

HOUSE FELLOWSHIP A CATALYST FOR CHURCH GROWTH

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0. INTRODUCTION

A house fellowship, home cell, or home church is a Christian brand name used to describe a group of Christians who frequently gather for worship in private homes of their members. This group remains an integral part of a larger Christian body, such as a parish, branch and province within a locality where the church is located. However, some independent-minded groups have seen the House Fellowship Centre as the primary form of Christian community.

Sometimes these groups meet because the membership is small, and a home is the most appropriate place to assemble, as in the beginning phase of the British New Church Movement. Sometimes this meeting style is advantageous because the group is a member of a Christian congregation which is otherwise banned from meeting as is the case in China and other countries centuries ago.

Some recent Christian writers have supported the view that the Christian Church should meet in houses, and have based the operation of their communities around multiple small home meetings. Other Christian groups choose to meet in houses when they are in the early phases of church growth because a house is the most affordable option for the small group to meet until the number of people attending the group is sufficient to warrant moving to a commercial location such as a church building. House church organizations claim that this approach is preferable to public meetings in dedicated buildings because it is a more effective way of building community and personal relationships, and it helps the group to engage in outreach more naturally. Some believe small churches were a deliberate apostolic pattern in the first century, and they were intended by Christ.

Modernity has crisscross all spheres of spiritual activities to life endeavours enriched by the gospel of Christ. This includes various medium through which the gospel could be effectively preached. As Churches grew in this dimension, different formats on how to develop the gospel or widely propagate the gospel are now being put in place strategically to save lost souls. Olukoya (2008).

Methods are abound in this regards. Today, the gospel of Christ is preached on electronics and print media, door-to-door evangelism, open-air campaign, in public transport system, including the most formidably medium for preaching Christ is through house Fellowship or Home Cells. Calvin Lashway, (2014).

Until A.D. 200, then, a Christian architecture did not and could exist. Only the State religion erected temples in the tradition of the Greek and Roman architecture. It is important to remember that there is no evidence: biblical, historical or archaeological of Christian having special worshiper centres during the first century. Not until the first half of the third century did the Christian build houses of worship. Albert Henry (1899)

The origin of house fellowship commenced in the mid-30s to the mid-50s **A.D**, shortly after Peter's Pentecostal sermon in Acts of the Apostles Chapter 2:41-47 and Acts 5:423 respectively. This situation gave a rebranding of the gospel of Christ where the followers were first called Christian in Antioch in Acts 11:19-26 during Peter's missionary journey.

A group of small bodies of believers who assembles at a particular location to share the word of God after main Sabbath service. Today, more and more people from our believers are meeting in private homes each Sabbath for worship. These small groups are referred to by various names such as Home Fellowships, House Churches, and probably the most popular term, The Living Room Church of God or Home Cell. These Christians are often criticized for

this practice by some of the leaders and members of the religious organizations. Richard Krauthimer, (1975).

1.1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study intends to highlight salient challenges that have disconnected house fellowship from the mainstream of the church of God in the area of propagating the gospel of Christ and growth. Knowing that, house fellowship is a catalyst to church development. But this is not the actual on ground.

1.2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of House Fellowship vis-a-vis its catalytic role in the growth of a Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), while not undermining scriptural evidence showing that it was a normal New Testament practice for small groups of Christians to assemble in private homes for worship, fellowship and instruction.

1.3. SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The significance of this study is anchored on the following:

- The study will exposed various methods to be adopted in making House fellowship efficient;
- The study will open up further area of concern and principles for church growth;
- The need to appraise house fellowship as the most considerate factors in church growth.
- The study will also elucidate the New Testament stands on House Fellowship.

1.4. SCOPE OF STUDY

The scope of the study is on how house fellowship can energize church growth in a view to populate the kingdom of God with a desperate intention to depopulate hell, as it has been instructed by Christ.

1.5. LIMITATION OF STUDY

The scope of this study is as a result of the following limitation:

a) Time

Time is one of the problems encountered in the course of carrying out this study. This study was initiated **and** concluded within a few weeks, a period short enough to hamper the adequate procurement of relevant data;

b) Lack of Cooperation

Most of the respondents have not been cooperative and compromising to the researcher as it ought to be in facilitating the sourcing of relevant data, and this affected the study in a way. Notwithstanding the above limitations of the texture of this study is not impeded.

1.6. RESEARCH PROCEDURES/QUESTIONS

This segment of the study examine(s) the method, design and characteristics of the study population, sampling procedure, determination of the sample size, data collection and procedure for processing and analysing the collected data. On this research, we relied heavily on content analysis and qualitative secondary sources and interviews as further examined in chapter four.

a. Research Question(S)

In order to effectively answer the research question and present an empirical study, I have formulated a few empirical questions:

- Is house fellowship justified in terms of heavenly readiness?
- Is house fellowship a catalyst for repositioning the church for spiritual and physical growth?
- What role does house fellowship play in ensuring the actualisation of kingdom development in Christendom?

b. Research Propositions

To adequately carry out the research work, the following propositions are made:

- House fellowship has not impacted negatively on church growth at large;
- The current strategies employ by church leaders in house fellowship groups have not been effective;
- House fellowship enables leadership mentoring that positively influences church development in determining the following:
 - i. measures taken by the church leaders in promoting personal witness;
 - ii. measures taken by the church leaders to improve house fellowship efficiency, ensure spiritual mobilisation of heavenly bound believers;
 - iii. growth of any church as body of Christ is dependent on the method of house fellowship adopted;
 - iv. challenge to effective house fellowship system of the churches is yet to be countered;

1.7. Definition of the Terms

In this study, readers are likely to come across words with difficult meaning. Hence the following definition of words:

- **Church**

The word "church" in the New Testament is always translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* 1577 "an assembly, a (religious) congregation" *Abbott-Smith Lexicon*. Thus, a church is not a building, or a place where Christians met. A church is an assembly or congregation of Christians. (*Online Bible, ekklesia* 1577).

