



Simple Church in Europe

Status Report 2010

Simple Church Europe

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Status Report 2010

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Media summary

In autumn 2009 Simple Church Europe (<http://simplechurch.eu/>) initiated a small-scale research on the status of simple church planting in Europe. Simple Church Europe is a resource network that helps initiate and develop simple, empowering and reproducible communities of faith in 45 nations. We foster learning, strategic collaboration, research, exchange of resources and development of training. In order to do this more effectively, we wanted to get a better picture of how many simple church networks there are in Europe, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and what kind of exchange and support would be most needed. We used a relational approach: starting with our primary contacts and taking it one connection further (LinkedIn-style), we identified 69 simple church networks in 16 nations, of which 48 networks participated in the first (main) survey and 22 networks in a second (additional) survey. As far as we know this is the first coordinated research effort on simple church planting in Europe. The outcomes are presented in this status report. For your convenience we offer a five-point summary:

1. What is a simple church network?

For the purpose of this research we defined ‘simple church network’ as a relational network of small groups (3-20 people), made up of people who follow Jesus and extend his Kingdom. Simple church networks have no church buildings or paid clergy, and their meetings can take place anywhere - in neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, cafés, outdoors. Another common term for simple church is ‘house church’ or ‘organic church’. A more comprehensive definition is offered in this report.

2. What types and expressions of simple church are there in Europe?

The simple church landscape in Europe is very diverse. There are simple church networks among specific ethnic groups (like migrants, gypsies), social groups (like businessmen, urban youth) and in specific geographic locations (villages, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, universities). Some are quite organized (leadership team, fixed meetings), others function more informally (groups of friends, often coached by an apostolic worker). Based on our observation and the interviews we held with network leaders, we see three kinds of simple church networks:

(a) Apostolic networks: simple church groups started by an apostolic worker ‘straight in the harvest’, mostly along the lines of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples in Luke 10 (planting a new simple church group in a household/social circle instead of inviting people to an existing church meeting). These networks are primarily made up of new believers who just heard about Jesus, are being discipled, and win others to plant new groups.

(b) Bridge networks: simple church groups made up of existing Christians who intentionally seek to be ‘missional’. They try to build relationships with non-believers, often using conventional forms of evangelism and a ‘come to us’ approach.

(c) Christian networks: simple church groups formed by existing Christians who mainly seek a more relational and participatory alternative for conventional church. These groups tend to be inward-focused and sometimes reactionary: seeing their way of church as more biblical and healthy than the churches

they come from.

Of these three kind of networks (a) is most effective in mission and reproduction, and (c) the least, with (b) being on a learning curve.

3. **What are the main blessings and challenges of these simple church networks?**

The simple church networks consider 'mission' (reaching new people with the Gospel) their 'main blessing' in 2009, but also point this out as their 'main challenge'. We found that especially contextualisation is an issue. What is 'good news' to people, is the approach being perceived as relevant, are new faith communities really embedded in the culture? The networks that are most successful in missions put a relatively high emphasis on prayer, developing intentional relationships with non-believers, the gifts of the Holy Spirit (prophecy, healing), the 'person of peace' approach as instructed by Jesus in Luke 10, interactive meetings where everyone can contribute, and a focus on reproductive disciple-making. A second challenge for the simple church networks is identifying and training leaders to plant and develop new groups. A clearly perceived quality of the simple church networks is friendship/fellowship/community.

4. **How many simple church networks and groups are there in Europe, and what is their growth rate?**

Most simple church networks started over the past 10 years; the year 2000 seems to be a turning point. On average a simple church network is made up of 9 small groups and 96 people, roughly 11 people per small group. Based on an extrapolation approach explained in this report we estimate the total number of simple church networks in Europe on 1,417 across 45 nations. These networks make up a total 12,757 small groups, in which 140,327 people are involved.

In many nations in Europe the membership of institutional churches is declining. In the Netherlands for instance the decline of the mainline protestant and catholic denominations is between (minus) 1 and 3% annually. Free evangelical churches are doing a bit better with an average growth of 0.5% annually (some are growing, some are shrinking). Compared to this, the simple church networks in Europe are doing quite well with an average growth of 22%. The comparison of simple church groups with rabbits (often heard on simple church conferences) might be true for China and India, it's certainly not (yet) the case in Europe. In 2009 the simple church networks planted on average 2.5 new churches. This represents 30 new members per network of which 7 come from a non-Christian background. So 23% could be considered 'real harvest' and 77% a 'recycling of the saints'. In 2010 we found a higher real conversion percentage of 34%.

5. **Recommendations: where can simple church networks improve?**

Based on the outcomes of this research and our interviews with simple church planters, we offer three recommendations:

(a) Actively learn from the ‘Apostolic networks’ that form the vanguard of the simple church movement. These networks are at least 4 times more effective than the other simple church networks in reaching non-Christians. What can we learn from them about discipleship, missions, contextualisation, training leaders and multiplication?

(b) Be very intentional and ‘out of the box’ in missions. Simple church groups can be started anywhere, so why not adopt a new locality or people group in prayer, and at Gods timing send a small team to identify a ‘person of peace’ and form a new group?

(c) Coach and train Christians in your network to plant new groups. Networks that train grow, networks that don’t train don’t grow.

The results of this survey are indicative, not comprehensive. We took the pulse of simple church planting in Europe as far as our relationships go. Simple Church Europe is open for feedback and aims to review and improve the indicators of this research.

