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Charles Arn President, Church Growth, Inc.

8to15

**THE WORLD
IS SMALLER
THAN YOU THINK**



TOM MERCER



INTRODUCTION

LIVING IN A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE GOES TO CHURCH

I serve as a pastor to a group of people who call themselves High Desert Church. We live in the high desert of Southern California, on the I-15 corridor about halfway between San Diego and Las Vegas. The people who attend HDC are extraordinary. Not because they look different than most people who claim to be Christ followers, but because most of them actually follow Christ—not perfectly, of course, but intentionally, to be sure. There is no way for me to convey the message in this book without invoking the experience I've shared with HDC. They've provided a laboratory-like environment where oikocentric thinking has not just taken root—it's taken over!

I realize an author's first responsibility is to, as they say, "define the audience." That is, the sooner a reader recognizes which audience the author has targeted, the sooner he or she can determine if they're part of it! From the beginning, I was inclined to write to any Christian who wants to make a profound difference in their world. The oikos principle certainly provides momentum to that end and the lion's share of the final product focuses there. But as the process unfolded, I realized how critical HDC's role has been in creating a more ideal environment for worldchange to germinate—and the pastor in me began to seep out. If that confuses anyone, I offer a very sincere apology in advance, but I just cannot separate the role of the local church from the mission of the individual believer. At the least, a book about an oikocentric life and a book about an oikocentric church certainly belong on the same shelf. In this case, they will share the same cover.

FORCED TO CHANGE THE WORLD

We hear a lot about China these days, usually regarding the Chinese economy—but that's not the only thing that's grown over there recently. The church in China has grown at a rate history has never witnessed before. Although public Christian assembly remains either banned or heavily monitored, the house church movement has exploded, with

much of the growth now migrating from rural areas into the urban centers of the country. In 1949, when the rest of the world was virtually cut off from the Chinese church, there were an estimated 500,000 baptized Evangelical Chinese believers. Today estimates are as high as 130,000,000. And it's not just China—go ahead and Google the underground church in Iran. They're experiencing unparalleled growth as well. In fact Christianity is growing most rapidly in all of the regions of the world where you would least expect it.

When I heard missionary reports about the oppressed church as a kid, I remember connecting dots between spiritual power and martyrdom. Not being too fond of the idea of oppression, political or otherwise, the idea of Christian ministry actually scared me. If you share that same aversion to prison time, here is some good news—it isn't persecution that generates growth, it's the ministry model that political oppression actually *forces* us to embrace. When the church is forced out of a traditional leader-centered ministry model, where the focus is on the platform ministry of highly gifted leaders, into a more relational oikocentric model, where the focus is on the personal ministry of individual believers, the results are startling. Ask a typical Chinese believer where they go to church and they'll probably tell you the same thing Jesus did—they don't go to church, they *are* the church!

If only we could keep that focus when we're not oppressed! But as governments become more tolerant of Christianity, allowing large assemblies to become the center of church life, our tendency is to shift our focus to leadership gifts, leadership conferences and leadership development strategies—and Christian leaders are tempted to think more about moving up the food chain while parishioners tend to think less about reaching out to non-believers to instead focus on finding the best places to “have their needs met” and “be well fed.”

In contrast to those regions where Evangelicalism is growing most rapidly, it is growing in the U.S. by a lethargic 0.8%. Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry's *Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America* reports that “less than 20% of Americans regularly attend church—half of what the pollsters report.”¹ Among others, they cite respected sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, whose research revealed that the actual number of people worshipping each week is closer to 52 million

people instead of the pollster-reported 132 million (40%). The reason for the discrepancy is what researchers call “the halo effect”—what people tell pollsters versus what they actually do.

