

# Missional Small Group: A House Church Model of Mosaikkirche Northwest

Mariel R. Eberhard

## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Mosaikkirche Northwest's house church structure, emphasizing how important it is to strengthen the community's internal rhythms, where small groups nurture and disciple believers, and its outward rhythms, where members share the gospel and their lives. Rooted in the understanding how the early church in Acts could organically share the gospel through the community life. Living together allows members share daily life, live missionally, and offer neighbors a genuine way to experience our community. This strategy looks after members while also making a gospel difference locally.

## THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT IN EUROPE

The house church's concept is modeled after the church in Acts, where believers would gather in each other's homes to share bread and worship together. Throughout history, Christian communities in various countries have used the model of a house church to uphold their faith and commitment to God's kingdom in the face of challenges. The house church movement had also played a significant role in the history of Christianity in Europe.

Persecution from the state church compelled the Dissenters, a Protestant movement in the United Kingdom like the Huguenots in France, to go underground and they met as house churches, calling themselves "The Church in Wilderness."<sup>1</sup> Although they would still meet as a big group, most of their interactions were done in their small group setting. The house church structure helped them to continue exercising their faith amidst the persecution of the state church.

In Germany, Philipp Jakob Spener, known as the father of Pietism in the country, noticed a gap within the church. He believed that implementing a small group model could help strengthen it. Spener encouraged individuals to gather in small groups, which he referred to as *collegia pietatis* (pious gatherings), to discuss sermons or engage in Bible studies. However, the church viewed these gatherings negatively, fearing that these *gemeinschaften* (fellowships) were replacing the church's role.<sup>2</sup>

The house church movement in Europe gained

momentum because believers wanted more than just a typical church service. Wolfgang Simson noted that this growth stemmed from the belief that experiencing Jesus and the Holy Spirit was not limited to traditional church buildings but extended into everyday life.<sup>3</sup> There's no single definition of a house church; different communities have shaped the concept to fit their needs. However, this model emphasizes the intimacy and close relationships among believers, mirroring the communal life described in the book of Acts.

There is a growing desire for Christians in Europe to experience this intimacy with their fellow believers. And as neighborhood becomes more diverse because of the growing population of immigrants moving to big cities, believers are met with different challenges in sharing the gospel. The house church model could address these needs, offering a space for believers to gather, encourage each other, and cast vision for the gospel.

## MISSIONAL SMALL GROUP

In a society like Germany, which is both individualistic and post-Christian, it is common for believers to drift away from their churches after services, or even to question the need for church community altogether. This is why Timothy Keller, in *Center Church*, advocated for building missional small groups. These groups are communities where people share their lives and delve into the Bible on a more personal level. The goal is not just intellectual understanding; it's about learning to live out the Bible's teachings in our everyday lives and within the context of contemporary culture.<sup>4</sup>

My church, Mosaikkirche Northwest, is located in the Nordweststadt, a neighborhood of Frankfurt, Germany. For the past ten years, we have been dedicated to actively engaging with our community. This commitment to neighborhood involvement is a core value, reflected in our house church model with its emphasis on missional small groups. The church planting team prioritized that our house churches not only study the Bible but also connect with their neighbors. They envisioned a community mindful of the Great Commission and its role in God's work within our neighborhood.

Our church is focused in reaching out our neighborhood. Most of our members are living in it. This made it easy for us to gather in each one's

1. Wolfgang Simson, *The House Church Book: Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started* (California: Barna Books, 2009), chap. 2, subtext: More steps into spiritual darkness followed, pa. 9, [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).

2. Simson, *The House Church Book*, chap. 2, subtext: More steps into spiritual darkness followed, pa. 10.

3. Simson, *The House Church Book*, chap. 3, pa.1.

4. Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 262.

home during the week and be part of each one's lives beyond the regular church schedule. We wanted to emphasize alongside the house church structure the concept of missional living. Missional living is not just about building relationships and being friends with our neighbors, but it is also about proclaiming the Gospel in these relationships we have.<sup>5</sup> In the end, evangelism does not only become part of our lives, but it becomes our lifestyle. I want to emphasize here that what we are cultivating is a relational kind of evangelism and discipleship. This is the heartbeat of our community.