If you have any questions about this status report, feel free to contact our office in the Netherlands at webmaster@simplechurch.eu or +31 30 223 9542.

Introduction: why we held this survey

God is at work in many places in Europe and seems to be shifting His church back to a fresh grassroots movement of the Kingdom of God. Christians rediscover the call to team up, reach out, make disciples and start small groups that multiply. Pretty much like in the days of Acts when groups of Jesus followers gathered on a daily basis to pray, eat, have fellowship and share the Gospel with others, as the Spirit led them. They had a huge impact on society. Although it's still very early days for the simple church movement in Europe, we are encouraged by the stories we hear from so many different places.

In November 2008 a group of simple church network leaders from across Europe met in Zürich to explore ways in which we might collaborate more effectively and serve the growing simple church movement. We decided to encourage each other regularly by meeting up, connecting over the web, and create a learning environment in which we share our resources and best practice. As a result of this meeting a website was developed at www.simplechurch.eu with an overview of the networks, stories, practical articles, training and links. Also, we initiated a survey that would help us gain a better overview of what's happening with simple church planting in Europe.

Research method and definitions

God is a god of great diversity and creativity. So no surprise that the simple church landscape in Europe is also very diverse. However, research demands restriction in what to measure and what not, so we had to come up with a definition of what a simple church network is and what it is not.

Characteristics of a simple church network

1. Small: the backbone of the church is groups of 3-20 people.
2. Jesus-centered: the focus is following Jesus Christ, seeking His direction and mission.
3. Relational: the members really care for each other.
4. Mission-minded: intentionally sharing Jesus and his Kingdom with others.
5. Reproductive: a vision for reproduction of disciples and small groups.
6. Decentralized: bottom-up initiative, including communion, baptism and discipling others.
7. Connected: part of a local or national network of (simple) churches/ministries.

We classified our contacts as simple church networks if they matched at least six of the seven characteristics. If they did not match the last characteristic (connected with other groups) they were not included in the survey.

What a simple church network has not

1. A congregational church service as the main focus of church life (there can be celebrations and network meetings though).

2. A fulltime paid pastor or clergyman who oversees the laity (there can be pastors, elders and deacons though, and apostolic workers could be paid to equip the different house churches in a network and/or start new ones).
3. A building as the central location of church life.

Groups and networks

In this report we use the term 'simple church group' for the small groups of 3-20 people, and the term 'simple church network' for the collective of simple church groups. A 'simple church network' consists of multiple 'simple church groups'.

Research process

There's no way to identify all simple church networks in Europe, let alone include them in a survey. In the first place Europe as a continent is huge and extremely varied, socially and language-wise, something that many research projects struggle with. Secondly, like most pioneer and grassroots initiatives, simple church groups tend to operate 'under the radar' of regular research and church statistics. Their relative fluidity (flexible groups with no membership rolls, that easily start, dissolve or multiply), and the fact that many pioneers are cautious to share information with perceived 'third parties', is a challenge.

Therefore we decided to approach the research relationally. We started with an inventory of our primary contacts: leaders of simple church networks and apostolic workers that we were already in relationship with, and then took it one connection further by asking them whom else in their network should be included in the research. This way we identified 69 simple church networks of whom the leader/facilitator was invited to participate in an online survey.

Survey

The online survey contained both qualitative and quantitative questions. If the network leaders did not respond or when things were unclear, we called them by Skype or phone and guided them through the survey. A great benefit of these calls was the strengthening of relationships with the simple church leaders. Of the 69 network leaders who were invited to participate in the first (main) survey in autumn 2009, 48 (70%) completed it. A second (additional) survey was held in autumn 2010 as a check on the quantitative data of the first (main) survey, and also to get feedback on additional indicators of the growth trend of the simple church movement in Europe. In total 22 networks (46%) completed this second survey.

Types and expressions of simple church in Europe

The simple church landscape in Europe is very diverse. There are simple church networks among specific ethnic groups (like migrants, gypsies), social groups (like businessmen, urban youth) and in specific geographic locations (villages, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, universities). Some are quite organized (leadership team, fixed meetings), others function more informally (groups of friends, often coached by an apostolic worker).

Four models used by simple church networks

In our research we came across four models used by simple church networks:

1. Apostolic model: a visionary apostolic worker forms the link between groups/people.
2. Intentional relationship model: the simple church groups in a network know they are connected, breed relationship and regularly meet up with the whole network.
3. Church of small groups: the backbone of the church is small groups that carry the 'simple church DNA', but they also have a regular gathering/meeting point with the whole network and more centrally defined leadership.
4. Information hub: a website, mailing list, or vision point for simple church (not an intentional network).

In our survey the majority of the simple church networks (68%) was structured according to the 'intentional relationship model' (no. 2).

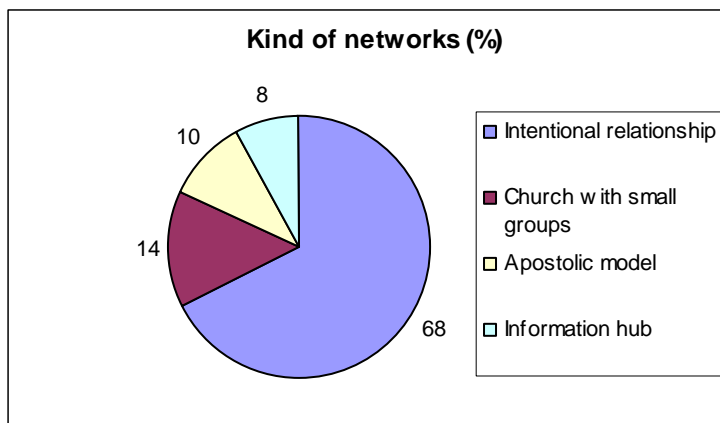


Chart 1: Kinds of SC-networks in Europe (%)

Additionally we found that:

61% of the networks are not part of a bigger denomination or network.