But I am proposing that both the mainline 40% pollsters and the less-optimistic 20% pollsters are both wrong. They’re research might be dead on but I still think they’re wrong. I believe that virtually 100% of the people in this country attend church every week—because church isn’t someplace you go—it’s someone you know! So most people, who don’t yet know what a personal relationship with God looks like and will not be attending a worship service in any particular church building this weekend, will probably still have the chance to see the power of Jesus demonstrated every single day! They’re attendance might not be recorded in a database, but people seldom come to Christ because of a pastor’s sermon or a great worship band anyway. Virtually all of us who know Christ made our decision to follow Him through a personal relationship with one or more believers who either demonstrated faith to us or answered our questions or (most likely) both—during the week, over the course of many weeks, but not necessarily on a weekend.

But before we move on, let me get this straight—even with all of our emphasis on church leadership, preaching and vision over the past several decades (to say nothing of our marketing campaigns), we can still only talk two out of every ten Americans into coming into a building once a week to listen to us “annointed” leaders preach, yet ten out of ten Americans are interacting with the church on a daily basis.

Hmmm.

That’s certainly not to say that attending a weekend service is unimportant—but if that service is not focused on that most important statistic of all then it certainly has lost any relevance to the church’s mission. When people hear about HDC, the immediate assumption is that we are a church for “seekers,” but we are not. Neither do we aspire to be the “believers” church many of us grew up in. We’re not necessarily looking for seekers or believers—we want “partners.” Simply stated, HDC is a support group for worldchangers. So if you also want to change your world, or if you want to partner with others in that great cause, then keep reading because you can do both! And you might be surprised to discover that the world is actually smaller than you think!

oikos *n*, extended household (Gr.)

1. the most natural and common environment for evangelism to occur
2. a group of eight to fifteen people with whom you share life most closely, your sphere of greatest influence
3. the people for whom God wants to prepare you to become an ideal instrument of His grace
4. a microcosm of the world at large, for whom God sent His Son—that all who place their faith in Christ would be delivered from the bondage of sin and enjoy life to the fullest

worldchanger *n*, someone who actively encourages people in their relational world (their oikos) to become Christ followers

oikocentric *adj*, having evaluated purpose through the lense of oikos

“All great change in America begins at the dinner table.”

CHAPTER 1

A NEW PAIR OF GLASSES

It was amazing! A group of four students had grown to more than 300, and in just a few years. The amazing part was that it was our youth group. I was their youth pastor, and yet all that growth had little if anything to do with me. Those young people had taken a simple concept and turned their worlds upside down. A few years later, there we were, ministering to more than 300 kids. But let's back up a bit.

Back in 1979 my Senior Pastor asked me to attend a seminar with him, one led by Dr. Win Arn. Up until then neither of us had heard much about the word *oikos* let alone the principle behind it. I had been hired by the church because the youth ministry needed a boost. (The first Bible study I led had a grand total of four students in attendance. That's right, four!) It was at Dr. Arn's seminar that I was introduced to the basic principle I'm going to share with you. Of course time and experience have refined its implementation, but its efficiency lies in its pure simplicity.

That seminar lit a fire under me. Up to that point I was hesitant to introduce evangelism to the youth group at all. I remembered my own experience with evangelism as a student and never felt comfortable. So for the first time I began feeling like I could be a strategic part of the Great Commission in a natural, authentic way. My Senior Pastor encouraged me to go for it. I felt like a youth pastor unleashed! Three years later the youth group was on the verge of outgrowing the church. Over 300 students had taken this simple idea seriously and had literally turned our community on its ear.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Church leaders often struggle with the ongoing challenge of reaching the next generation, but why is it such a struggle? Maybe a better question would be, why do so many young people stay away from church? I would propose that people will generally do most anything if they're given a good enough reason. Most young people stay away from church for the same reason most older people stay away from church—they simply haven't been given a compelling reason to go. People need a better reason to attend church than "because it's the right thing to do!" The post-modern world we live in no longer recognizes right and wrong with that level of clarity.

A local church may also be tempted to merely see themselves as a self-perpetuating entity, to invite younger Christians to attend only for the sake of keeping the church from folding up its tent. You can often sense their fear in the conversation—that the ministry they've shared for decades would die on their watch. But is that a good reason to have a church—just to see if we can keep it alive for one more generation?