It is important for us to nurture a rich and intimate community for the people of our neighborhood. Living in proximity with each other helps us to be more engaged and intentional in reaching our neighbors. In a traditional church model, believers who do not have strong connection with it, can easily just disconnect. But since we are living in the same area and there is a high chance for us to meet when we buy our groceries or walk going to work, we are able to nourish the relationships we have with our church members. It is important for our church planter team to establish a community where an individual identify himself or herself to it.

Jesus had lived with His disciples and shared his life with them. The people in the Bible observed their lives, even criticizing them; yet they organically spread the gospel. Because of this proximity Jesus had with His disciples, He could model to them what it meant to follow God. Just as what is said in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch's book *The Shaping of Things to Come*, our understanding of Christ should inform our mission, and in turns shape our understanding of the church.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany, young Christians seeking discipleship often attend a Discipleship Training School (DTS). These schools are typically away from their home churches; students then live in a dormitory and most of their interactions are done within the confinement of their school. According to one of our church leaders, she had joined this discipleship training. This experience led her to seek for a community like her DTS exposure. She shared that during her DTS, she felt a lack of missional living or the missional aspect of her discipleship training. Since she was living with fellow believers, they do not have a lot of interactions with non-believers, and she saw here how the house church structure and the concept of missional living had come together.

She was interested and decided to move here. It was interesting for her to be part of our church because not only is she surrounded with fellow believers, but she could receive encouragement and motivation from them to share the gospel to her neighbors. Since she is

also living in the same building as her house church, it is easy for them to meet their neighbors together and live out the teaching of the bible in those relationships. She said staying in a Christian bubble is easier, especially in a society like Germany where faith is not usually discussed, and finding a Christian friend who truly lives out the Bible is difficult.

It is important for us to create a place for our members to experience the discipleship they need to grow, not only as good Christians but believers who have missional mindset. We hope to strengthen both the inward and outward rhythms of our church. We hope that like in the bible, our relationships within our community would bring impact to our neighborhood.

## TO CARE AND TO INFLUENCE

One of our church planters had a conversation with Timothy Keller before he died. Keller said that we are living in a different time now. When he started his ministry, going to a church service is still viewed positively by the society. But we currently have a big gap between the Christian community and the people we are reaching out. We need to first invest in connecting this gap and create a space for relationship and trust to be built rather than emphasizing in the larger worship gathering.

Our church usually meets only as a big group for two Sundays in the month and the rest of the Sundays, we meet in our house churches. This kind of rhythm is common among churches who had adapted the house church model. Some even only meet once a month and the rest of the Sundays are dedicated to meeting in their house churches. This helps the churches to invest their time and money in more important things. This takes away the pressure for the church planters to buy or rent a building for the gatherings.

Our pastor said that when they were reflecting about what kind of church they wanted to build, they wanted it to be able to influence and care. They wanted a church that is big enough to make impact in our neighborhood and small enough that they could still care for each other. So, the house church model helped in fulfilling this direction. They wanted that our church would be able to give its members the care and discipleship they need.

Our discipleship happens within our house churches. Leaders in these small groups mentor and walk alongside the members, while our pastor mentors those leaders. Members understand their role in each other's spiritual growth, fostering a culture where the pastor isn't solely responsible for nurturing and evangelism; it's a shared effort. Our church leaders also participate in these house churches and are cared for by their own house church pastors.

The original concept of a house church in Germany is more inward focused. Traditionally, German churches would typically form small groups for their bible studies and prayer meetings. However, the church planting team wanted for these house churches

5. Tim Chester, "Missional Lifestyle", Acts29, February 8, 2018, <https://www.acts29.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/8.-Missional-Lifestyle.pdf>.

6. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), chap. 1, subtext: The Rise of the Missional Church, pa. 4, [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).

to not only be a place for learning about God but a place where each one is challenged and motivated to reach out their neighbors.

Two years ago, we started a disciple-making team (Jünger-macher Team) alongside this structure. The team aims to meet every other week, while the other weeks are dedicated to meeting new people or evangelism. This came out from the idea that as our church developed and grew in the past years, we became more focused on the structure than giving space for people to meet other people and share the gospel. Although these house churches are open to invite people to their gatherings on Sundays or during the week, the weekly meetings became too much for some people and had hindered them from meeting new people.

A common challenge I observe in many churches is how adaptable they are to change. When developing new initiatives or program, it is crucial to keep the church's vision and mission in mind. As a church grows older, it is vital to strengthen both the inward and outward aspect of our community. We must care for our existing members while also reaching out to those who have not yet found faith.

## OUR HOUSE CHURCH

Our church is in a diverse neighborhood. Recent statistics done in our neighborhood shows that 73.2% of the population is comprised of immigrants or people with immigrant backgrounds, and we want our church to reflect this. Since house churches are usually formed based on where people live, it makes it easier for members to meet and connect in their daily lives. We are a German-speaking church because we believe it is the most welcoming approach. Many people in our neighborhood speak their native language first and German second, so we do not expect everyone to have learned English. I believe this differentiate our church from churches that classified themselves as international church and employing English as medium of communication.

My house church is composed of a Uganda-German family, Mexican, Hong Kongese, Filipino German family and another German. When we meet, we do not exclude the kids but allow them to also participate in our meetings. We believe that this would also help the kids to have relationships within the church and acknowledge their role in the community.

When we meet on Sundays, we usually start with a brunch. Everyone would bring food and sometimes we bring something that represents our home country. We would share about our week and just catch up with each other. I think that this is also an important part of our house church meeting because it helps us to know each one's story. Coming from a culture where stories play a vital role in building relationship, I appreciate the trust of each member to share their current situations.

After that, we would usually move in the living

room where we would have praise and worship and then read the Bible together. We read the Bible in English and German translation as some of us, like me, are still learning much of the language. Our house church's pastor is not always the one leading the bible study or hosting the house church meeting. Anyone who wants to can lead and host. Our house church pastor will normally assist the one leading if help is needed.

Following this, we would discuss what we were thankful for that week and ask for any prayer requests. We would pray for the person to our left, closing with the Lord's Prayer. Each member says the Lord's Prayer in their own language. This prayer resonates deeply with me because hearing it in various languages highlights God's ability to unite us, regardless of our backgrounds, in a moment of shared encouragement and motivation. We see a glimpse of the biblical prophecy where people of different tongue will worship God.

During the Sunday service, where all of us are gathered in one place, in the middle of the praise and worship, our worship leader would invite us to pray loudly in each one's language. I believe this also reflect how diverse God's people are and how despite of differences in culture, we are united in Christ's Kingdom. I love this part of our church service, and I always look forward to it.

There are times also during the Sundays, when we gather as a house church, we would invite our neighbors to our meeting. We usually would eat with them and instead of reading the Bible together, we replace it with games with them or just normal conversation about their lives. We want to use that time to build relationships and help them to get to know more about our community.

Aside from Sunday's brunch, our house church plans activities like BBQ grilling, picnics, game nights and instrument lesson during the week with our neighbors. We were able to build trust and deeper relationships with them. We also invite them to join in our special events. I remember when my husband and I got married two years ago, our former house church invited an Indian family to help them learn how to dance a traditional dance because they knew that I was in India for a year. Some of our church members also joined this dance. Up until now, this family still remembers that, and they really felt loved and included in our community.