39% of the networks are intentionally part of a bigger network.

Four models illustrated

We illustrate these four models with testimonies, extracted from our interviews with network leaders.

1. Simplechurch.dk (Torben Sondergaard & Ronald Gabrielsen, Denmark, apostolic model)

Torben is a gifted evangelist who connects easily with people. Over the past years God used him to save and heal many people on the streets, which was even broadcasted on national television. He and his colleague Ronald are now starting simple church groups across Denmark that (because of distance and variety) are not necessarily connected to each other. They coach and train these groups. A video interview with Torben is available on <http://simplechurch.eu/>.

2. Kristent Netverk (Terje Dahle & Erling Thu, Norway, intentional relationship model)

Kristent Netverk has an apostolic team of twelve people in place with different ministry gifts (prophet, apostle, evangelist, teacher, pastor, etc.). They come together every two months to pray, read the Bible, share testimonies and strategize to plant new churches in Norway. Already simple church networks have been started in more than 20 localities. Within these localities the groups are connected to each other. They help, encourage and pray for each other to start new simple church groups. A more extensive article on Kristent Netverk is available on <http://simplechurch.eu/>.

3. PGL/Houses of Light (Ronald van der Molen, The Netherlands, church of small groups)

Ronald works with the principle of 3, 12 and 120. His church, officially linked to the VPE (Assemblies of God in The Netherlands), has ‘transformation trios’ of three people that multiply as soon as a fourth person arrives. This is based on the example of Jesus who had three best friends (Peter, James and John) with whom He spent most of his time. They also have home groups of maximum twelve people (like Jesus and his twelve disciples) that meet every week for a ‘meating’ (combining ‘eating’ and ‘meeting’, prayer and Bible study). Every Sunday they have a larger celebration with everyone in their network (maximum 120 people, like the group on the day of Pentecost). When the group grows larger than 120, they send out people to plant a new network. They found that non-believers prefer the larger meetings over the small groups, as their ‘entry point’. The underlying idea is that people are being transformed in the small groups of three, encouraged by the group of twelve and inspired by the larger celebration.

4. Novavox.org (David Schäfer, Germany, information hub)

Novavox is a national network that aims to inspire, network, train and coach people to start organic, simple churches. They translate books and organize events. Novavox functions as an information and inspiration hub for the simple church movement in Germany, and doesn’t take responsibility for starting simple churches.

Target groups

Most simple networks are reaching out to families (50%), focus on a specific area (48%) or are reaching young adults (39%). Few networks focus on ethnic groups (11%) and business people (7%).

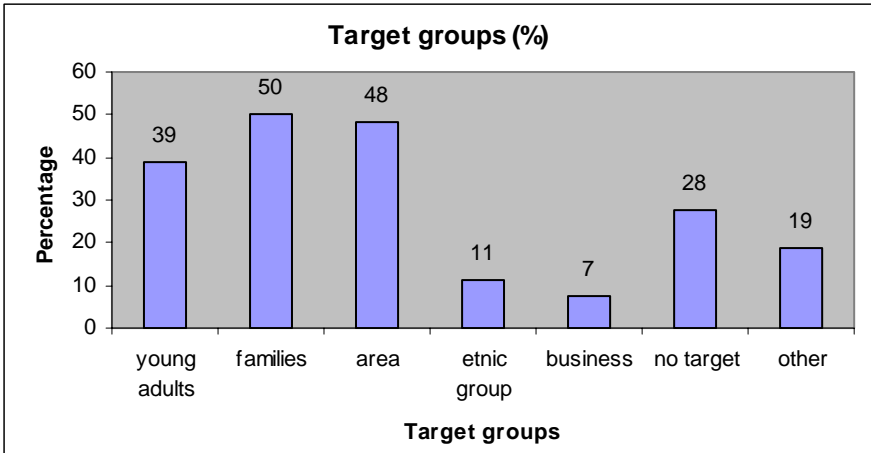


Chart 2: Target groups of the SC-networks (%)

57% of the networks are involved in cross-cultural ministry.

43% is not involved in cross-cultural ministry.

We found an inspiring example of a simple church network operating in the business world. A Swiss apostolic team started three businesses that combine regular work-for-profit with intentional discipleship, community life and multiplication of resources. The (mostly younger) people they hired were invited to live in community with a regular schedule of prayer, shared meals, and training. Just like Paul in Corinth (Acts 18), people are being equipped in the workplace to develop their skills, reach others and plant new simple church groups among their day-to-day contacts.

Three types of networks

Based on our observation and the interviews we held with network leaders, we see three types of simple church networks:

(a) Apostolic networks (32%): simple church groups started by an apostolic worker ‘straight in the harvest’, mostly along the lines of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples in Luke 10 (planting a new simple church group in a household/social circle instead of inviting people to an existing church meeting). These networks are primarily made up of new believers who just heard about Jesus, are being discipled, and win others to plant new groups.

