context of an extended meal, the early church was following the Jewish pattern of teaching in the context of sacred meals e.g. the Passover meal or the Essene community meal.

In 1 Corinthians 14:26 we see that teaching should have an 'every member' aspect to it, with each bringing something to contribute: a word of instruction, testimony, song, insight, etc. Teaching was part of body ministry – one-anothering – and Paul's expectation was that each one would have words of instruction or teaching to bring at different times.

In Colossians 3:16 we get a picture of the word of God being communicated, and lived out, through the interaction of the gathered community - "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom".

Paul here highlights teaching and admonishing one another - with the expectation that teaching was not just the communication of truth, but the meditation on it, the discipling based on it, the openness of each person to have their character shaped by it through the input of others in their community. The context was catechetical rather than informational.

Every member participation, however, did not undermine the wider role of gifted teachers both within a city/town-wide context or church or those Paul sent on his behalf, or, of course, Paul himself.

Worship and singing were also important elements of the life of the household communities and, as with all the other elements of Christian household life, were very interactive and communal. Again, 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:15-16, along with the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:19-21, give us a fairly complete picture. Worship was the overflow of the heart, directed towards God.

Study of the phrase "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," used in Colossians and Ephesians, has led scholars to conclude that it is sort of a taxonomy for the role of music in the Early Church assemblies:

Psalms - songs applying all the forms of the Psalms - laments, praise psalms, wisdom, etc.

Hymns - songs composed in response to the Word being preached and taught. The hymns would be learned and passed on and become part of the local church's ever-growing body of songs. These songs were one of the keys to the Word richly dwelling in the lives of the believers – something that John and Charles Wesley picked up on many centuries later.

Spiritual songs - contemporary expressions of songs born out of the life of communities of faith, sung by those communities and rooted in the styles and culture of the day. Some of these would have been spontaneous songs from within their times of gathered worship.

It is very likely that very few household communities had a musician and/or an instrument in their midst and so singing was a cappella. This would have fitted well with the 'every member' and spontaneous aspects of their gatherings – though it is also likely that some elements of the worship times would have been liturgical and credal.

As is clear from Paul's writings, the use of spiritual gifts, for example prophecy or word of knowledge or speaking in tongues, was normal and very much encouraged. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 Paul writes "eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy". Spiritual gifts were for everyone, not only open to everyone, but given to everyone. In 1 Corinthians 12:7 Paul declares, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good".

Spiritual gifts were an indication of the presence of God, and a tangible demonstration of the Holy Spirit's working in and through believers. They were very much a part of the believers call to minister to one another and to submit to one another – to equip and build the church. not to show off their supposed spirituality as the Corinthians appeared to be doing.

Spiritual gifts and ministry were, and are, distributed by the Holy Spirit to ensure that all members of the body were needed – to be dependent upon one another! As with words of instruction, songs, prayers etc the use of spiritual gifts was communal and interactive and everybody could bring contributions when the believers were together. However, though the use of these gifts may often have been in the household gathering but the gifts themselves are clearly not limited to this setting, as the narrative of Acts shows for example.

Corporate prayer was another element of church life that was clearly there from the beginning. Acts 2:42 records that the early church devoted themselves to prayer.

When the Jewish authorities commanded the apostles not to speak or preach about Jesus they responded by going back to the church, who raised their voices together in prayer. After they had prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit.

After Peter was released from prison he made his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where he knew people would be gathered to pray.

Paul regularly encouraged the churches he was writing to, to pray together for him and an open door for the gospel, and to engage with culture and national life in prayer – in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 urging “petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”.

Church community dynamics

Meeting in multiple homes, the church context was very much that of a household or family rather than an organisation – living out in a real way what it meant to be the family and people of God. For some, the church as a family deepened their family bonds as they worshipped and learned together, and the gospel impacted their character and behaviour. For others the church family undoubtedly replaced the family they had been forced to leave having declared their faith in Christ.

According to Acts 2, the early church devoted themselves to ‘fellowship’ (koinonia). This was a central part of what it meant to be a believer in community together with other believers. The word koinonia means to be drawn together in intimate participation and commitment. The word was often used to describe a business partnership or a marriage covenant, and reflected the participants having joint shares in, and common vision for, the partnership or venture being described.

In the church, it referred to being in Christ together, participating together in relationship with Him and with each other. It involved active participation within the Christian community - sharing in spiritual and material blessings - and the outworking of their faith and community in demonstrating the love of Jesus to those around them - sharing the gospel, remembering the poor etc.