Since joining my church community and being part of the lives of my neighbors, I realized what it means to truly engage and invest in our relationships. I saw how important it is to know their needs and contextualize what we had learned in the bible. The effectiveness of our ministries does not depend on the tools we use, but in our understanding of our context and the people in our lives.

## CONTEXT AND PEOPLE



I believe that our house church model structure fit our context's need, and I think that it allowed us to have spaces for relationships with each other and make an impact in the lives of our neighbors. I would like to emphasize two things here; first is context and second is people. By understanding our context, our church can tweak things with how our structure should be.

Our church had planted another church in a nearby neighborhood and one of the things our leaders instructed the church planting team, is to take time to get to know the neighborhood. Some of the things that might had worked in our church, might not work there. Context plays an important role in a successful church planting. We need to keep the key principles that works and let the context inform us how do things.

Second is people. We are complex beings, influenced by some many things in our lives. There is no formula in how to make a deep relationship. It needs our time, patience and energy. It is important that we view the people we are reaching out as projects. Most of the time, they would figure it out. Genuine friendship comes out of our genuine curiosity and interest in their lives.

Our house churches' composition is very diverse: students, families, professionals, singles, or married. One reason is for people to be connected by their love for God and not of common interests. We want that our differences will lead us to allow God to work and help us to be united.

One of our pastors said that through her house church, she could see a diverse picture of God. Through her interactions with her house church members, she gets to see God in a different perspective. I believe that one of the beauties of being here is just seeing how different cultures form this diverse and multicultural community.

I strongly believe that we missed out on many opportunities when we neglect to listen to the local people in our neighborhoods or areas of ministry. While there may be practices and traditions that go against biblical teachings and require change, not all aspects of their culture are harmful; some may even prove to be beneficial.

North Before, But Never Without West

Our church has this saying "North before, but never without west," a play of the name of our neighborhood, Nordweststadt which is North-west city in English. North means our vertical relationship with God while west refers to our horizontal relationship with our fellow believers and non-believers. What this mean for us is that while our relationship with God is important, we should not neglect our relationship with others. It also means that we cannot have good relationships with others, without having a deeper relationship with God. True spiritual growth causes strong relationship, both within and outside our faith community.

Living in this neighborhood constantly reminds me of my responsibilities as a missionary and a believer.

I think it is important as believers that we value connecting to our local church community wherever we live and have the longing for our neighbors to come to Christ too. We cannot gatekeep God's love. Our love for God should overflow in our relationships.

The world is constantly changing, and we live in a global society, where people have different perspectives about Christianity and churches. It is important for us to bridge the gap and create communities, where these people would not only hear about us but experience to be part of it. Nowadays, the interactions between the church community and non-believers does not start in the four corners or in the entrance of the church building, it starts in our daily lives. It starts in the interactions in our neighborhood, workplaces and schools.

Our relationships are the starting point for non-believers to get to know us. We cannot just pour our hearts in worship and be filled with God's Spirit and word during a Sunday worship and not allow it to be felt in our interactions with other people. We need to always remember that God is continuously inviting us to play a role in His story.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chester, Tim. "Missional Lifestyle., Acts29. February 8, 2018. Accessed February 3, 2025. <https://www.acts29.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/8.-Missional-Lifestyle.pdf>.Keller.

Frost, Frost and Hirsh, Alan. *The Shaping of Things to Come*. Michigan: Baker Books, 2013. [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).

Timothy. *Center Church*. Zondervan, 2012.

Simson, Wolfgang. *The House Church Book: Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started*. Barna Books, 2009. [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).



Mariel R. Eberhard  
[mariel.eberhard@gemission.de](mailto:mariel.eberhard@gemission.de)

Mariel R. Eberhard is currently serving as a missionary with Greater Europe Mission. She recently completed her Master of Arts in Intercultural and Urban Studies at Asian Theological Seminary. She enjoys meeting new people and learning about different cultures. Through her mission work, she hopes to see the church grow and the gospel impact lives in her community. Her vision is for Europe to be renewed through thriving communities of faith.