People young and old need to be challenged to see beyond the preoccupations of a self-absorbed culture and look to change their world. Young people want that. When they first emerge onto the scene, every generation aspires to be worldchangers, that is until society convinces them they can't be and the demands of day-to-day survival crush the dream. Well, guess what? That youth group—those four kids were convinced that they could be worldchangers, at least in their own worlds. And then they did it. And that's the point.

God wants to change the world. And we shouldn't be surprised by that—it's not just a story in the Bible, it's the story *of* the Bible. Unfortunately, most of us are content with a good Sunday sermon, comfortable music and lunch afterward with our friends. Most Christians show little interest in worldchange, much less being actual worldchangers. But a nice comfortable church is not the plan that Jesus, the Head of the Church, laid out. He's building a powerful one!

YOU MEAN THERE IS A PLAN?

Jesus designed, taught, modeled, and then gave His plan to His

Church. Our task is to simply read the directions and follow that plan. It has been there all the time. The early church had it. The modern church seems to have lost it. But churches around the world are discovering that the oikos model still works as well now as it did then, and that anyone can participate!

Oikos is not a program. It's not an event. It's not an emphasis. It's actually like a new pair of glasses through which we can see our world the way Jesus did. Now pushing 60, my eyesight continues to falter. I'm not asking for sympathy, just that you'd bring a high powered flashlight to the restaurant and show me the inside of the menu from the other side of the table! Anyway, a few years ago I finally had to do what I had been procrastinating about for years—go see an optometrist. He fitted me with a pair of glasses that for the first time in a long time allowed me to see the world around me with clarity. The funny thing is, until I put them on I didn't realize how really poor my vision had ever so gradually become.

In a spiritual dimension, Dr. Arn was my optometrist. I put on my oikos lenses that day and haven't taken them off since! I read the Scriptures with more clarity, see ministry with a sharper focus and plan my daily schedule with a greater sense of urgency. Now I've become somewhat of a spiritual optometrist myself—helping others see how every believer has the opportunity to be God's instrument in the most effective arena possible—their own circle of relationships.

Here's how it works. God has given each of us, on average, anywhere from eight to fifteen people whom He has supernaturally and strategically placed in our relational worlds. The Greeks used one word to describe this personal world—oikos, or "extended household." This is the world God wants to use each of us to change, our individual world!

God has always utilized the family unit as the primary arena for effective evangelism. But the word "families" in the Bible refers to more than we are used to thinking about when we consider families in today's world.

Hans Walter Wolf describes the family unit in the Old Testament. "A household usually contained four generations, including men, married women, unmarried daughters, slaves of both sexes, persons without

citizenship and 'sojourners,' or resident foreign workers." ¹

Keeping that in mind, consider the following verses about the spiritual dynamic in the centrality of the family in God's plan.

"There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you." (Deuteronomy 12:7)

"And there rejoice before the LORD your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns, who have no allotment or inheritance of their own." (Deuteronomy 12:12)

That same extended family continues to be the focus in the New Testament. The Greek word *oikos* describes that same relational target.

President Ronald Reagan was often referred to as The Great Communicator. He was also a great motivator. His larger than life persona and folksy style transcended ideological walls. He was a master at casting a grand vision for a better world while still clarifying how each of us must focus—what every American could and should contribute to our national destiny. "All great change in America," he said, "begins at the dinner table." ²

Jesus would agree. In fact, He said it first and even said it often. Further, He has actually set a table for you—a table with anywhere from eight to fifteen chairs around it! Your *oikos* might include the clerk at the grocery store where you shop every week, the server you talk to at a favorite restaurant or that person you keep running into every day at work. Our *oikos* comprises different kinds of people, all with different needs, but they've all been supernaturally and strategically placed there for a reason—God wants to demonstrate His love and grace to them all through us. We all have an *oikos*. Your *oikos* does not contain the same eight to fifteen people who make up mine. But it is that world, *your* world, that God wants to transform, to bring to Himself through the one common denominator they all share—you!