This was a joint vision and commitment to giving their lives and their resources for the kingdom of God, in ‘partnership’ together, amongst the communities in which they lived. Luke uses the word similarly to describe the ongoing partnership of the fishermen in different boats who worked together when bringing in the miraculous catch of fish.

Koinonia was the day-to-day responsibility and calling of all believers – loving, serving and discipling one another on mission together, as they obeyed Jesus’ teaching and commission.

In Mathew 28:19 Jesus instructed his disciples “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”.

This is what it meant to follow Jesus – to be his disciple! Jesus’ disciples were the agents of his kingdom, and the work of the kingdom was to make other disciples, who in turn would raise up disciples of their own and so on. Making disciples was a fundamental imperative for the church, and one of the central aspects of being a disciple was to be obedient to Jesus.

In John 14:23 Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me... Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.”

In Jesus day it was not unusual for respected rabbis to have groups of disciples. The Jewish model of discipling was rooted in the concept of the disciple learning from the discipler in close relationship through example and imitation, as well as teaching and learning. A disciple’s goal was to gain the rabbi’s knowledge, but even more importantly, to become like him in character and action.

A disciple would have four key tasks (1) to memorise their teacher’s words; (2) to learn their teacher’s traditions and interpretations; (3) to imitate their teacher’s actions; (4) to raise their own disciples.

We can clearly see all of these being expected of his disciples by Jesus (John 8:31; Mark 7:5-8; Luke 9:1-6; Matthew 28:19-20). The process of discipleship happened within the community of the group – not on a purely, or even mainly, one-to-one basis. This meant that the group all learned the lessons that arose from individual interactions, the process was not ‘personal’, and correction, encouragement and compassion were all expressed in the public group setting. It meant also that the disciples learned from each other, in particular from each other’s successes and failures.

To be a disciple of Jesus meant leaving their former life to become a follower of Jesus - prepared to walk in his footsteps in obedience to him. Baptism was the first step - a burying of the old life and resurrection into the new, a declaration that Jesus was now their master and discipler.

Paul also taught that discipleship was about obedience! Writing to the Romans (6:17), he declared “though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance”. To the Philippians (2:12) he said “my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”.

Discipleship in the early church, was not about organised programs and classes, or just the responsibility of leaders, but rather the day-by-day process of one Christian learning from others – having the Christian life modelled to them, understanding and learning to obey Jesus’ teaching - as they followed Jesus together. It was a community function, based on personal relationship in an intimate context, passing on and demonstrating in practice all that Jesus taught.

To be a true disciple was not just about acquiring knowledge – it was about hearing and doing, accountable to one another to put into practice what they heard, read, and observed. Demonstrating character change, loving and serving one another, making new disciples and so on!

In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul instructs Timothy to entrust Paul’s teachings to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Reliable and qualified meant those who obeyed and put into practice Jesus’ commands! This process was not just the basis of discipleship but the multiplication of disciples and churches in the early church.

Christianity was, and must remain, a disciple-making movement with the expectation of multiplication!

The New Testament highlights that Christian disciples are servants of Jesus – but also of each other. Paul writes to the Galatians (5:13) “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love”. Peter (4:10) wrote “use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace”.

Christian ministry is service. God gives individuals specific gifts and ministries to build up the church – some more public than others – but all are servants and there is no hierarchy of status in God’s family. All are equally servants in the household of God and are equally required to serve one another humbly in love. All are equal.

Biblical servanthood crossed all boundaries – whether of race, culture, class, gender, education, wealth, age etc. The household communities became the public demonstration that God saves people of every ethnicity and culture to be in community together – and that those people are equal within the church. This would have been very counter-cultural, and clearly seen by unbelievers in stark contrast to normal social divisions e.g. Antioch was divided into walled off ethnic areas at some point during the early years of the church!

Although Paul greets and highlights a number of those who worked hard among the churches, and talks about elders, deacons and leadership generally, he clearly expected the exercise of family life, and the partnership in the gospel, to be a whole household affair. He likens the church to a body made up of many parts, where each part is equally important and one part cannot do without another. All parts are responsible for the harmony, love, care, correction and encouragement of all the other parts, and for all parts to be accepting of the harmony, love, care, correction and encouragement of all the other parts (for example Romans 12:10 & 16; Ephesians 4:2).