- **House Fellowship/Home Cell:**

House fellowship means being a part of a group; a body of people coming together with a common purpose. It also means, sharing things in common such as interest, goals, beliefs, feelings, activities, labour, privileges and responsibilities. But, in Christendom, fellowship in Greek means 'Koinos' which means 'Common mutual interest or beliefs'

- **Catalyst:**

Business dictionary defined catalyst as a substance that speeds up a chemical reaction, but not consumed by the reaction, hence, it can be recovered chemically unchanged at the end of the reaction. However, in the context of this study, house fellowship becomes an energizer that speeds up church growth through strategic leadership style.

- **MFM:**

This is acronym of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries established in 1989 by D.K. Olukoya as the General Overseer as a Pentecostal denomination founded in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria and branches spread across the globe.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, various literatures on house fellowship will be reviewed with a view to give proper scholarly approach to this study. Thus, we examined some work of the following authors:

- Allen .R: Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours;
- Blauw .J: "The Missionary Nature of the Church'.'
- Green .M: Evangelism in the Early Church;
- Lyrene E.C. Jr: "Prayer and Evangelism,"
- Lee Loe: Home Fellowship Leader's Manual;
- Olukoya Daniel. K.: What you must know About House Fellowship;
- Adegbeye .E.: RCCG House Fellowship Manual;
- Peters .G. W: A Theology of Church Growth
- Stott John: The Spirit, The Church and the World,
- Teddy Levron: Effective Evangelism Training Center.
- Thom Rainer .S: Church Growth and House Fellowship In The Book Of Acts
- Vaughan .J. N: "Trends Among the World's Twenty Largest Churches,"

- Wagner .C.P: Strategies for Church Growth.

With the exception of Green's Evangelism in the Early Church, the subjects of house fellowship and church growth in the Book of Acts have been unaccountably neglected in recent years. Church growth writers refer to Acts rather consistently to support their theology and practice, but no detailed work has come from the movement. Most home cell ministries have a buy-in approach from a theological perspective in the Book of Acts, building a biblical apologetics for the mandate of house fellowship: "House Fellowship as a catalyst to church growth find its orientation in the Bible. A return to the principles and practices unfolded in the Book of Acts is the only reliable answer." It would appear that home cells in Acts has been viewed as one of several facets to be studied. In other words, house fellowship and church growth are only two out of many areas which comprise the sum total of the book. Such a perspective, however, seems to ignore the primary motivation for the writing of the book. Luke the theologian is was first a home cell leader.

2.1.1. Theologians Definition of House Fellowship

The value of redaction criticism is that it presents Luke as an author who intentionally arranged his material in a precise order to communicate a specific message, i.e., the evangelistic mandate. German scholars such as M. Debelius, H. Conzelmann, and E. Haenchen first applied redaction criticism to Acts in the 1950s. These men, unfortunately, approached the Bible with a skepticism that doubted the accuracy of parts of Luke's historical narrative. The author, they say sacrificed historical truthfulness for the sake of theological intent. We must not, however, set accuracy in opposition to intent. Hence, this study literature review will focus on the Apostle Luke biblical narrative theory on house fellowship from the book of Acts of the Apostle:

Luke is both historian and theologian. The best term to describe him is "evangelist," a term which, we believe, includes both of the others. As a theologian Luke was concerned that his message about Jesus and the early church should be based upon reliable history. Luke concern was to communicate the message of salvation through house fellowship approach. (Luke 2:42)

House fellowship and the resulting church growth are a priority concerns to the propagation of the gospel of Christ. The consolidation of salvation can be enforced through house fellowship found in no one other than Jesus (Acts 4:12); and through that medium salvation is offered to everyone who is willing to accept Christ as their personal saviour in repentance by faith. "The Spirit of God is poured out on many house fellowship. Example is Peter's fellowship in the House of Cornelius" (Acts 10:1-48, NIV);

Whereas the Old Testament (OT) depicts "house fellowship" as people coming to God, the Lucan perspective demonstrates that God's people (and indeed God himself) will seek and will go to the people "a centripetal missionary consciousness" becomes in Acts a "centrifugal missionary activity the great turning point is the Resurrection, after which Jesus gives his people a universal commission to go to the world and make disciples." Blauw (1974).

Indeed Luke begins his narrative with an early mention of the ascension. The Apostles are found gazing skyward by two angels ("two men dressed in white," Acts 1:9-11) who rebuke the men from Galilee for focusing their attention on the empty skies that moments earlier had framed the ascending Christ. Now, the angels imply, the apostle's mission is "earthward," to proclaim this Savior to the world, to go to the world rather than to expect the world to come to them (house fellowship). That is, bringing the gospel to the homes of believers and potential Christians alike. Such is the essence of the entire Book of Acts of the Apostle:

outward-moving gospel from house to house fellowshiping that results in the growth and development of the body of Christ (church).

According to Thom Rainer (1990), posited the definition of house fellowship as catalyst of church growth in two words he described the central activity of Acts of Apostle: by defining house fellowship as a communication of the good news of Jesus Christ through verbal proclamation and lifestyle witnesses within a small group of people, with the intent to develop their spirit man and leading the person or group(s) to salvation in Christ. It is also vitally interested in the postconversion activity commonly known as discipleship. Church growth is the building of the church primarily through house fellowship. While church growth writers of our era speak of other kinds of growth (e.g. transfer growth and biological growth), Luke is concerned with the growth of the church that comes from the making of new disciples through house fellowship.

However, Olukoya (2008), in his book ‘ What You Must Know About House Fellowship’ defines house fellowship as the bedrock upon which church development is attained both spiritually and physically. He also noted, that, house fellowship is spiritual matrix system that trains members for leadership position. This assertion is in line with the General Overseer of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Adeboye. E. (2017) who equally posited that, house fellowship is the foundation of church growth. Thus, it become pertinent that it is treated with utmost seriousness if believers will attain Christ mandate to evangelise the world.