“He wants Texas back !”

CHAPTER 2

I CAN DO THIS!

I hear the same thing nearly every time I finish presenting an oikos workshop. Sometimes it's a rookie, fresh out of seminary, excited with the prospects of reinvigorating the church. Sometimes it comes from church volunteers, overwhelmed with their workload and already weary of the prospective “next” program. Sometimes it's from veteran pastors who have tried everything they could get their hands on to involve their church in the Great Commission. But most often it comes from someone who has grown up in church praying that others would somehow do what they don't believe they can—change the world for Christ.

A few years ago I began meeting regularly with a group of pastors in San Diego. As you can imagine, from the very beginning of the group's relationship, the oikos principle bled into every one of our conversations. But one of the guys would look at me sideways every time oikos came up. He just couldn't believe effective ministry could evolve out of such a simple premise. I talked him into attending a workshop anyway, hoping he would come to better understand the principle—at least then he would know what he was rejecting!

After the first part of the presentation was over he walked up to me and said, “I'm sold,” as if there was never a doubt! I actually thought he was teasing me—up to that point he had been so resistant it was hard to believe he had done a “180” so quickly. I asked, “What happened?”

“Tom,” he said, “it was the weirdest thing. About halfway through your talk, my wife leaned over to me and whispered, ‘I can do this!’ When she said that, the light went on!”

OIKOS IS A NATURAL

The oikos model is the most natural organizational principle for both the lifestyle of a Christian and the ministry of a local church. Another way to describe oikos is that it is organic. It is totally authentic—there is nothing artificial about it. It's not imported from someone or somewhere else. In fact, it's already at work wherever you attend church, in your home and in your individual life.

It *fits* all ages and levels of maturity.

It *flows* naturally out of a Christian lifestyle.

It *fuels* discipleship like no program can.

It *facilitates* the growth of Christ's church like nothing else.

It *finances* itself.

It is *faithful* to the Bible.

But the oikos model is also simple—and that's important because the spiritual heritage of our salvation is rooted in simplicity.

The warning in the Garden of Eden was simple.

Stay away from just one tree.

The cost of disobedience was simple.

You will die.

The Law's lesson was simple.

We're in trouble.

The plan of redemption is simple.

We can be set free.

The price of redemption was simple.

A perfect Sacrifice.

The message of the cross is simple.

Unconditional love.

The essence of salvation is simple.

Amazing grace.

In baseball lingo those are all fastballs. No junk, nothing sneaky or complicated. Ninety miles an hour, right over the middle of the plate. So when it comes to His strategy for evangelism why would God throw us a hard slider down and away? As I said before, nobody would ever say Christianity is easy, but it has always been simple.

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THE VERSE THAT HAUNTS ME THE MOST

“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19)

There is a context to that statement to be sure, but the essence is clear. The Apostles were like us. Left to their own devices, they tended to make everything more difficult than it should be. The Gospel was just their latest victim.

You would expect that from the Judaizers. Kings of complexity and yet they were Christians. They prided themselves on being more “legal” than anyone, but perfectionism gets complicated. For them it evolved well beyond commitment. They became impossible to please because the Law was impossible to oblige. Nobody could ever accuse them of not trying, but at the end of the day, it was like being declared the Valedictorian of Summer School—who cares?

So, before any further damage could be done, the Apostle Paul called them out. At the first Council of the Christian church, James and the rest of his legal team were forced to deal with what the Gospel really was. Before the day was over, they at least came to grips with what it really wasn't. And what it wasn't was complicated! James' words reflect his concern that he had been part and parcel to the unthinkable—he had actually been making it difficult for non-believers to come to Christ. This was only a few years after the cross and the fire of the church was already being doused by waves of complexity.