The New Testament letters talk a lot about how followers of Jesus were expected to behave towards one another – they were to love, to be devoted to, to honour, to live in harmony with, to accept, to instruct, to greet, to agree with, to encourage, to serve, to bear with, to be kind to, to forgive, to speak to, to submit to, to admonish, to spur on, and to be humble with the other members of their Christian community.

These behaviours were an expectation of life in the household communities and developed through ongoing discipleship in the context of that local community. What is clear is that these communities were not just small groups of people who met up a couple of times a week for a meeting – even if that meeting included a meal. They were expected to be a household, a family – with all the love, loyalty, unity, friendship, as well as challenges and frustrations, that being a family entails!

The generous and committed nature of this sort of partnership of “heart and mind” (Acts 4:32), of love and service for one another, was also demonstrated through their practical caring for one another’s needs and well-being.

In Acts 4:34 we read that “God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them”. Acts 6 shows us that from the beginning, caring for the needy within the church was a major part of community life – and the church quickly began exporting that love and care beyond their own community to the people around them.

This was an essential part of Christian faith, replicated across each household community, and would have been compellingly attractive to their unbelieving friends, neighbours, and local communities – especially so as this generosity was powerfully demonstrated to those outside the church.

Church community leadership

As noted earlier, in using larger homes owned by believers, Paul was following a practice well established among Jews. They too frequently used homes for newly formed or smaller synagogues. The host of such a house synagogue was called “the ruler of the synagogue.” His role would have been as the leader of the community, but he would not have led all the meetings or done all the teaching. His main responsibility was to preside when the group met and to encourage wide participation.

In Corinth, one of the early converts was Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8), who may have then become a leader of one of the house churches in Corinth – he was certainly one of the earliest converts and specifically mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1.

It is likely that a household community would have met in the home of its patrons unless circumstances dictated otherwise – for example, the capacity of the property and any outside spaces such as courtyards or gardens.

In at least four of his letters, Paul indicates that believers met in the homes of individuals who served as hosts and patrons of church gatherings. It is likely that Paul identified these people because as hosts or patrons they were known to him, and would also have been prominent across the household communities in that town or city, and therefore known to Paul’s readers.

In 1 Cor 16:19, Paul sends greetings from Aquila and Priscilla, “Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house”. In Col 4:15, Paul sends greetings “to Nympha and the church in her house”, and in Philemon 2, Paul addresses his letter to Philemon “and to the church in your house”.

In Rom 16:5 he asks the readers to greet the church in Priscilla and Aquila’s house, and in v23, he sends greetings from Gaius, whose hospitality both Paul and the whole church at Corinth enjoy. It is also possible that a number of others he identifies in this chapter were also leaders of household communities.

Interestingly, when Paul greets Philemon and his wife Apphia, he greets the church that meets in their house as ‘the church that meets in *your* (singular) house’ – referring to Philemon. However, when Paul greets Aquila and Priscilla – he greets the church as ‘the church that meets in *their* house’. Perhaps Apphia wasn’t a leader, or possibly she was not yet a believer? When Paul greets Nympha and the church that met in her house he only names her.

These references may indicate that the household communities were hosted by one individual – male or female, married or single - or by a couple, or even by several unrelated people.

The fledgling Christian households do not appear to have been particularly hierarchical in their structure and organisation; community life was about all being servants in God’s household – a body of parts of equal value as we have already seen.

However, it seems clear from all the research carried out into the early church that the household patron or couple were often responsible for a level of leadership of the local household community – perhaps similar to that of the synagogue ruler.

What is also clear, is the involvement in leadership and patronage of women, in the household communities in particular, but also in in the local city-wide church, travelling on Paul's behalf, and within Paul's team at different times.

Priscilla, Nympha, Chloe, Julia, Nereus' sister, Phoebe, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Mary (Rome), Lydia, Euodia and Syntyche were clearly known and influential in leadership and patronage in city/town-wide local church settings. The disagreement of the latter two in Philippi having a serious impact on the church.

In a wider context, women served alongside Paul or on his behalf. Euodia and Syntyche seem to have been in this category, Junia certainly appears to have been so, and was attested as an apostle by notable Christian leaders in the first few centuries. Phoebe, of course, is accepted as having been sent by Paul to Rome on his behalf carrying his letter. In this role it is expected that she would have been responsible for reading the letter and answering questions and explaining Paul's meaning, as this was the usual role of someone delegated with this task at the time.

Women were often patrons and benefactors of the churches, and in Phoebe's case, of Paul himself – see Romans 16. This seems to follow on from women being named in Luke 8:3 as the benefactors of Jesus and the disciples.