Lee Coe (2014) defined House Fellowship as the concept of the application of God's Word to our everyday life, giving constant emphasis to Jesus. Home Fellowship is for Christians of all ages and in any stage of Christian experience, allowing each will to grow at his or her own pace by: applying God's Word; finding God's will through a living, progressing faith; learning to love God,

others, and ourselves by sharing burdens and joys; experiencing the thrill and joy of answered prayer; in discovering new, practical truths from the Bible for their personal life; and effectively helping others to understand how to trust Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

However, Lee noted that Some Home Fellowships overemphasized social responsiveness without Bible study application. While this concept fills a definite need in Christian lives, its shortfall is that it is based more upon emotional needs and social desire than upon the biblical principles of growth through the study and application of God's Word. God's Word is spiritual food. Without a steady diet of it, we become spiritually malnourished

The President of Christ Embassy, Chris Oyakhilome (2008), noted that, Home Cell System is a special structure within the church that enables spiritual development for soul winning. The cell units are also designed to encourage fellowship amongst brethren, which is necessary for the nurturing of their faith and warfare purposes, and that, it is structured in a way that people of same or similar professions belong to same group. For instance, there are cells for the married, single, teenagers and for professional/businessmen and women. Chris has advance home cell to online meetings. That is, taking the activities of the cell system to the internet using the social networking platform as a tool to increase our sphere of influence and reach out with our gospel. This is in line with **Matthew 16: 15**

” And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” a new world has been created through the Internet platform so we have been sent once again to go in there and preach the gospel to every creature.

Matthew 24:14

“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

The Cell system has an online cell meeting reporting register which is the cell administrative module for the Christ Embassy ministry website. It deals with the weekly reporting of the activities of the cell system in the different zones in Nigeria. It also has features which enable you to download and receive resource materials for cell growth and expansion; including online testimonies from your cell meetings.

2.1.3. The Normative Versus the Exception of House Fellowship

Much debate has transpired in recent years over certain events in the Book of Acts. Is the tongues-speaking miracle of Pentecost an event for Christians to expect today? Should the "signs and wonders" prevalent in Acts accompany our modern-day evangelistic efforts? Is Christian initiation a two-stage event, with conversion and water baptism followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Rather than elucidate the arguments for and against such phenomena as being normative for today, it is of greater value to focus on the areas of agreement which were integral to house fellowship as a catalyst for early church growth.

These principles are areas that virtually all evangelicals would agree are normative for today. Indeed, contemporary home cells are prerequisite for kingdom enhancement evangelism. Wagner (1987), *Strategies for Church Growth*, for a good discussion on church growth and discipleship. For a thorough discussion of the definition of church growth and its relationship to house fellowship. Rainer, Wheaton & Shaw, (1989).

John Stott (1990), advanced one of the best contemporary commentary on the Book of Acts as it regards House Fellowship groups. In his book, *The Spirit, The Church and the World*', John Stott addresses most of the issues on the

normative and non-normative events in Acts. However, Stott's commentary is balanced yet uncompromising in its faithfulness to the text as it regards to evangelism a mission statement for christian home cell.

According to Thomas Rainer (1990), one of the foremost theologians, in Criswell School of theology, viewed the origin of house fellowship the earliest church growth was anchored on vigorous strategic planting of house fellowships across the locality where the church is established and the principle of prayer guided by the following would be less than complete without these basic precepts established by the early church:

- **The Principle of Communism/Prayer in House Fellowship Centres**

Scholars on biblical church growth undoubtedly recognizes the efficacy and indispensable role of house fellowship and prayer to the spiritual and physical growth of the church, many of the contemporary church leaders fail to give these catalysts prominent place it deserves. Apostle Luke would not have us miss the importance of prayer in the growth and expansion of the early church and communion breaking of bread amongst believers. Stott elucidated that following Jesus' ascension, the prayers of the disciples had two characteristics which "are two essentials of true prayer, namely: that they persevered, and were of one mind." The principle of unified prayer, or prayer with one mind and purpose, is a thread that runs throughout the Book of Acts as the Apostles embarked on various missinary journeys. Luke's initial description of the 120 disciples of Christ at the upper room, (Acts 1:15) shows that they followed Christ's command to wait for the Holy Spirit by obediently communing in fellowship and praying as a group with one mind. Stott (1990)

The power of "agreement prayer" again, is established when the Sanhedrin threatened the followers with punitive action if they continued to speak about the "name, Jesus" (Acts 4:18). The impulse to share was too great, however, and a meeting of unified prayer in one accord sent the early church to new levels of boldness (Acts 4:31). "Having been bold in witness, they were equally bold in prayer." For example, when Herod plots to destroy the evangelistic impetus through persecution, the church unites in fellowship and prayer (Acts 12:5):

Here then were two communities, the world and the church, arranged against each other, each wielding an appropriate weapon. On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other side, the church united in fellowship and turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless possess. The prayers of the "powerless" defeat all the weapons of the world.

Peter was rescued from prison by an angel through the house fellowship prayers of believers who daily interceded for him, and the gospel continues to spread (Acts 11:11). Herod was struck down by the Lord and died a gruesome death (Acts 11:23). The oppressing action against the church was permitted; only for a brief season. The gospel, because of the power of unity in house fellowship and prayer, spreads unhindered.

2.2. Church Growth: the Principle of Spiritual Warfare

Olukoya (1999), sees the sustainability of the work of faith embedded in house fellowship, backed up with effectual prayers as the primary weapon for church growth as it were with the early church because the followers knew their battle was "not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

According to Teddy Levron (2011), Church Growth can't be judged by simply counting disciples and their Heads. "How many people were in attendance (numerically) at last year services as opposed to current growth" Numbers, however, can be deceiving. Simply counting heads or bodies does not tell you anything about the spiritual growth of the people in a congregation. Counting heads also does not indicate whether or not the individuals in your church are new converts or if they simply transferred their membership from another church or denomination. But, the Bible does not tell us to market ourselves, but to lead people to Jesus. Church growth is a by-product of winning souls and making disciples through house fellowship.