(b) Bridge networks (50%): simple church groups made up of existing Christians who intentionally seek to be ‘missional’. They try to build relationships with non-believers, often using conventional forms of evangelism and a ‘come to us’ approach.

(c) Christian networks (18%): simple church groups formed by existing Christians who mainly seek a more relational and participatory alternative for conventional church. These groups tend to be inward-focused and sometimes reactionary: seeing their way of church as more biblical and healthy than the churches they come from.

The percentages come from our second (additional) survey and are only indicative.

Eight streams of house church

Wolfgang Simson¹, author of ‘Houses that change the world’, observes eight streams of house church. This is another illustration of the wide variety in the simple church landscape. Some of these streams were represented in our survey, others weren’t.

1. Regular house churches: groups of Christians that meet in homes. We see both single groups and organized networks, some of which have websites and are resourced by leadership/ministry teams.

¹ Wolfgang Simson, *Another sixpack of housechurches*, 2009

2. Off-the-grid house churches with 'Out of Church Christians' that intentionally do not want to be known, listed or be on anybody's radar. We find out about them by accident or through opinion polling or sampling, the kind of research George Barna does.
3. Business groups, either house churches within a company or those connecting folks in the business world.
4. More and more traditional churches are changing their home groups or even transitioning their whole lot into house churches.
5. Inside the Roman Catholic culture there is a surprisingly large amount of 'small churches' that are intentionally set up to cut out the middle layer of clergy and directly connect the people with Jesus and the Bible. In many cases, these groups are supported by bishops and cardinals.
6. Many historical churches, like the Anglican Church, develop 'small missional communities'.
7. Insider movements. A staggering amount of under-the-radar house churches are emerging within religious mega blocks like the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, New Agers and even within certain cults. But they choose to stay within their religious culture for effectiveness and to build bridges of God.
8. Media-birthered house churches, initiated by television, radio or online community facilitators.

The main blessings and challenges of simple church networks

What are the strengths and weaknesses of simple church networks in Europe?

Quality parameters

We asked the network leaders to score their network on four quality areas: fellowship/friendship, prayer/prophetic, missions/service/justice, and discipleship/reproduction.

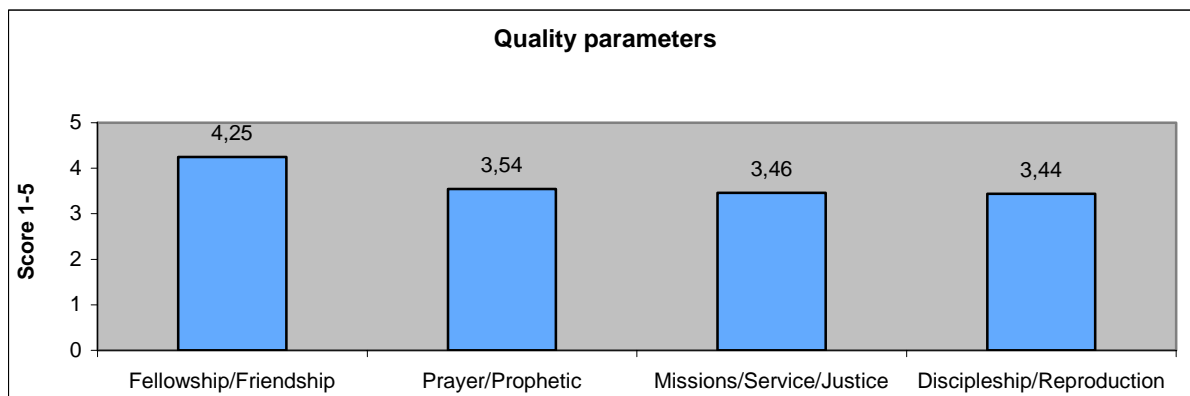


Chart 3: Score on four quality parameters (1 = very bad, 2 = insufficient, 3 = neutral, 4 = above average, 5 = very good)

A clearly perceived quality (above average/very good) of the simple church networks is friendship/fellowship, with the other quality areas ranging between neutral and above average.

Main blessings

To get an indication of how the simple church networks are doing, we asked the network leaders what they consider the main blessing for their network over the past 12 months.

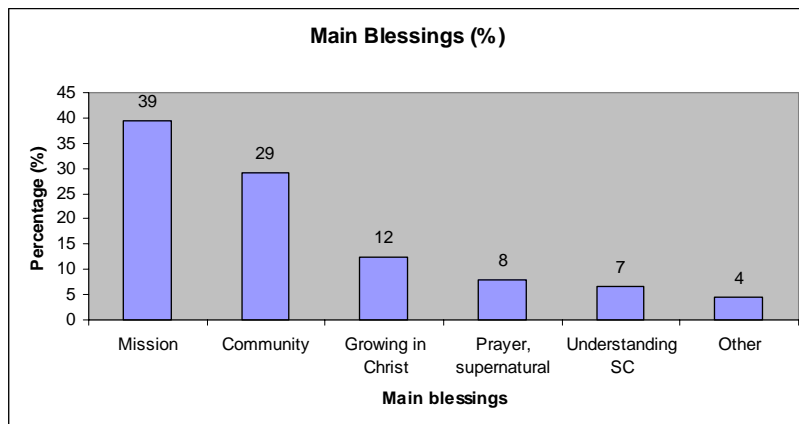


Chart 4: Main blessings of the different networks the last 12 months (%)

The main blessings of the networks can be summed up in three points:

- New disciples are being made and new churches planted (mission).
- People start to think and live more missional and develop ideas to reach non-believers (mission).
- People are blessed by the friendship within the simple church groups and the relationships between different groups in the network (community).