As well as highlighting in his letters, those hosts/patrons who were known to him, Paul also commended them, and others in leadership type roles, to his readers and regularly highlighted them as people who work hard among them and/or those who assisted Paul directly e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:15 – 16 and Romans 16:12.

Developing leaders, in whatever role, was an important element of church life and was undoubtedly based on Jesus' model of raising up the disciples, and of Paul's interactions with those he raised up. A study of these shows that developing leaders was a matter of discipling, coaching, teaching, challenging, correcting etc, but also of faith, trust, taking risks, delegation and accountability – to say nothing of the work of the Holy Spirit!

This process operated in settings where the leaders and those being developed were sharing life together in a community and mission context – as Jesus brilliantly demonstrated e.g. Mark 6:6-12; 30-56 and John 13:1-17. The family-like dynamic of the household community would thus have been a wonderful context for the foundation of both discipleship and leadership development.

It should also be noted that, within these communities, and indeed within the local church across the city/town, 'full-time' paid leadership would have been rare – the economic realities would have been far more constraining than for most of our predominantly middle-class churches. In addition, the local model of synagogue officials was that were most were unpaid. This background would have helped to keep the theological construct of the body, and the ministry of all to all, at the forefront of practice as well as belief.

As mentioned earlier, the household-based communities were probably linked together across each village/town/city, and Paul's letters are addressed to the 'the church' in that location – encompassing all the household communities there.

The New Testament references two roles within the life of the local church - elders (also called shepherd and overseers) and deacons. These roles would appear to have operated across 'the church' in a town or city, and therefore exercised the modelling of Christian life, oversight, and service across all the household churches within that town/city-wide church.

In ancient Israel the city/town elders' role was to maintain the practice of Old Testament law and the myriad of other laws that were added – to act as leaders among the people, maintainers of custom, judges and guardians of the law - to ensure correct interpretation and practice. An example of this is in Ruth 4.

Elders in the new churches seemed to have a role that operated in a similar way. They were called shepherds and overseers, which summarises their two main functions. The role of a shepherd was to guide their flock to food and water, both of which could be scarce, and water was often only available via a well, and to provide protection for the flock.

Within Roman civic government, the role of an 'overseer' was to govern and manage a colonised city as an appointee of the emperor, and to be responsible to the emperor for the oversight of Roman law and homage to the emperor himself.

The use of the term 'overseer' can be even more clearly understood against a backdrop of the local church as a living organism of multiple and multiplying household communities. They would have engaged in a caring oversight of many households, maintaining overall culture, community and practice across the groups.

The Roman empire of the first century was a very multi-ethnic world and the early church reflected that. Paul set the benchmark for raising up and releasing leaders from many ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, both in the churches and in his team.

The Antioch church is a great example of this – the five individuals noted in Acts 13:1 coming from five different nations, different cultural heritages, and different economic circumstances. The church, and church leadership of all types, reflected God's heart and purpose for all nations, tribes, languages, cultures – rich or poor!

Community on mission

Jesus' command to the disciples was clear – “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19)

This command was at the heart of the New Testament church. Like the command given to Adam and Noah, or the promise given to Abraham – the task for the church was to fill the earth with people who were followers of the one true God. The apostles were to make disciples who obeyed all of Jesus' commands – including, and especially, this one! Every disciple from this point on, therefore, became a disciple who made other disciples, who, in turn, made other disciples, and so on. This was their primary commission.

Although the book of Acts focuses on the ministry of the early church leaders and apostles, particularly that of Paul, the majority of 'mission' was done by and through the 'ordinary' Christians who were saved and then discipled on the foundation of Jesus' call to make other disciples. The account of the spread of the gospel in Antioch (Acts 11) gives us a window on this:

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also,

telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Bradley Blue wrote "The rapid and wide expansion of the Church in the early centuries was due in the first place mainly to the spontaneous activity of individuals.... The Church expanded simply by organizing these little groups as they were converted, handing on to them the organization which she had received from her first founders."

Encountering Christians in the local community was the way that most people heard about Jesus, and encountered Jesus, rather than a believer's gathering being a specific point of public attraction!

Mission was primarily worked out in extended family, servants, friends, in the local streets, the local marketplace, the local businesses and places of work etc by Christians belonging to household communities in that same local area.

Basing mission around specific houses and households would appear to have been a model that Jesus passed on to his disciples. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two in Luke 10:5 he sent them to every town and place he was about to go to. His specific instructions to them were...