Apostle Luke would have his readers open their spiritual eyes to see the ongoing conflicts between the Holy Spirit and Satan. One such confrontation is stated explicitly in the book of Acts 5:3 when Peter accuses Ananias who was a member of Peter's led house fellowship, who allowed himself and his wife to be manipulated by satan, and the end result was not pleasant. Stott finds the symbolism of the dragon's three allies in Revelation to correspond to Satan's three weapons in the first chapters of Acts: persecution, moral compromise, and distraction. Thorn Rainer (1989).

Satan first attempts to destroy the church with persecution on house fellowship by means of the Sanhedrin when the Apostles were arrested, jailed, tried, flogged, and forbidden to stick together or preach (Acts 4:1-22 and 5:17-42). The second ploy of the devil is to ruin the Christian fellowship with the moral compromise of Ananias and Sapphira. Satan is explicitly identified as the source of the evil in this passage. The third weapon of Satan in Acts is the subtle ploy of distraction. He attempts to divert the Apostles from their calling of constant fellowship, prayer and preaching by creating a socio-administrative problems (Acts 6:1-7). At each point when satan attacks and the church overcomes, a new wave of revival floods the church: "So the word of God spread.

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly in Acts 6:7. Why is Luke concerned with his readers' understanding the principles of spiritual warfare? The evangelist would have us understand that such battle is normative for today, and must be fought and won in order for God's word to spread and for disciples to increase in number.

2.2.1 The Principle of God's Sovereignty in House Fellowship and Church Growth

Despite the abundance of conflicts and setbacks of the early church, Luke communicates clearly that God is the final victor. The reader indeed anticipates each battle lost by the early church eventually will be reversed by the followers of Jesus where ever the gospel is preached in future.

The martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) does not reduce the church to a level of frightened ineffectiveness. To the contrary, the persecution that broke out against the disciples scattered the church throughout Judea and Samaria. The defeated church then became smaller groups of believers who fellowship together proclaiming Christ as the dispersion of the gospel spread to new areas. God in his sovereignty turned defeat into a larger victory (Acts 8:4). Green is correct in his assessment that Stephen's death led to the beginning of a massive revolutionary movement which spread the gospel of Christ across the length and breadth of the world.

The "amateur missionaries" (those evicted from Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom) eventually became the leaders who changed the face of the movement by preaching to the Greeks and initiating the Gentile mission at Antioch. If the murder of Stephen was an external factor that led to the growth of the church, Luke would have us note that numerous internal problems were also turned into divine victories. One such example is the Ananias and Sapphira incident of Acts 5.

In his typical pattern of conflict/surprise/victory, Luke relates what seems to be an overwhelming internal problem: deceit within the fellowship. The surprise factor; is the death of the two perpetrators at the hands of God. The victory is noted in a rapid-fire sequence of events: all who heard about the incident were seized with fear (Acts 5:11); the "outside world" highly regarded the church (Acts 5:11); and "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" daily (Acts 5:14). That revival Apostle Luke and others experienced was ignited from house fellowship. The Book of Acts, in one perspective, is a narrative of the sovereign work of God in the midst of external and internal forces that would thwart any "normal" movement. Luke's message is clear. Though we are the vehicles to communicate the gospel, our strength and power is from God. Even in the throes of seemingly insurmountable opposition, God's work will not be deterred by any form of treat. Green contrasts the Apostles as the "professional" ministers, to the men evicted from Jerusalem as the "amateur" missionaries. The analogy, of course, is to our lay/clergy labeling of today. Green (1970).

There are obviously lessons to be learned from the above passage. Believers willingness to learn from experience of men of God either past or present is as important as any other responses. Hence, further chapters will highlight the prerequisites to achieving sustainable church growth through effect house fellowship group on Christ. The onus lies on church leaders to exhibit spiritual maturity in prayers before embarking on corporate, group(s) of home cells, with a view to understudy the socio-cultural value and the spiritual environment where the church operates, and to raise future leaders (ministers) for Christ.

Conclusively, Luke made us to understand from the above review carried out in this study that House Fellowship group is a ministry established by Christ,

having its origin from the Bible. Thus, it should be sustained and improved upon for the gospel of salvation.

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON HOUSE FELLOWSHIP

3.0. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we are going to review few Biblical stands on the importance of House Fellowship, a catalyst to church growth and spiritual development of members.

The concept of house fellowship was first introduced by Jesus when he went to break bread in the house of the Chief Tax Collector, Zacchaeus. Luke 19:1-10. He also had a similar fellowship at Matthew's house which accorded many sinners the opportunity to listen to the gospel of salvation preached by Jesus. Matthew 9:10.

From Biblical perspective, house fellowship is viewed as:

- The assembly of Christians who gathered for worship in a religious meeting;
- A company of Christians, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs, according to regulations prescribed for the body for order's sake;
- Those who resides anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body;
- The whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth; and
- The assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven.

3.1. THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is important to remember that there is no evidence either biblical, historical or archaeological of Christians having special buildings for worship during the first century. "Not until the first half of the third century did the Christians build houses of worship." Richard Krautheimer writes to the Christians in the book "Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture" states:

Until A.D. 200, then, a Christian architecture did not and could not exist. Only the state religion erected temples in the tradition of the Greek and Roman architecture. The saviour religions (for example, Mithras or Isis), depending on the specific form of their ritual and the finances of their congregations, built oratories above or below ground, from the simplest to the most lavish but always on a small scale. Christian's congregations prior to 200 were limited to the realm of domestic architecture, and further, to inconspicuous dwellings of the lower classes. Krautheimer (1965)

As we examine the biblical evidence, we will see the importance of "domestic architecture," (i.e. the private home to the New Testament Church of God). There were direct scriptural evidences that Christians assembled in Private Houses of believers in the New Testament which we will elucidate briefly in the subsequent subheading of this study.

