

the
Rabbit

&

the
Elephant

*Why Small Is the New Big
for Today's Church*

*Tony & Felicity Dale
George Barna*

BARNA 

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In a time that is crucial, God sent a precious gift to our nation—Tony and Felicity Dale. There are few people I respect and love as much as I do these two. It is my privilege to call them friends and coworkers. Their experience is a prophetic voice to us, and this book gives wings to that voice.

Neil Cole

AUTHOR OF *Organic Church, Search & Rescue*,
AND *Organic Leadership*

Tony and Felicity Dale ask the right question in this book: why is the church growing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, while thousands of churches are closing and church attendance is at an all-time low in America and Europe? They ask the question and they tell us the God answer! Don't miss this book!

Floyd McClung

INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR OF ALL NATIONS

Tony and Felicity Dale have found keys to restoring God's original purpose for the church. Today's church is 95 percent tradition and 5 percent truth. What if we could turn these percentages around? I encourage you to read and reap from *The Rabbit and the Elephant*.

Sid Roth

HOST, *It's Supernatural!*

Tony and Felicity Dale are at the forefront of a revolution that is brewing in the body of Christ today. That revolution is marked by a growing number of Christians who are gathering outside the organized church and finding Christ in fresh ways in Christian community. This book will give readers a window into some of the exciting things that are marking this revolution. Among other things, you will discover that Jesus Christ can be profoundly known and expressed outside the typical structures of institutional Christianity in new and simpler forms of church life. Read this book and join a revolution that just might outstrip the Reformation!

Frank Viola

AUTHOR OF *From Eternity to Here, Reimagining Church*,
AND *Pagan Christianity?* (COAUTHORED WITH GEORGE BARNA)

God is shifting the church from church-as-we-know-it to church-as-God-wants-it. Felicity and Tony Dale bring us a thrilling backstage account of how God is restoring divine order in his house. May the spiritual “rabbit plague” they describe here sweep through our post-man-made church world and invite all of us to join the King, Jesus, as he builds his church.

Wolfgang Simson

AUTHOR OF *Houses that Change the World*
AND *The Starfish Manifesto*

I have read many books on the house church movement, but this one was the most helpful of all! Tony and Felicity Dale have been involved in the house church movement, both in England and in the United States, for many years and bring a wealth of information and practical help in every aspect of house church ministry. *The Elephant and the Rabbit* will be the first book I will be recommending to those who are led to get involved in simple church.

Robert Fitts

AUTHOR OF *The Church in the House: A Return to Simplicity*

Tony and Felicity bring years of global leadership and experience in the simple church movement to this book. They are genuine pioneers of this movement in the West and have visionary insights to offer in this easy-to-read, practical, and big-hearted book. We are grateful for their ministry.

Alan Hirsch

FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF SHAPEVINE.COM
AND AUTHOR OF *The Forgotten Ways*

In this new book by Tony and Felicity Dale, “rabbits” are simple churches, and those rabbits are multiplying rapidly! Here you will find quality “rabbit food” in the form of dozens of practical insights wrapped in real-life stories. Tony and Felicity Dale are wise voices speaking into this emerging movement.

John White

COMMUNITY COACH AT LK10.COM

Clear. Practical. Timely. The contents of this book are praiseworthy, but more importantly the book springs from the lives of a couple who are implementers rather than theoreticians, people who are Kingdom-minded and humble in heart.

Curtis Sergeant

DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL STRATEGIES, E3 PARTNERS MINISTRY

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Introduction

WE ARE IN RURAL INDIA and it is hot—so hot that the sweat is dripping down our faces. The oppressive heat is compounded by the number of bodies packed into a room without air-conditioning for this conference on church planting. The women, like exotic tropical flowers in their colorful saris, brighten the otherwise drab surroundings. It has been a long day. Although we have frequently broken things up with different activities, the concrete floor gets very hard after a few hours—we, the honored Western visitors and our interpreter, are the only ones privileged to have chairs. It's time for some light relief.

“Imagine you take two elephants . . .”

The audience perks up. They sense a story is coming.

“For our purposes, they are a male and a female.”

Small titter.

“And you put them in that room behind us” (pointing to a tiny kitchen off the main room).

More laughter. They know you couldn't possibly fit one elephant into that room, let alone two!