Main challenges

What do the networks consider as their main challenge in the next year?

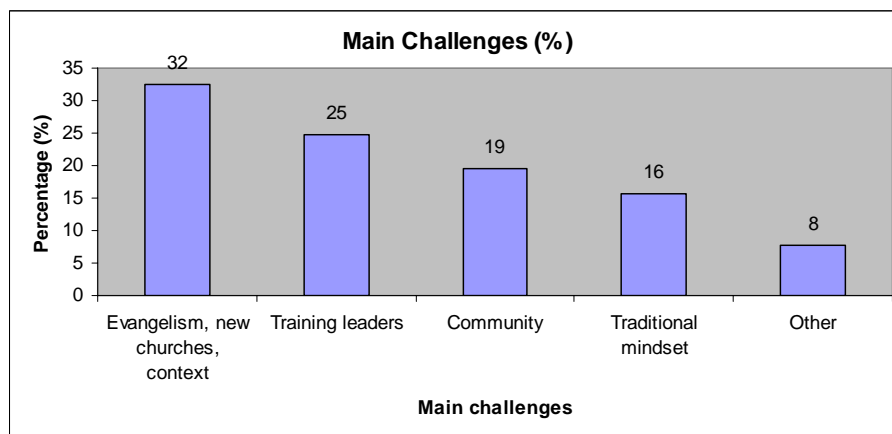


Chart 5: Main challenges of the SC-networks (%)

The main challenges of the networks can be summed up in three points:

- Making of new disciples of non-believers.
- Planting of churches that suit the culture and context (contextualisation).

- Training new leaders to lead and plant new churches.

Contextualisation

The simple church networks consider ‘mission’ (reaching new people with the Gospel) their ‘main blessing’ in 2009, but also point this out as their ‘main challenge’. We found that especially contextualisation is an issue. What is ‘good news’ to people, is the approach being perceived as relevant, are new faith communities really embedded in the culture?

What we can learn from networks that are successful in missions

The networks that are most successful in missions put a relatively high emphasis on:

- Prayer.
- Developing intentional relationships with non-believers.
- The gifts of the Holy Spirit (prophecy, healing).
- The ‘person of peace’ approach as instructed by Jesus in Luke 10 (planting a new simple church group in a household/social circle instead of inviting people to an existing church meeting).
- Interactive meetings where everyone can contribute.
- A focus on reproductive disciple making.

The following testimonies, extracted from our interviews with network leaders, illustrate this.

1. Healing Communities (Keith & Jeanne Smith and team, global network)

Healing Communities are small communities of Jesus followers that are dedicated to love God, love each other and bring healing to their communities. Worldwide there are approximately 1,000 communities; about 200 of those are in Europe. Keith & Jeanne use the Focused Compassion model, where they teach people in a 45-hour course about wholeness of spirit, soul and body, what is church and how to relate to non-believers. Out of this teaching, people start to freely lead other people to the Lord and start new churches. Keith & Jeanne are serving as a father and mother for the people they have trained. They work very organically and relationally and encourage people take up their own responsibilities. When a church is planted, they withdraw and keep a more loose connection. Keith said about the key of what they do: “There is no method for church planting! It’s very simple... Pray, listen to God and do what He tells you!”

2. Simple church network (Alex*, Switzerland)

A ‘Spirit led’ phone call in 2007 led to the beginning of a movement among esoteric practitioners in Switzerland. Alex, the simple church planter, told a friend of him about a ‘Christocentric healing course’ he was preparing. His friend got excited and soon Alex ended up teaching about Jesus in his friend’s house to an interested group of eight esoteric practitioners. Most of them came to Christ and started sharing the Gospel with others. Now there are already ten stable simple church groups, with more on the way. A longer interview with Alex is available on <http://simplechurch.eu/>.

(*real name known to Simple Church Europe, but withheld to protect his pioneering work)

3. C|movement (Florian Baertsch, Switzerland)

The aim of C|movement is to plant communities of faith within urban subcultures that are still unreached by the Gospel. In Zürich, like in most other large cities of Western Europe, society has become very fragmented. There are hundreds of subcultures like youth tribes, ethnic/immigrant groups, and religious groups, many unreached by the Gospel. Unreached means that some members of these groups might be Christians and visit a church outside their subculture, but within the subculture there are no indigenous communities of faith. C|movement uses a simple Luke 10 approach to plant communities of faith within these groups. Guided by the Holy Spirit they have been able to connect with esoteric practitioners, martial arts sportsmen, metalheads, Turks and various other groups. Friendships were started with 'persons of peace', people of influence within these social groups that are open to the Gospel. These 'persons of peace' stay in their subculture and a first community is planted with their friends and families.

4. New Life West (Matthew Helland, The Netherlands)

Matthew and his family live in Amsterdam. In their neighbourhood they intentionally build relationships with people from various ethnic backgrounds, and spend a lot of time in the houses and cafes in their area. They have been able to lead people to Jesus and start a number house churches where meetings take place an interactive and spontaneous way. Every week they host a kids' club with 45 children from a Muslim background. Matt works with Life Transformation Groups (LTG's), a model Neil Cole developed to make and multiply disciples. LTG's are groups of 2-3 people that meet weekly to discuss Scripture and accountability questions, and pray for non-believers in their social circle. LTG's have a simple but profound DNA:

- Divine Truth – reading Scripture.
- Nurturing Relationships – accountability questions.
- Apostolic Mission – reaching non-believers.