3.2. New Testament House Churches

The New Testament made references to religious meetings in temples, synagogues, and schools. Nor did it mentioned specific Christians building as worship centres for meetings, though it never condemns the practice. However, there are four (4) unquestionable references to House Churches, and at least twenty one (21) likely references to House Churches in the New Testament.

House Churches as it was known in the past, what is currently called house fellowship. Which is synonymous with current days' practices, if not the normal practice of the New Testament Church of God—a practice those in today's Living Room Church of God have returned to.

In the New Testament church, there was organization and congregations. Some Bible scholars believe that a big organization is a bad thing. But, the Bible doesn't spell out the exact organization. It speaks of positions, elders, and deacons. It talks about local churches, but there were no 'Epistle to the Living Room Church'. There was only one letter to scattered brethren, which was the letter by Apostle Paul to the Hebrews, all the rest were to churches.

Although, some schools of thought among theologian argued from different angles on house fellowship. Implying that a Living Room Church of God is unbiblical, that it is not a "congregation" or a "church." What does the Bible say? Is the modern practice of small groups of people meeting in private homes for worship, fellowship and instruction unbiblical? This we take us to the incident at the house of Aquila and Priscilla in the New Testament, 1 Cor. 16:19.

3.2.1. The Assembly in the Ephesian House of Aquila and Priscilla

First Corinthians letter by Apostle Paul was written in the city of Ephesus probably during the spring of A.D. 57. At that time an Assembly of Christians are meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla:

"The churches of Asia Greets you. Aquila and Prisca [Priscilla] greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19).

However, the above mentioned house was not the only House believers gathered to fellowship at in Ephesus. Paul's letter to the Roman Christians was

written in the city of Corinth probably during the spring of A.D. 58. By this time Priscilla and Aquila had returned to Rome, where they had once lived (Acts 18:2), and an Assembly of Christians were meeting in their houses:

"Greet Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia" (Romans 16:3-5).

Like Ephesus, we will see that the House Church of Priscilla and Aquila was not the only assembly of Christians in Rome.

3.2.2. The Assembly in the House of Philemon

Paul's letter to the Colossians is written from Rome sometime around A.D. 61 or 62, during his first Roman captivity (A.D. 61-63). This is the period of time covered in Acts 28:16-31.

The letter was apparently delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus. Onesimus was a native of Colossae (Colossians 4:7-9). He was a runaway slave of Philemon, who ending up in Rome, was converted by Paul (Philemon 15-16, 10).

In addressing his letter to Philemon, written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians (probably A.D. 61 or 62), Paul sends greetings to the assembly of Christians meeting Philemon's house:

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved (brother) and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:" (Philemon 1-2).

The Christians of Colossae daily assembled in Philemon's home for fellowship.

3.2.3. The Assembly in the House of Nympha

Again, Paul's letter to the Colossians where he made reference to another House fellowship at Laodicea in Nympha's house:

"Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house" (Colossians 4:15).

In this context, Paul was making references to two groups of believers in Laodicea. The first group being "the brethren at Laodicea," or as in verse 16 "the church of the Laodiceans." The second group is "Nympha and the church that is in her house." It is also possible that only one group of people is being referred to here, and the entire Laodicean Church assembled in the house of Nympha.

Scenarionically, we observed from the scripture that, 30 years after the crucifixion of Christ, Christian were meeting /fellowship in private homes of believers. By the very nature of meeting in homes, it means that, these congregations were not large, but rather in smaller groups based on the size of a room in a given home, Krautheimer (1965).

Richard Krautheimer subsequently described what these homes were like as the congregations consist of lower and middle believers as highlighted in 1 Cor.1:26-31. Such houses are known to us, if not from the first and second centuries, at least from the fourth and fifth. In the Eastern provinces, they were apparently one-family buildings up to four storeys high. The dining-room on top was the only large room, and often opened on a terrace. This is the upper floor, the upper chamber or hyperoon which was mentioned in the Acts 2:1-7; 20:8], the room 'high up, open to the light', of which Tertullian still speaks after A.D. 200. The furnishings would simply consist of a table and three surrounding couches, from which the dining-room takes its name in Latinized Greek—the

triclinium. The main couch opposite the entrance was presumably reserved for the elder, the host, and guest. The congregations might crowd the room, including the window sills, so that at Troas from the heat of the many lamps and the length of the sermon. Example, was the young man who fell from the fourth floor (the tristegon) during Paul's ministration, only to be resurrected by the preacher, Paul (Acts 20:5-10). In Rome, where tenement houses with horizontal apartments were the rule, not necessarily including a dining-room, any large chamber may have served for these gatherings. No other rooms would have been required by the congregations. Frank J. Goodwin, (1986).

3.2.4. The Practice of the Jerusalem Church

Our studies shows that the first Seven Chapters of the Book of Acts are a historical view of the early Church of God, meeting in private homes for fellowship and meals, a practice traced back to the early Jerusalem Church of God in 31 to 37 A.D. Luke records:

"And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47).

The Apostles also utilized private homes as another location (besides the Temple) to teach and preach the gospel of Christ: "And every day, in the temple and **from house to house**, they (the Apostles) kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Messiah" Acts 5:42.

In about 37 A.D; Saul led a persecution against the Jerusalem Church (Acts 8:1-3). In writing about his maltreatment against believers, Luke had this to say:

"But Saul (began) ravaging the church, **entering house after house;** and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3)".

Why did Saul enter "house after house"? Because he knew believers' fellowships in homes as there were no permanent worship centres then. **If Christians worshipped in "church buildings," Saul would have gone there to find them.**

The private house was still being used as a location for Jerusalem Christians to assemble during another period of persecution in A.D. 44. During this persecution, James the brother of John was killed by **Herod Agrippa I** (reigned from 41-44 A.D.), and shortly after, imprisoned Peter with the intent to kill him after Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, (Acts 12:1-5).