“You give them plenty to eat and drink and you shut the door on them. Three years later, you come back and open the door. What comes out?”

A number of people call something out. We look to our interpreter for help.

“They say that three elephants come out. Mom, Dad, and a baby.”

“That’s good. In three years, Mom and Dad elephant have had one baby! Now, instead of two elephants, let’s pretend you put two rabbits in the room.”

They start to chuckle. Already they can anticipate what is coming.

“At the end of three years, when you open the door, you had better run for your life, because millions of rabbits will explode out of that door.”

The room erupts in laughter!

But they have also caught the point. Something that is large and complex is hard to reproduce. Something that is small and simple multiplies easily. Elephants take a long time to reach maturity and have a long gestation period. It takes time to reproduce a single elephant. Rabbits, on the other hand, are extremely fertile all the time. They reach maturity in four to six months, and their gestation period is a mere thirty days. Hence the expression “breed like rabbits.”

We learned this story from others,¹ but it doesn’t matter where in the world we go—from primitive rural India to the sophisticated cities of the West—people relate to the analogy and instinctively apply it to church planting. It has become a well-recognized parable.

A megachurch is like an elephant. It is easily visible and dominates the landscape. A major effort of both money and manpower is required to produce another megachurch. A microchurch (simple church, organic church, house church) is like a rabbit. Rabbits live underground and you cannot easily find them, but they are everywhere. They are nonthreatening—even warm and cuddly. They have the potential for rapid multiplication because anyone can gather a few people together in a living room or coffee shop. And they are very easy to duplicate.

A “plague” of rabbit churches could transform a nation.

In the Beginning

CHARLES DICKENS BEGINS his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with the haunting phrase “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . .” For us, these words had become an overwhelming reality.

We arrived in the United States in 1987 with high hopes and great expectations. We had come from the concrete jungles of London’s East End to the wide-open spaces of Texas. We had left behind a cold, rainy, windblown island for the balmy temperatures and sun-filled days of the Texas hill country. We loved the food, enjoyed the people, liked the city. Our four kids reveled in the unrestricted access to the outdoors and a swimming pool to share with their new friends. It was indeed the best of times.

It was also the worst of times. God had abandoned us—at least that’s what it felt like. He had led us to move to Texas, but as soon as we arrived at the airport, it seemed like He deserted us and took the next plane back to England, leaving us to fend for ourselves!

How could we have come to this?

We had met at the prestigious “Royal and Ancient Hospital of Saint

Bartholomew” (Barts Hospital, founded in 1123). It was love at first sight over the histology microscope. That’s not quite true, but because there were so few Christians in the school (just 4 of us out of 150 students in our class), we were constantly thrown together, and a deep friendship developed. We soon sensed God leading us to get married.

By this time, England was already post-Christian, so all of the believers in the medical school and hospital—everyone from nurses and medical students to physical therapists and janitors and even a few of the qualified doctors—formed a close-knit community. Because we all spent so much of our time together—studying and working at the hospital—we gradually came to the realization that we were functioning more as a church within the hospital than we did as members of the traditional churches we each attended on Sunday. So we decided to take the unlikely step of actually calling ourselves a church. This was a highly controversial move at the time. Everyone expected church to be run by professionals. However, it did give us the dubious satisfaction of a certain notoriety, as we were thrown out of the organization that united student Christian groups across the nation and preached against from some of the best-known pulpits in London!

And God began moving. Our times together were often glorious examples of how the Holy Spirit can move in a group of people who are looking for Him to lead. Soon, students started coming from all over the country to see what was happening, and they used the spiritual fire they experienced to ignite similar moves back in their own colleges and universities. As a result, more people became Christians and many were filled with the Holy Spirit.

After we received our medical degrees, our medical school church sent us out, along with a wonderful nurse, to start a new church in the East End of London. We were joined by a great couple that we had met

when we moved there. At that time, London's East End was not the gentrified place it is now. It was a very socially deprived area with devastating problems everywhere we looked. But Jesus seemed to shine even more brightly in the darkness.

In his practice, Tony often heard harrowing stories that really had no medical answer, and when he did, he would simply say to the patient, "You know, I'm not sure that medicine can help you with this situation, but have you ever thought of praying about it?" The patient would typically respond, "Oh, doctor, I pray, but I feel like my prayers just hit the ceiling!" This was Tony's opportunity to share the Good News! Hundreds of his patients became believers, and many miracles occurred right there in the office as he prayed for their healing or deliverance. As the church there grew, Tony was able to refer new believers to a home group that met right on their street—or at least very close to where they lived.