This DNA is the basis for being a disciple of Jesus. Besides, the method is easy, simple and without costs, which makes it highly reproducible.

5. Simple Church Network Ukraine (Timmy Powers, Ukraine)

Several years ago a couple of American missionaries, along with a small team of Ukrainians, started to reach out and disciple people, and intentionally form simple church groups. The ministry quickly grew into a handful of churches in the capital Kiev. To support the work and spread the vision, the team launched a Russian language website with resources and stories on simple church planting. Through the website, God opened doors to several other countries, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and more recently Latvia. Through the website, publishing of books and other materials, and various conferences and training events, several simple church networks and dozens of simple church groups have been planted. The most fruitful side of the ministry has been the work among drug addicts and alcoholics. It all started when a Ukrainian drug addict came to Christ. Since the turn-around of this 'man of peace', now two and a half years ago, more than 35 other drug addicts and alcoholics have come to Christ. In addition, over the past year and a half four rehab centres that function as churches have been opened. In the centres, the former addicts live together in community, read the Word, pray and farm the land in order to provide for their own needs. The changed lives of these men and women are now in turn impacting many of their friends and family as well. Truly the biblical principle of going into the harvest to reach

people, make disciples and see simple churches spring up and multiply, is occurring more and more in the Russian speaking world.

Training leaders and simple church planters

Another challenge, which goes hand in hand with the challenge of mission, is the training of leaders: people who can lead the simple church groups as well as plant new ones. Most networks do have a team of leaders in place that serves the network. They gather regularly for encouragement, sharing and teaching. In some cases there is a 'five-fold ministry team' that travels to the different house churches to encourage and inspire. Although most of the networks do have 'internal leadership', the challenge remains to raise up 'apostolic' leaders to plant new churches.

85% of the networks have a leadership team in place.

56% of the networks have a simple church planting training in place.

In the last year the networks trained each on average 12 people to plant new churches.

Of the people trained 17% also started a new simple church group.

Recommendations for training

Network leaders who intentionally train new leaders, gave the following recommendations:

- Be intentional in developing and training leaders to plant new churches. Invest time in people and be strategic in starting new groups.
- Train leaders on the job instead of in a classroom setting. As a mentor develop a good relationship with your emerging leaders, listen to their needs and the needs of the group, and establish teaching as the needs arise (menu teaching).
- Train leaders in an interactive way. After all simple church meetings need to be participatory and interactive. By modelling this, people learn to share, use their gifting, and encourage one another.
- Right from the start plan for multiplication of leaders (2 Tim 2:2). Expect emerging leaders to immediately pass on to others what they learn. As a leader you have to delegate responsibility as quickly as possible, and learn to coach 'from the back'.
- Raise up and train leaders in the harvest: let new converts stay in their social network, and help them reach their friends for Christ.

How many simple church networks and groups are there in Europe, and what is their growth rate?

There have been several attempts to estimate the number of simple church groups in Europe, but as far as we know this is the first coordinated research effort. Starting with our primary connections we found 69 simple church networks across 16 countries in Europe that matched our definition, of which 48 networks participated in the survey.

Networks per country

Most simple church networks we found in the Netherlands (19). Second and third are Germany and Switzerland with 16 and 10 simple church networks. This is partly explained by the fact that our team is based in the Netherlands and we have most contacts in the Germanic nations.