While Peter was in prison, the Jerusalem Christians continually prayed for him (verse 5). The inference here is to communal prayer, not just individual prayer, but corporate intercession. This assertion was supported by verse 12 where it states that people were gathered for prayer in a room. Verses 6-11 chronicled how Peter was set free from prison. Realizing his freedom, and not having a dream, Peter "went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where brethren were gathered together interceding in praying for him," Acts 12:12.

One reason Peter went to the house of Mary that night, besides it being close by, may have been that he knew this was one of those houses in Jerusalem where Christians gathered to fellowship. What is known, is that on this night people were gathered at Mary's home for prayer.

This night was probably the night preceding the Last Day of Unleavened Bread. Remember, Herod did not want to kill Peter until after the Feast (Acts 12:4),

and on that very night when Herod was about to bring him forward for execution (verse 6), Peter was miraculously set free by an angel.

Another reason while Peter went to Mary's house that night, it was because Mary's house was a regular meeting place for believers in Jerusalem. Saul knew some of them would still be there that night having a fellowship meal, following the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This imply that house fellowship is a long age New Testament convention, a tradition that must be upheld by successive believers till the coming of Christ.

The above illustration also corona with scriptural interpretation as Luke elucidated in the book Acts indicating that Jerusalem Church was a collection of House Assemblies or Churches. The Jerusalem Christians assembled in private houses for fellowship and instruction from the word of God. This is the same activity taking place today in the Home Fellowships or Home Cells globally.

3.2.5. Thessalonica and the "House of Jason

After departing Philippi, Apostle Paul arrives in Thessalonica. It is approximately in the 51 A.D. where he preached in the local assembly of believers for about four Sabbaths days. Which made some Jews accepting Jesus as the Messiah, and even a greater number of Gentiles converting to Christianity (Acts 17:1-4). This situation, angered a few Jews, who stir up a mob, made up of "wicked men from the market place" (verse 5). **The mob attacks the "house of Jason"** looking for Paul and Silas to kill them (verse 5). While in Thessalonica Paul and Silas were staying in the home of Jason (verse 7). Not finding them at the "house of Jason," the mob found "Jason and some brethren" who they took to the authorities of the city (verse 6). However, studies shows that the "house of Jason" was more than just where Paul and Silas were staying.

Rather, it had become house fellowship meeting place outside the synagogue for believers in Thessalonica.

Verse 4 records that some of the Jews as well as "God-fearing Greeks" and "leading women" of the city, "joined Paul and Silas." This mean they "joined" Paul and Silas on religious matters, but that meaning was rather narrow when we examine the context of the verse. When the mob raided the "house of Jason" they only found "Jason and some brethren" (verses 5- 6). This would imply that joining Paul and Silas meant joining them in assembling at the "house of Jason for religion fellowship." The boycotts by believers in not worshipping at the synagogue due to treats in their lives may have been the motivating factor in the attack on Jason's house because they were not found in the synagogue.

3.2.6. Corinthian House Fellowships

Paul travelled shortly after leaving Thessalonica for Berea, Athens, then went to Corinth (Acts 17:10-18:1). He stayed there for about a year and half (verse 11). In early 52 A.D. to the middle of 53. A.D, Paul preached in the local synagogue where his message was rejected by the Jews in Corinth. From there on, he concentrates on preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 18:1-6) and aborted the ideals of going to the synagogue to preach. Rather, he went to the house of a certain man named Titus Justus a worshiper of God. Whose house he converted to worship centre for the young Corinthian that later became a Church (verse 7).

This research observed three other possible House fellowships in Corinth. First Corinthians refers to two of these House Churches Paul addressed letters to from Ephesus during the spring of 57. A.D.

The first possibility occurred in 1 Corinthians 1:11 "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's (people,) that there are quarrels among you." (The word "people" is added by the translators, and is not in the Greek.)

The verse could also be translated: "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's, that there are quarrels among you."

Paul writes that he received information about the Corinthian Christians, from some people who are associated with an individual by the name of Chloe. The nature of this association is not clear. They could be members of Chloe's family, household servants or possible even members of a House fellowship meeting at Chloe's home.

A second possibility is found in 1 Corinthians 1:16 "Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other." **The Greek word translated "household" in verse 16 is *oikos* 3624, meaning "a house, a dwelling," Abbott-Smith Lexicon.** The New American Study Bible (NASB) translates this word as: descendants, families, homes, household, oneself, palaces, etc. Keep the meaning of this Greek word *oikos* in mind as we will be seeing it in several other scriptures. The "house of Stephanas" is a completely justifiable translation that there exist a house fellowship (*Darby Bible*) uses exact same meaning.

Impliedly, Paul was referring to Christian assembly meeting in the house of Stephanas were members (believers) were baptized by Paul himself. Additional confirmation to this fact is in 1 Corinthians 16:15, (*King James Version*):

I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the **house of Stephanas**, that it is the first fruits of Achaia, and *that* they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints)." A similar Greek word, ***oikia* (No. 3614)** is translated "house," above. It means "a house or dwelling" and is related to *oikos* 3624, Abbott-Smith Lexicon. The NASB translates this word as: home, house, household, households, and houses.

A third possible Corinthian House fellowship mentioned by Paul in the New Testament is found in Romans 16:22-23:

"I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. **Gaius, host to me and to the whole church**, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother" (Rom. 16:22-23).

Gaius is not only the host of Tertius (Paul's secretary), but the "host of the whole church" in Corinth. This suggest that the entire Corinthian congregation meets each Sabbath in Gaius' home to fellowship with one another in God's presence. Or it may mean that when the "whole church" gathers together in one meeting. It is done at the home of Gaius. With smaller regular weekly congregational meetings taking place in the homes of Justus, Chloe, and Stephanas. Gaius' home may have been used for these smaller meetings as well.

3.2.7. Ephesian House Fellowship

Paul arrives in Ephesus in 54. A.D. and had to teach in the Jewish synagogue for three months (Acts 19:1, 8). Having experienced several resistance to his message by the Jews, Paul left the synagogue and held public meetings for about two years in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). All through 54 to 57 A.D Paul spent a total of three years in Ephesus teaching Christ to the people (Acts 20:31).

