

Being the House Church

The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, along with other Christian churches in the two islands, has had to face up to the changing medical landscape in being the church, because of the impact of the global Coronavirus pandemic known as COVID-19.

The past two weeks have seen churches going virtual and increasingly offering online worship services. However appealing this model of being church may be, I wish to argue that the church has not done sufficient reflections on being church during a time of global and national pandemic.

This paper argues that church leaders have become too comfortable with the settled institutional way of being church, that it has neglected to identify and reflect on other authentic ways. We have neutralized the other ways bequeathed to the followers of Jesus to be the church, and have settled for the expensive and inflexible institutional maintenance model.

Could it be that COVID-19 is inviting the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands congregations to rediscover and embrace the family-/home-centered model of being church during this period of national crisis? It is called House Churches...the church in our homes. This was, and still is, the first base—the core of being church, as the home is the place for family prayers and worship that once formed the foundation of Jamaican spirituality.

COVID-19 could be positively appropriated as a game-changer in the religious environment within Jamaica and Cayman, should our congregations grasp the opportunity to be the church in the homes of every member's family.

The Biblical Foundations of House Churches

Paul wrote an epistle to Philemon, in which he stated: “To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philemon 1:1-3). Again in Acts 17:1-9, we are informed that when Paul left the synagogue in Thessalonica, he met converts in the home of Jason.

In the book of Acts, the home of the mother of Mark was the base for assembly of early Christians. Also, in the home of Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15), the believers met for worship.

The early/young church, after the resurrection of Jesus, was a minority faith, and within a context of political persecution that impacted their health and safety, they met in their homes for meetings and fellowship. They did not place priority on purchasing or erecting buildings for the purpose of holding worship. The church, as the gathered community that

followed Jesus, met in the homes of the believers. The only building used for church meetings in the early Church was the homes of believers.

They were groups of family congregations that were small enough for a lot of interaction. In the passage from *1 Corinthians 14:26-40*, Paul described the worship experience as that in which the worshippers engaged in full participation to teach, prophesy and speak and interpret the tongues, as well as to share with each other. Each of the house churches had an Elder or Elders to give leadership.

The Response of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands

The response of the **United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands** to this coronavirus pandemic should not be defined only by closing the physical and public church building, because of the health and safety risk. This sends a negative signal to the public that the church can only function through the gathering in buildings open to the public. This is inconsistent with our Reformed theological heritage. ***The church is not a building! Rather, the church is the people of God.*** Within traditional Jamaican and Caymanian cultures, we grew up having family prayers at early morning and before bedtime. The church was first located in the homes of believers, not in a public building within the community. The church is still the church when it is scattered. ***Indeed, it is the scattered church that grows numerically!***

Therefore, ministers should strategize with their Board of Elders how best to organize the church to function as “**House Churches**” in different homes where no more than 10 persons will meet for weekly worship. During this period of lockdown, the **United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands Synod**, through its ministers, lay pastors and lay leaders should prepare weekly home liturgies, not lasting more than 30 minutes, that give emphasis to prayers, hymns/choruses, the lectionary readings and reflections. These services can be led by one of the family members. During the weekly worship, an offering for the work of the UCJCI ministry and mission should be collected and presented to the office during the week. Singing and prayers from homes in the community will be a powerful witness that the church is present and active.

Home/House Churches are not new in our modern era. The growth of the church in Communist China has happened primarily through Home/House Churches. In other contexts where there are civil wars that prevent public gathering of the church members, the church went back to the homes of the members.

Let the **United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands** return to the homes of her members during this period of coronavirus pandemic.

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