Please don't think that we were anything special. What we were seeing was not unusual. In fact, these kinds of stories were happening all over the country. Set against the backdrop of the charismatic movement, England was an exciting place to be a Christian during the 1970s. Churches were spontaneously starting in people's homes, giving rise to what was referred to as the "house church movement." Thousands of these churches sprang up, giving every little town and village in the country a dynamic expression of the body of Christ.

Those were exhilarating times. Some days we literally ran to the building we were meeting in because we couldn't wait to come into the Lord's presence. Occasionally the presence of God was so real that we would all find ourselves facedown on the floor, lost in adoration of Him. We wouldn't dare go into a meeting with unconfessed sin because we knew that the Holy Spirit would most likely expose it publicly.

Across the nation, streams of these house churches were forming. They had their own apostolic leadership (early attempts to model Ephesians 4 leadership teams), and sometimes thousands of believers came together for glorious weeks when we lived in tents and experienced amazing times of worship, teaching, and fellowship.

Like most of the house churches across the United Kingdom, our ambition was to grow as large as possible. The concept of the megachurch was just beginning to gain acceptance, and we assumed that a big church was the indication of God's approval. Our little group grew rapidly, eventually becoming one of the largest shows in that part of the city. Like most of the other house churches, we had long since outgrown a home. But as we grew bigger, subtle changes occurred. Gradually the sense of Jesus' presence dimmed. In reality, the majority of non-conventional churches had become little more than souped-up versions of all the other churches around.

In the spring of 1987, we were on a plane returning from California, where we had been ministering. One of us turned to the other: "Has God said anything to you while we have been away?" As we compared notes, we discovered that He had told both of us individually that we were to leave England and move to the United States. He subsequently made it plain that our destination was to be Texas.

Six months later, the day after the first hurricane to hit England in five hundred years and the day before Black Monday when the stock market crashed, we, our four kids, and twelve of the largest boxes the airline would allow arrived in Texas. We didn't know a single person. We felt like Abraham, who obeyed a call to move not knowing where he was going.

For the first few years we lived in America, we tried to fit into good local churches. We failed abysmally—mostly due to our lack of understanding of American church culture.

Finances became a problem. We had naively assumed that we were supposed to be working for the same ministry Tony had been involved with in London: a ministry to doctors and people in the medical and allied professions. That, too, failed spectacularly. And nobody wanted to employ two unlicensed physicians.

But the most devastating thing was that God stopped speaking to us. He didn't give us any indication of why. We spent time repenting and seeking His face, but the heavens were silent. It just appeared as though He wasn't there any longer. God had abandoned us.

This went on for nine very long, very dark years.

During those years we had lengthy conversations in which we mulled over what we had seen in England. We eventually came to the conclusion that, although we hadn't realized it at the time, we had probably lived through a period of revival. We spent hours discussing the nature of church. Was there something about church as we were seeing it in the United States—or even what the house church movement in England had become—that somehow militated against the free flow of the Holy Spirit? Why had we experienced such a powerful move of God in the early years, and why had it stopped? Could the sense of God's moving in power have had anything to do with the fact that the churches were small—small enough to have deep fellowship?

As we tried to answer these questions, we asked our British church-leader friends what they might do differently if they could do it all over again. One of them answered with disarming honesty, "I would just get together with a few friends over a drink at the pub to talk about Jesus and what He is doing." Then he added wistfully, "But I can't do that; I have too many church responsibilities."

We also reflected on the nature of revival. Why did some revivals—like the Welsh Revival—appear to end so quickly, while others—

like Methodism under John Wesley—seemed to last for many years? What about the growth of the church in China, arguably the largest move of God the world has ever seen? Could it be that when new wine is put into new wineskins, the revivals carry on for decades?

As we thought about this and studied the Scriptures, our theology of church began to change. We realized that we needed to view the New Testament through the lens of a small group setting in order for it to make sense. How can you bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) or teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16) in a congregation of five hundred when you may not even know the person sitting next to you? What does it really mean to love one another and prefer one another in love (Romans 12:10)?