It is imperative to note that the Bible nowhere condemns meeting in hired halls or buildings built for meetings. The salient understanding of this study is that the vast majority of early believer's meetings were in home cells. This attest to the fact that the Ephesian Churches were predominantly a structure of House Fellowships. 1 Cor. 16:19.

3.2.8. Troas House Fellowship

On a Saturday night in Troas, about in 58 A.D, the local Troas Christians gathered in an "upper room" fellowship at meal and breaking of bread with brethren, while listening to Paul sermon (Acts 20:6-12). This scenario emphatically depict a continuation of a Sabbath house fellowship that had begun early of that day.

The above mentioned verses was silence about the nature of the upper room they had the meeting (private house or in a public building). We do know the upper room was on the third floor of this building (verse 9). However, we observed it was a practice of the early Church to meet in the houses of its members (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phil. 1-2). So it is plausible that this "upper room" was located in the house of a Troas Christian.

3.2.9. The House Fellowship in the House of Philip the Evangelist

Our studies described Paul as one of the most outstanding Missionarists in the Book of Acts due to millage he covered in propagation of the gospel of Christ. On one of his missionary journey to Jerusalem, Paul spends a fewer days in Caesarea, staying in "the house of Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:7-8). During Paul's visit, he discovered that Philip's house was a meeting place for locals (Christians) in that community for regular worship. Acts 21:10-15.

The apartment was fair and large enough to host Paul and his traveling companions (Acts 21:8), and same time Philip's house was able to accommodate "the local residents" (Acts 21:12) or "those from that place" (*New King James Version*), who were present when the prophet Agabus prophesied what would happen to Paul if he went to Jerusalem, Acts 21:10-12.

3.2.10. Roman House Fellowships

In 61-63 A.D, Paul rented a house for two years where he preached and taught the gospel of Christ (Acts 28:16, 23, 29-31), even though he was a Roman prisoner.

Studies shows that Paul's House Assembly in Rome was not the only one in existence then. There were five other House fellowships in Rome, before the arrival of Paul. Mention of these assemblies are found in Paul's letter to the Romans, probably written in the spring of 58 .A.D. It is important to remember that at this time, Rome had no public transportation. You had to walk, or have a litter carried by servants or slaves. Carts and animals were not allowed to move around in the city during the day, only at night. This was a large spread out city. It was not practical for all Roman Christians to meet together for worship. Hence, Rome appears to have had at least five House Fellowships:

- At the house of Priscilla and Aquila. (Rom. 16:3-5);
- At Aristobulus' house, (Rom 16:10);
- A House fellowship at Narcissus House, (Rom 16:11);
- A house fellowship at Asyncritus and the brethren with them, (Rom. 16:14);
- A house fellowship in the house of Philologus and Julia including saints who were with them, (Rom 16: 15).

From the above, Paul had quite a fair relationships with most house fellowships in the entire Roman Empire. Thus, he had to write series of letters admonishing Titus regarding vain messages he heard is being taught amongst believers in the house fellowship across Roman and that they should stick to the gospel of Christ which was handed down to them. Tit. 1:10-11, 1Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1-2, 2 Tim. 3:5-9. Paul appears to be warning Timothy about false teachers sneaking into House fellowship and leading people astray spiritually.

Towards the end of the first century (about 95 A.D), the Apostle John writes what is known as the Second Epistle of John. In his letter, John wrote about certain doctrinal standards a teacher should have before he is allowed to teach. "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting" 2 John 1:10.

Is it possible that John is admonishing House fellowship/home cells to be careful whom they allow to enter their assembly as a teacher? Spiros Zodhiates in his introduction to Second John writes:

The 'elect lady and her children' (2 John 1:1) may be a reference to an actual lady and her children, but many scholars contend that this is a cryptic way of addressing a church to safeguard against the letter falling into the hands of those who were hostile to the Church.
Spiros Zodhiates, (1992).

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION ON THE IMPACT OF HOUSE FELLOWSHIP AS CATALYSTS FOR CHURCH GROWTH

4.0. INTRODUCTION

Sequel to the above chapters, this chapter intend to highlight salient issues as it regards House Fellowship as catalyst to church growth focusing on Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM). A Ministry resolute to bringing deliverance, salvation, healing and propagation of the gospel of Jesus through spiritual teaching of her members on how to war against powers of darkness in the application of your hands for war and your finger to battle unseen powers of darkness through Jesus Christ.

4.1. HOUSE FELLOWSHIP IN MFM, NIGERIA

Most Pentecostal Churches in Africa including Nigeria imbibe the structure of House Fellowship Centres as a major means to reinforce church growth and mentoring scheme of potential leaders. House fellowship centres are key to MFM structure. Hence, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Deeper Life Bible Church, etc. Lay more emphasis on home cell centres as a catalyst for growth and spiritual development of believers as enshrine in Acts of the Apostle chapter two and three respectively. However, for content analysis and referral on the subject matter, MFM house fellowship will be summarily analysis in this regards.

MFM is one of the single largest Ministry in Africa, and the house fellowship centres is as old as the Ministry itself. Members and their welfaric needs are linked, identified and met. These centres cut across all localities and houses where MFM Church and Members resides. Accessibility is quite easy and a compactable administrative structure that runs the entire activities of the home cell.

The objectives for the establishment of fellowship centres in MFM are primarily a medium to spread the gospel OF Jesus Christ and to meet the physical and spiritual needs of members as most resident Minister could no long reach members one after the other due to growth size of the church. Other are:

- Training and raising future discipleship.
- Creating a forum for interpersonal and spiritual relationship among members.
- To effectively propagate the gospel of Christ within their locality.
- To arrest horizontal growth and focus on vertical growth.
- Prepare believers for the second coming of the Lord Jesus.
- To equip faithful believers for services of the Lord Jesus which they are called.
- To develop consistency in discipline and godly character in our members.

MFM House Fellowship Leadership Training School, (2016).