"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' **6** If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. **7** Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house".

In his afore-mentioned book, Gehring writes, "In the Palestinian setting the only conceivable person to receive the (peace) greeting would have been the head of the household. He (normally) alone would have been able to accept the greeting and offer an invitation. Only with his permission would the messengers have been able to stay in the house. He alone was able to make a religious decision, a decision that the entire household would customarily embrace. When the head (and his household) accepted the peace greeting and provided hospitality for Jesus' messengers, he proved himself to be a 'person of peace'. The peace of God had already begun to work within his heart and mind."

Gehring also sees a similar strategy in Paul's approach – aiming to reach entire households with the gospel by first reaching the householder - as a key within his overall strategy of going to commercially and politically strategic towns and cities to plant churches that would then multiply out to the towns and villages in the surrounding countryside.

Many of the events that Luke recounts in Acts involve households. God regularly acted to save the whole household connected with a particular house or family. The household of Cornelius (Acts 1 & 11); the households of Lydia and the jailer (Acts 16); the household of Crispus (Acts 18); the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16). They were then often the hub for mission in an area or city.

We can assume that the households served as a source of evangelistic contacts, with its built-in network of relationships reaching far beyond the immediate family to servants, friends, clientele, and business associates. The church was called to be community, but to be scattered communities on mission.

But Paul's strategy was not just limited to planting churches that he himself founded! His strategy can be clearly seen in Acts 19 while based in Ephesus. Paul initially spent a few months winning a number of people to faith, and then discipling them to be true followers and obedient servants of Jesus (vv 1-9). In v10 it records that as a result of this, in a period of just two years, the whole province of Asia, both Jews and non-Jews, heard the gospel!!

The whole of the province of Asia did not come to Ephesus! Some of the Ephesian disciples were clearly trained and sent out across the whole province to make disciples. It is quite possible that this was the focus of the use of the Hall of Tyrannus which may have been available during the middle of the day when all other activity was shut down for several hours.

The multiplication effect meant that the whole of that part of the world heard the gospel in the space of a two-year period and many household churches planted across the region.

Paul made disciples who would go to the next town, the next region and ultimately, to the next nation! It is clear that they didn't need to have been a Christian for years, already be leaders, or had formal training, before they went! Evangelism and church planting are the calling and responsibility of all disciples.

Mission, or evangelism, was not a church program! Neither was the household gathering the 'shop window' or the 'growth engine' of the church. The 'shop window' of the church was the Christians themselves, living life and following Jesus amongst their unbelieving families and local communities, serving those communities, and each other, and establishing their households of faith as counter cultural demonstrations of the power of the love of Jesus.

Remembering the poor

In Galatians 2:10, Paul writes about his meeting with the Jerusalem apostles and notes that the main request from them in relation to his ministry was that "we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along".

This one short comment highlights the importance of the church's role in caring for the poor and needy, both inside and outside the church, right from the beginning. For both the Jerusalem-based apostles, and for Paul, this was something that was central to the message of the gospel, rather than merely a ministry of the church.

This was founded on Jesus' answer to the question of the greatest commandment. While putting God first, and loving God first, was of utmost importance, loving others – even enemies – was like it, and effectively a sub-clause of loving God with all ones, heart, mind, soul and strength! (Matthew 22:39)

Under the old covenant there is an intrinsic connection between the worship of God and the care of the poor. In Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy, he links the practice of bringing the first fruits of the harvest to the temple along with the "tithe for the poor" (26:12-16). Accordingly, the tithe for the poor became part of the sacrificial practice that is the heart of Israelite worship.

That sacrifice and caring for the poor were interrelated is the necessary practice that shaped the people of Israel's understanding that what they gave to the poor was in fact a "loan" to God. Their understanding appeared to be that, even if the one who owed the money might never be able to pay back the loan, the loan will be paid back by God himself.

The obligation to care for the poor, therefore, was understood by Israel as a loan first and foremost given to God. Proverbs 19:17 became a central text shaping the people of Israel's practice of caring for the poor: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full."

To give to the poor was not, therefore, just an act of charity, but part of worship - an encounter with God.

This understanding seems to have directed the practice of outworking the love of Jesus within the life of the household communities in the early church. As noted earlier, the communal meal, a sharing of food brought by each member of the household, was at the heart of household church life, and this meal also became a benefactor meal for the poor, and provided opportunity to ‘remember the poor’ and bring the love of Jesus to those around them.