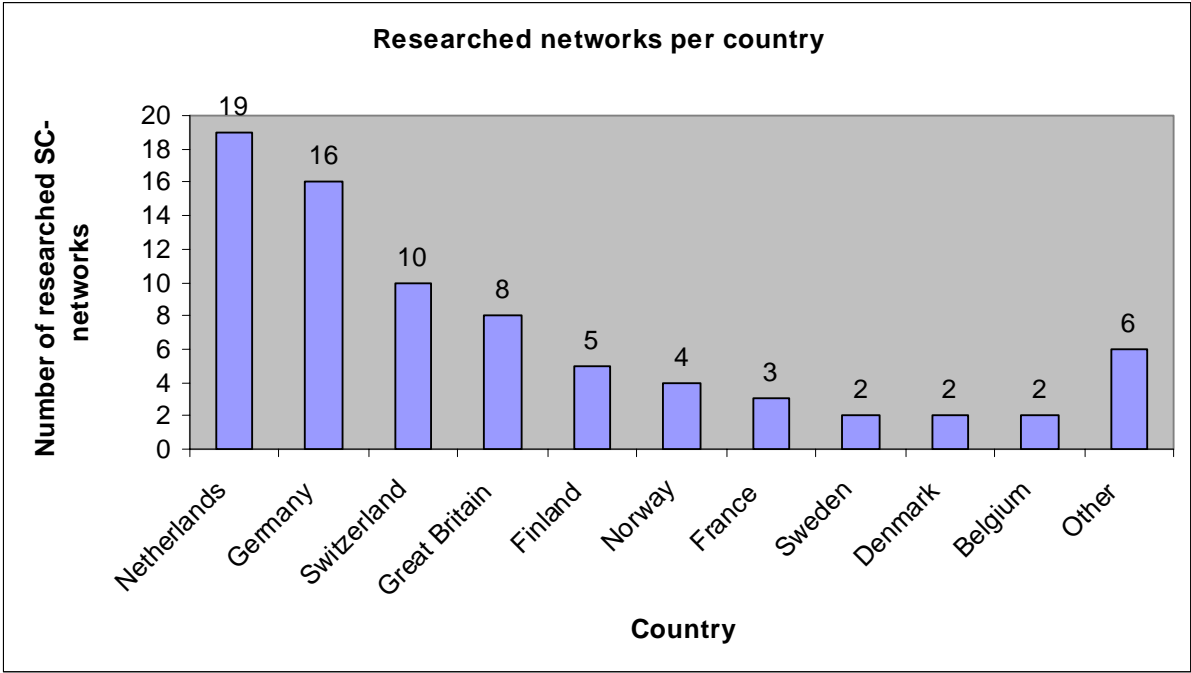


Chart 6: Total researched simple church networks per country

The crucial year 2000

Interestingly most of these networks started in the past ten years; the year 2000 seems to have been a turning point. We asked the network leaders when they started their first simple church group and when it developed into a network of multiple groups. The average year the first group started is 2001, and the average year the groups developed into a network is 2004. So within three years the single groups evolved into networks. This also shows that the simple church movement in Europe is still fairly young and in a pioneering phase.

Number of churches and people involved

We asked the network leaders how many small groups they have in their network and how many people are part of these groups. On average a simple church network is made up of 9 small groups and 96 people, roughly 11 people per small group.

A possible extrapolation approach: 'the wisdom of crowds'

Of course there are many (probably hundreds of) simple church networks in Europe that we are not aware of. For practical reasons we limited our research to our first (and a few second) degree contacts. We used a definition that excluded a number of networks and all single groups that don't function in a network. Realizing that our research scope is limited and only indicative, we wondered: would it be possible to reach an 'informed estimation' (not a wild guess) for the whole of Europe?

In 2006 the European Missions Research Group (emRG) published the 'European Spiritual Estimate'², for which they used James Surowiecki's 'wisdom crowds' approach. They asked a good number of well-informed missions leaders in Europe to make an informed estimation about the number of churches in their region and their effectiveness in evangelism. This led to an overview of Europe that pretty much seemed to match with the perceived reality on the ground.

Could this approach be used to reach a realistic estimation of the total number of simple church groups in Europe? When we asked 20 network leaders by e-mail to estimate how many simple church groups there are in the whole of Europe, their average guess was about 8,000 groups. Obviously this is quite speculative; how can you know? Also the question how many simple church groups there are in your nation would be difficult to answer. But in your own city or village, as an informed and connected leader, you could probably tell with a high certainty how many simple church groups there are.

From a local count to a European estimation

We decided to test this by taking a closer look at the local level, in our case the city of Utrecht and the town of Houten in the Netherlands, where we are working with simple church groups ourselves. In Utrecht (301.632 inhabitants) we know for sure about the existence of eight simple church groups. This means one group on 37,704 inhabitants. In Houten (47.479 inhabitants) we know four simple church groups. This means one group on 9,410 inhabitants.

If the average between a larger city and a smaller town would be indicative, the Netherlands would have an average of one simple church group per 29,093 people. Knowing that the Netherlands has 16,499,085 inhabitants, this would mean 567 simple church groups in the whole nation. As we only counted the local groups we knew personally, not including groups we are not aware of, this is a conservative estimation.

² Scott Friderich, *European Spiritual Estimate*, 2006, available at <http://www.emrgnet.eu/> (select emRG Wiki)

Now how to move from the national to the European level? Obviously nations like Spain, Norway and Russia are very different from the Netherlands. But we know of simple church initiatives in almost every nation of Europe, and so the question is: how do we 'weigh' the different nations in terms of 'simple church presence'? We decided to group the nations of Europe based on Operation World's³ percentage of Evangelicals. The average percentage of Evangelicals in Protestant-Anglican Europe is 6.2% of the total population. In Catholic-Orthodox Europe this percentage is 1.2%. We used these percentages, together with the population data of the nations, to weigh and extrapolate the Dutch data. Assuming that in Protestant-Anglican Europe the simple church situation is more or less the same as in the Netherlands, the total number of simple church groups would be around 7,000. In Catholic-Orthodox Europe it would be 4,300 groups. This brings the European total of simple church groups on 11,300. Knowing there are on average 9 groups in a network, this would mean a total of 1,255 simple church networks across 45 nations. With an average of 11 people in a group, this would mean 124,300 people are part of simple church networks in Europe.

Total number of networks and groups in Europe

Because this is just an informed estimation of two individuals, not a true 'wisdom of crowds' approach, we decided to include this question in our second (additional) survey. We asked the network leaders to count the number of simple church groups in their own city, town or region and (based on the number of inhabitants) extrapolate this to their nation. Using the same calculation approach as described above, this brings the total number of simple church networks in Europe to 1,417, the number of simple church groups to 12,757, and the number of people involved in these groups to 140,327. Obviously, if instead of 22 network leaders 100 people would do this, the reliability would increase substantially.

How fast are the simple church networks really growing?