4.1.2. HOUSE FELLOWSHIP IN NORTH AMERICA AND UNITED KINGDOM

Recent studies revealed that, activities of house fellowship that was once neglected in developed countries is gradually returning. For example, North America and United Kingdom has energised the activities of home cells as a new strategy to grow membership for Christ. This development is often seen as a return to a New Testament Order known as restorationist paradigm. A shift towards restoration of God's eternal purpose and the natural expression of Christ on earth, urging Christians to return from hierarchy and rank to practices described and encouraged in Scripture. According to some proponents, most church goers are turning to house fellowship centres to worship God because many traditional churches fail to meet their relational needs.

Some that support the house church configuration (associated with Wolfgang Simson, Jon Zens, Milt Rodriguez, Frank Viola and others, (1978)) consider the term "house church" to be a misnomer, asserting that the main issue for Christians who gather together is not the meeting location (the house), but whether or not Jesus Christ is the functional Head of the gathering and face-to-face community is occurring. Other titles which may be used to describe this movement are "simple church," "relational church," "primitive church," "body life," "organic church" or "biblical church."

House churches can adopt an organic church philosophy which is not necessarily a particular method, technique or movement but rather a particular church expression that the group takes on when the organization is functioning according to the pattern of a living organism. The church represented in the New Testament is based on this principle, and traditional, contemporary Christianity has reversed this order. Krautheimer, (1976).

4.2. HOUSE FELLOWSHIP A CATALYST FOR CHURCH GROWTH

Church development is a crusade that examines the functions, structures, nature, well-being and proliferation of Christian Churches as they relate to effective operation of Christ's directive to 'Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make of THEM disciples' (Matthew 28: 19 – 20). Hence, a well-established church entails the following Biblical approaches: Strong Biblical Leadership style, Organisation of the Worshipers, Practical Christian believes, Sound Biblical Doctrine, Fellowship of the Believers, Worship, Prayers, Faith and Healing, Evangelism, Creativity, Inventiveness, Church Building and Finance.

One of the catalysts of Church Growth is House Fellowship. It is a meeting of small groups of believers that holds in a house, church building, office, under the tree, shop, store, etc. where believers, unbelievers, children, teenagers and adults, men and women at various levels of spirituality congregate to study the Word of God and pray. House Fellowship Centres are easy to start; with a relaxed and informal atmosphere; members are symbolically seen as evangelistic tools to propagate the gospel, it enhances quality platform that facilitate pastoral/leadership training for believers, and it awakens church social responsibilities to their environment with a view to forestall growth.

As a catalyst, House Fellowship plays important role in the development of Church Growth, this include the following:

- House Fellowship reaches out to individual members' needs in a manner that a larger congregation won't be able to do.
- A structured and well organized House Fellowship system is a very efficient energizer for Church Growth.
- House Fellowship creates a sense of belonging, communism and membership among the people. That is, member's sees him/herself be recognized by the cell or unit of the entire church they belong to. This sense of belonging enhances growth.
- House Fellowship breeds unity in the church. It does this by creating unity among the cell members.
- Neighbourhood evangelism is made easier through House Fellowship especially the people group and proximity approaches.
- House Fellowship does not cost as much to run as a full fledge church building, yet it consistently proves to be more efficient.
- A well-organized House Fellowship system eliminates clique formation and informal groups. This elimination is possible because the number of members in a House Fellowship Centre is kept to the barest minimum.

Oduwole Tunde, (2017)

Conclusively, house fellowship centres plays major role in the spiritual grow of her member, in the area of provision of material needs, house fellowship has a welfaric structure in that regards. Their presence in an environment influences in no little measure the culture of the people positively.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0. Introduction

Having sequentially analysed prerequisite for Church growth in the previous chapters, and this being the concluding chapter of this research work, we intend to put the card on the table in its clear terms the importance of house fellowship centres to spiritual development of believers. Reaffirmation and appraisal of the nitty-gritty of the latter has its Biblical examples laid down by the Lord Jesus as recorded in the book of Luke 5:29 and Luke 19:1-10 respectively. However, the purpose for this summation, is to contently align theologically position and analytically observations to validate our findings on salient issues raised in the previous chapters regarding the theme of this study.

5.1. Summary

House Fellowship Centres has and will remain an integral part of evangelism and church growth within communities of jurisdiction. Hence, it is strong energizer and structural functionalities that aid Church Growth.

5.2. Conclusion

From the aforementioned, it is obvious that Jesus attended house fellowship meetings. Examples of these house meetings are:

- Levi, organised a great banquet for Jesus with large crowd of Tax Collectors in attendance. (Luke 5:29);
- Another scenario was Jesus, fellowshipping at the house of Zacchaeus' house after his strong and determined desire to meet with Jesus who apparently was on His way to Jericho stopped to minister salvation to Zacchaeus while in his house. (Luke 19:1-10).

This implied that sinners easily come to salvation when the gospel is brother closer to their door steps. The Apostles went from house to house breaking bread and preaching the gospel of our Lord on a daily basis and souls were added daily.

In MFM, as a major policy of the Church, you must be a member of a house fellowship centre closer to you. The reverse could just place you as mere church attendee and the leadership of your local church is not responsible to at any instance or point of need. Being a member of the house fellowship centre is very critical to the Management of the church.

Conclusively, in MFM, House Fellowship Centre mentor and raises future leaders, steady development of member's spiritual well beings, it is a strategic mean for evangelism and indeed, a catalysts for church growth and heavenly empowerment and discipleship.

5.3. Recommendations

From the above observations, we wish to recommend that House Fellowship system should run as care unit; and, should be involved in community works for

effective witness of the Gospel of Christ. Church Leaders as a matter of concern, develop and empower their house fellowships members in their localities in order to grow the church through the instrumentality of evangelism, coaching, mentoring, training and retraining of her member for leadership positions like Apostle Paul did to Apostle Timothy.

House fellowship brings members closer to their leaders and pastors. It creates stronger agape love among brethren and influences communion living among saints.

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