It became quite common practice for these households to collect more than they needed each week and send it home with their poor or to the poor in the city. In ‘From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries’, Peter Lampe identifies a practice of the early churches by mid 2nd century eventually known as “sending the Eucharist”.

This originally appears to have been the practice of sending food from the communal meal to those who were poor, or unable to be present, but may have also included those in other, perhaps poorer, household communities in the locality, and out to the poor in the local area – in addition to feeding those who came in to the meal itself.

This practice would seem to have eventually evolved into a formal sending of a small piece of bread from the ‘breaking of bread to remember Christ’ to other churches as a sign of unity between them or between the various church hierarchies.

This meant that ‘remembering the poor’ was strongly linked to the local geographical area and community, and that the households were, from the beginning, involved in the lives of those around them – even if this was, at times, a somewhat undercover involvement. It also meant that all the believers were directly involved in this outworking of their faith, both individually, and in partnership with the household as a whole.

Social action and social justice were rooted in individual and household community acts of service and worship. The personal and local aspect of this went hand in hand with communicating the gospel to friends, neighbours, and the local community in which a household community was set.

As the household communities multiplied, their impact across towns and cities increased. There is historical evidence to suggest that the Antioch church exported their care and generosity across the city, providing food and resources, praying for the sick and caring for them. At some point, Antioch was divided into racial sectors, walled off from each other to prevent violence, but the Christians are said to have risked their lives by crossing the walled divides to care for non-Christians and pray for the sick!!

The last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, recognized that the Christian practice of compassion was one cause behind the transformation of the faith from a small movement on the edge of the empire, to cultural ascendancy. Writing to a pagan priest he said:

“when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the [pagan] priests, then I think the impious Galileans [i.e. Christians] observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy... [They] support not only their poor, but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”

Remembering the poor, through social action and social justice, formed a key part of the life and ministry of the household communities of believers within their local area, and ultimately, across the known world.

Conclusion

The New Testament does not set clear formulaic rules for the organisation or operation of local churches. However, despite the many geographical, historical, cultural, social and technological differences between life then and now, the underlying principles of church, and church life, remain unchanged. The concept of church as the household or family of God was an evident theological backdrop, and the outworking of Christian community life in an extended household setting provided natural context for that.

Gehring comments “...scholars have correctly declared 1 Tim 3:15 to be the central ecclesiological passage for all three of the Pastoral Letters...the understanding of the church here goes beyond the metaphorical: the church is characterized, even in its concrete organizational structures, by the perception of itself as a household, with ‘household’ understood in terms of the ancient *oikos*. For the Pastorals the church really is the household or the family of God. Viewed in this way, ‘house or family of God’ becomes the model for responsible behaviour as well as for church order and leadership structures, and thus the central, all-guiding image for the self-understanding and organization of the church.”

Believers were in community together in household-based communities, and these in turn grouped together to form the local church in any given city/town/geographical location. These household communities were the basis for Christian life where teaching, worship, the Lord’s supper, discipleship, friendship, eating together, partnership in the gospel were all expressed and experienced. Household communities being joined together in a town or city, facilitated the sharing of gifts and ministries, wider relational ties, and broader partnership to advance the gospel and serve the poor.

There is evidence that the move away from this model to a focus on larger gatherings and specialist buildings went hand in hand with the church becoming a more central part of the ‘power structure’ of civic life from the 4th century onwards, a process driven by the Roman emperor Constantine. Clearly however, where persecution persisted, from the dominant established church or elsewhere, the household model persisted.

It is the dominant church model in some parts of the world in the 21st century, and this model of church life often goes hand in hand with a focus on mission and discipleship, with the whole church involved in all the central facets of the life and work of the community rather than the organisational structures and siloed ministry specialisms that are usual in the Western church, and church established by Western missionaries.

Fellowship, or partnership, was a central part of what it meant to be a believer in community together with other believers - to be drawn together in intimate participation and commitment - having joint shares in, and common vision for, the partnership of the gospel.

It was a communal commitment to giving their lives and their resources for the kingdom of God, in partnership together, amongst the communities in which they lived. It involved active participation within the Christian household community - sharing in spiritual and material blessings - and the outworking of their faith and community in demonstrating the love of Jesus to those around them - sharing the good news of their message, remembering the poor etc.

Jesus’ commission was to “go and make disciples of all nations”. People on fire for God, not preachers, bands, meetings or worship events, were the ‘shop window’ of the early church. Making new disciples was their priority, and those disciples were drawn into household communities which multiplied across the known world.