In 2009 the simple church networks planted on average 2.5 new groups, which is a growth rate of 22%. These 2.5 groups represent 30 new members, of which 7 came from a non-Christian background and 23 were already Christians. So 23% could be considered 'real harvest' and 77% is a 'recycling of the saints'. Our second survey, held one year later, showed a similar overall growth rate of 21%, but a better 'harvest rate' of 34% non-Christians versus 66% Christians.

Much better than conventional churches

In many nations in Europe the membership of institutional churches is declining. In the Netherlands for instance the decline of the mainline protestant and catholic denominations is between (minus) 1 and 3% annually⁴. Free evangelical churches are doing a bit better with an average growth of 0.5% annually (some are growing, some are shrinking). Compared to this, the simple church networks are doing quite well with an average growth of

³ Patrick Johnstone & Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 2001, p. 49. A new edition of Operation World was released in 2010, with a similar percentage of Evangelicals.

⁴ CBS, *Religie aan het begin van de 21ste eeuw*, <http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/953535E3-9D25-4C28-A70D-7A4AEEA76E27/0/2008e16pub.pdf>

22%.

Growth trends in the networks

61% of the networks indicate they are growing.

37% say they are stable.

2% say they declined.

In the second survey we asked the network leaders to categorize their network as an Apostolic, Bridge or Christian network (see page 10) and we linked this to the quantitative data.

	Apostolic networks	Bridge networks	Christian networks
Average number of groups started per network in 2010	1.86	1.64	1.25
Groups dissolved	0.57	0.55	0.25
Net group growth	1.29	1.09	1.00
Average number of real conversions per network in 2010	10.43	4.36	1.50
Total percentage of people in the network that converted from a non-Christian background	41.14	11.45	8.75

Table 1: Growth trend of the Apostolic, Bridge and Christian networks

More new simple church groups were started by the Apostolic networks than by the Bridge and Christian networks, but it's not a substantial lead, about 10-29%. The real difference is in the number of people who converted from a non-Christian background. Here we see that the Apostolic networks are four to seven times more effective in mission than the Christian networks, and two to four times more fruitful than the Bridge networks. The Bridge networks are on a learning curve.

We found a similar outcome in Mary Bufton's⁵ 2004 research on German and Swiss house church networks. The networks that grow fastest focus mainly on not-yet believers. They intentionally reach specific target groups and strategically train people to make disciples and plant new churches.

No 'rabbits' in Europe

Compared to traditional churches in Europe, the simple church networks are doing well, and offer a promising way forward. The majority of the networks have a steady growth curve. However, it's also fair to conclude that in Europe we don't see the exponential 'rabbit-type' growth that marks the simple church movements in India and China. Europe is the most secularized continent in the world. The church has largely lost her influence and has been pressed into the margins. The Christian subculture with its many activities has become almost irrelevant

⁵ Mary Bufton, *Hauskirchen-Netzwerke Deutschsweiz: Eine Untersuchung*, 2004, p. 52,53

to non-believers. Simple church planters are pioneering their way forward from a difficult starting position, and – in a way – have to ‘reinvent’ what it means to follow Jesus and form a Christ-centered community of faith with a message to the world.

Conclusion and recommendations

We compiled this status report as a service to the simple church movement in Europe, and to churches and missions groups that consider shifting to the simple church approach.

Simple church groups value healthy relationships, the ‘priesthood of all believers’, an open learning environment and missionary creativity. In most cases simple church groups are started and shaped ‘bottom-up’, not top-down. They develop relationally across the various social networks (niches). Simple church groups have a great potential to bring the Kingdom of God in the day-to-day life of our network society.

Three recommendations

Based on the outcomes of this research and our contacts with simple church planters we offer three recommendations:

1. Actively learn from the ‘Apostolic networks’

The simple church networks that are being planted ‘straight in the harvest’, along the lines of Luke 10, form the vanguard of the simple church movement. What can we learn from them about discipleship, missions, contextualisation, training leaders and multiplication? Check out www.simplechurch.eu for some of their stories, resources and ‘best practice’. We encourage simple church groups and networks to actively connect with, support and learn from apostolic workers who plant and coach new communities of faith. They sow the seeds of tomorrow’s church. Not only do they need our prayers and financial support, they can also train and mentor new simple church planters, and coach existing simple church groups to be fruitful and multiply.

2. Be very intentional and ‘out of the box’ in missions

Missions, connecting people to Jesus and his Kingdom, is exciting. But it’s not something that happens automatically. We have to be intentional and think ‘out of the box’. Simple church groups can be started anywhere. Not just in neighborhoods, but also in schools, work places, cafes. We encourage simple church groups to adopt a new locality or people group in prayer, and at God’s timing send a team to identify a ‘person of peace’ and plant a new group.

3. Coach and train Christians how to plant simple church groups

Starting a simple church group isn’t difficult, but there are a few principles and skills to learn. Networks that intentionally train their people grow and multiply faster than networks that don’t. The Luke 10 Manual, available on www.simplechurch.eu might be of help. Perhaps we can connect you to experienced trainers from other simple church networks. Traditional churches that consider ‘going more simple’, would do well to create vital space for young people to form missions teams and experiment with simple forms of church. Many of the

growing simple church networks involve younger leaders in multi-generational teams. They learn by doing, it's shaping their character and skills, and it can be a great learning experience for the whole community.

Evaluation of the research

The purpose of this research was to 'take the pulse' of the simple church movement in Europe. We realise that it is a start and work on improving the survey. We aim to enlarge the pool of respondents and fine-tune questions and indicators.

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Simple Church Europe

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