WE'VE MET THE ENEMY

Back in 1981, Fernandomania gripped the City of Los Angeles. Dodger fans couldn't get enough of Fernando Valenzuela, a kid from Sonora, Mexico. His efforts made him the odds-on favorite to be the league's top rookie, starting the season 8-0 with five shutouts and an ERA of 0.50. When asked about Valenzuela's contract negotiations, Tommy Lasorda, the longtime Manager of the Dodgers, responded matter-of-factly, “He wants Texas back!”¹ Lasorda had a knack for getting his point across—the kid's payday would certainly be huge.

But as large as it seemed at the time, Fernando's contract was peanuts compared to what players are paid these days! Now a self-aggrandizing web of complex business transactions, litigation, ridiculous contracts and even more ridiculous cable television deals, the simple game we loved to play as kids seems to have lost much of its soul.

Some years ago, I was invited to interview with a publishing company. Its Editor-in-Chief was one of the kindest and godliest men I've ever known. A mutual friend had sent him some of my reflections about the Scriptures. I was encouraged that he believed in me and was honored that his editors would give me some of their valuable time. I walked into the main exhibition hall of the convention center that day and, quite frankly, couldn't believe what I saw. It was the world's largest assemblage of Christian publishers, corporate Christianity at its best. This is not meant as a critical commentary, business is what it is. I met many wonderful people that day, virtually all of them reflecting a sincere desire to do Kingdom work. But, that aside, what impressed me the most was how we had all somehow been sucked into a vortex of complexity.

In what has unfortunately become the competitive and complex world of faith, we have met the enemy—and they are us! While we regularly try to reinvent the church in as many ways as our conferences and seminars can explain, the biblical strategy for changing the world remains constant. The foundation of that strategy is *oikos*. And what it lacks in creativity it also lacks in complexity. Which, of course, is why even *I can do this!*

“We strayed from the formula and we paid the price!”

CHAPTER 3

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

In research, 95% is a statistical anomaly or, as Malcolm Gladwell would designate it, an *outlier*—“a statistical observation that is markedly different in value from the others of the sample.”¹

For example, if medical research revealed that, of all those who experienced remission from cancer, 95% had received the same type of treatment, you better believe that’s all the oncology world would be talking about.

Or if a Golf Magazine reporter discovered that, of all of the golfers who had won a tournament championship on the tour over the last twenty years, 95% of them used the same brand of golf ball, it would not only be the cover story, but every other supplier would be breaking down that one ball, trying to figure out what makes it tick.

Or if 95% of the MVP’s in all professional sports grew up in your hometown, ESPN would have already been out there testing the water!

Or if 95% of all believers came to Christ through the same ministry model, you’d think that every Christian seminary, magazine and church would be all over it. But if you *did* think that, you’d be advised to think again. That’s what amazes me—of all of those who placed their faith in Jesus, from every generation, culture and denomination for the past 2,000 years, it seems that 95% came to Christ primarily through the influence of someone in their *oikos*, yet many churches essentially dismiss it.

Oikos is an outlier because we naturally have more opportunities to share Christ with those people we are around the most. As a result, our faith can be demonstrated to our *oikos* in our daily lives, as we’re carefully scrutinized on a regular basis by those eight to fifteen people.

God is absolutely sold on using your extended household, your oikos, as the natural arena where your testimony can be clearly communicated. We will talk more later about exactly how to determine who is in your oikos and what specifically to do about them, but the idea should not surprise anyone who has read the New Testament.

THE ORIGINAL PLAN

After healing the demon possessed man, Jesus told him specifically to: “Go home to your own people (oikos) and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” (Mark 5:19)

Immediately following Zacchaeus’ conversion, Jesus reflected on what had just happened:

“Today salvation has come to this house (oikos).” (Luke 19:9)

When Jesus healed the son of a royal official:

“...he and his whole household (oikos) believed.” (John 4:53)

Jesus called Levi (Matthew) to be His disciple:

“While Jesus was having dinner [with] Levi’s house (oikos) many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.” (Mark 2:15)