Rather than someplace to *go* on Sunday mornings, church in the New Testament was a vibrant community of Jesus followers, a 24-7 Kingdom lifestyle. Church was simple, taking place over meals and based on relationships. The people considered themselves to be “all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25, NIV). They were family.

We wondered how this relational way of life pulsating with the presence of the Holy Spirit could have been reduced to the spectator sport it is in most churches today. In some congregations, people barely know each other's names, let alone what is really going on in each other's lives. What needed to change for us to recapture the vital community those early believers shared?

We studied Acts 2 and saw that in the very first days of the church, all the believers met together and shared everything they had. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of those around them.

But following the martyrdom of Stephen, persecution forced these new believers to scatter, which further spread the gospel. After this, apart from one reference to Paul teaching in the school of Tyrannus, every mention of church is in reference to a group of people meeting in their homes. As we looked into church history, we found that this pattern continued for just under three hundred years until around AD 321, when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

We discovered that the Greek word used in the New Testament for “church” is *ekklesia*. It was not a religious word—in fact, it is the word used to describe a rioting mob or a civic assembly, as in Acts 19. Although the word literally means “those who are called out or called forth,” the best New Testament scholars agree that it also means a gathering or meeting of people. As Frank Viola describes in *From Eternity to Here*,

*The word meant a local community of people who assemble together regularly. The word was used for the Greek assembly whereby those in the community were “called forth” from their homes to meet (assemble) in the town forum to make decisions for their city. Consequently, the word also carries the flavor of every-member participation in decision-making. . . . It’s a community of people who gather together and who possess a shared life in Christ. As such, the *ekklesia* is visible, touchable, locatable, and tangible. You can visit it. You can observe it. And you can live in it.¹*

In contrast to His emphasis on the Kingdom, Jesus only spoke of church on two occasions that are recorded in the Gospels. The first is in Matthew 16 after Peter’s great declaration of faith, “You are the

Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus’ response is this: “You are Peter, and on this rock [this revelation] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:16-18).

Then in Matthew 18, Jesus discusses how to handle sin in the life of a believer, and He says if the person who is sinning will not listen when you go to him with a witness, you are to take it to the church. He continues,

Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. . . . If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.

—MATTHEW 18:18-20, NLT

Could this last sentence be the simplest definition of church? Does it matter whether we meet in a house or office building or the local Starbucks or even in a church building? As long as two or three are gathered, don’t they form the basic building block of church?

A national survey conducted by The Barna Group at the close of 2007 revealed that most Americans are surprisingly open-minded about what a church really is. When asked to determine whether each of several activities represented “a complete and biblically valid way for someone to experience and express their faith in God,” substantial majorities of the public accepted some of those options as legitimate forms of church. Those included engaging in faith activities at home, with one’s family (89 percent embraced that as biblically valid and complete); participating in a house church or simple church (75 percent); attending a special ministry event, such as a concert or com-

munity service activity (68 percent); and participating in a ministry that meets at a place of employment (54 percent). Indeed, tens of millions of Americans are comfortable with the idea that you can participate in God’s church without having to attend a worship service in a building constructed for religious activities.²

When disciples come together, Jesus is in their midst, but this is not the same as Jesus living within the individual believer. There is another dynamic at work when we are in the company of others—Jesus says that He is present among us.

The New Testament writers used the word *ekklesia* to refer to God’s people coming together in His presence in various ways. The first describes a church that meets in someone’s house (Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15). The second refers to a church in a specific city, like the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4) or the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2). Finally, the word is used to describe what has become known as the “church universal,” all believers everywhere throughout the ages (Ephesians 1:22-23).

As we thought about how we use the word *church* today, we realized that the meaning has changed. Most commonly, the term is used to describe a building or congregation, such as First Baptist Church or New Life Fellowship. But these are not biblical uses of the word. In fact, when the word is used to describe a denomination like the Methodist Church or the Catholic Church, one could argue that this is actually antibiblical, since it has the effect of dividing the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12-13).

Small, multiplying groups of believers are known as house churches, simple churches, organic churches, or missional communities. The terms are used interchangeably, but all refer to simple, vibrant communities of believers who are meeting in homes, offices, campuses, or wherever God

is leading them. For the sake of discussion in this book, we'll primarily use the "simple church" label.

All of this study was changing our theology of church. But now we were faced with an even bigger question: What were we going to do about it?