In Acts 10 we see the first example of a Gentile oikos coming to Christ. Cornelius responded to the Gospel presentation that Peter made and he and his household became believers. In reporting to the church leaders in Jerusalem, Peter reflected on what the angel had told Cornelius about Peter:

“He will bring you a message through which you and all your household (oikos) will be saved.” (Acts 11:14)

The story continued in Philippi with Lydia and the city jailor, both of whom responded to the Apostle Paul’s challenge to place their faith in Christ. Acts 16 describes how, in both cases, an oikos believed and were all baptized. And as the Biblical record comes to an end, the same tactical approach to worldchange continues to gain momentum from one century to the next. Our “households” have always been the most natural arenas where our testimonies can be most clearly and

powerfully communicated.

A SURPRISING LOOK

Research by Dr. Thom Reiner revealed *“Ten Surprises About the Unchurched.”*² Over the course of three years, his research team of seventeen men and women took to the streets of America. They covered all fifty states, interviewing a diversity of ethnic groups and socioeconomic groups. Wide-ranging demographic areas were also covered, and as many females as males were interviewed. There were those from a modest education all the way to doctoral degrees. Every person interviewed was deemed to be both unchurched and non-Christian. During those three years, they uncovered some interesting facts.

- Most of the unchurched feel guilty about not attending church. If they feel guilty, then why do they avoid church? Their research revealed that the unchurched do not feel as if they can fit into the protocol of a local church. They feel they will be out of place.

- 96% of the unchurched are at least somewhat likely to attend church if they are invited. 96%! That means, of the 160 million unchurched people in the United States, 154 million of them would be at least somewhat likely to come to church if someone would just invite them—but only 2% of active churchgoers ever do!

- Very few of the unchurched have ever had someone share with them how to become a Christian. In light of the fact that so few people invite an unchurched individual to attend church, it is not a shock to discover that neither do they invite them to know Christ.

- Most of the unchurched have a positive view of pastors and the church. Only a few said they thought that clergy were hypocrites or only after their money. That again was a paradigm shift for me because I had been told that everybody who didn't go to church thought the primary reason I wanted them to come was to tithe. But evidently, according to the research, that is not the case.

- Many of the unchurched have a church background, which tells us that they left church for a reason. And the reason is because many of

them attended churches that had no relevance to them—which means if we are going to reach them we may have to rethink the ways we do church.

- Some types of cold calls are effective, but many are not. The definition of a cold call is simply engaging in a conversation to which you have not been invited. One guy they interviewed said, “I don’t mind talking to people from churches, but please don’t show up at my home without an invitation—it reminds me of a telephone solicitation, only worse.”

- The unchurched would like to develop a real and sincere relationship with a Christian. The irony is, virtually all of them have regular relationships with a number of Christians already.

- The attitudes of the unchurched are not correlated to where they live, their ethnic or racial background or their gender. In other words, the same attitudes tend to cross over all of those boundaries.

- Many of the unchurched are far more concerned about the spiritual well being of their children than they are about themselves.

Pulling all of that together, the whole thing looks like a set up! I mean, if the vast majority of people in the U.S. have never had anyone tell them how to become a Christian, yet 96% of the unchurched population would be receptive if someone simply invited them to church, and most non-believers would like to develop a close relationship with a Christ follower...what are we afraid of and what are we waiting for?

WHAT HAPPENED?

When movie studio boss, Harry Flugleman, explained to *The Three Amigos* why their last few movies had been box office flops, he said, in no uncertain terms, “We strayed from the formula and we paid the price!”³ What’s not so funny is that, over the course of the last Century we’ve done the same thing—we’ve unwittingly, yet gradually allowed Jesus’ formula for building His church to fade into the background. We have relegated His mission to the lost to some kind of optional church program, and we’ve paid a very dear and eternal price. The good news is, we can change that. We can start reversing that today—and doing it is

simpler and exponentially more effective than any big evangelism program you have ever tried. In fact, oikos is both the most efficient evangelism process and the most effective discipleship process you've probably never heard of!