

## Episode 2 - Jason Shepperd, Church Project

**Announcer:** ([00:04](#))

Welcome to the Future Church podcast powered by Exponential, a podcast about innovative and emerging ideas in the North American church. With the need for the gospel in our generation, we must not look for a silver bullet approach. We believe there are many expressions to the local church and we are seeking to discover and highlight new and effective ways that churches can impact our world with the gospel. For more information about Exponential's resources and upcoming events visit [exponential.org](http://exponential.org).

**Todd Wilson:** ([00:37](#))

Hey, welcome to another addition of the Future Church podcast. I'm Todd Wilson, the founder of Exponential and thrilled to have you today, and really grateful to Jason Shepperd. Thanks for being on Jason.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([00:49](#))

Glad to be here with you, Todd. Thanks for the invite.

**Todd Wilson:** ([00:53](#))

Jason is with the church project in Houston, Texas. Jason was one of our award winners in Austin recently, at the Future Church Initiative gathering that we had. Jason presented the project and I have to say, Jason, I think I'm about as excited as I can be about what you're doing. I think, I like to say this transition from mega to multi to micro and where the future is headed with micro, you're kind of representing this bridge between the two. How about instead of me explaining that, why don't you explain sort of this idea, the mega and the micro, in your words, house churches, but how that integration works.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([01:39](#))

Yeah. Great. Well, thanks for the introduction and the opportunity. And I too, am very excited about what we're doing, but I was also really excited to hear all the other great things that are happening that are in worlds that we're definitely not in. I like to say there are some great things happening in the margins and we're sort of living in the main and trying to bring some bridges into the main and for whatever reason, we didn't start out to be a mega church. And I actually never thought we would become one, but we are one and thousands and thousands of people gathering weekly together. And we are what you would define as micro and others defined as micro, we call ourselves house churches. And so we would use the line, we're a church of house churches. We have many house churches under the umbrella of one church leadership, one church name, one church identity, one church structure, though, many house churches across our community. So that's Church Project.

**Todd Wilson:** ([02:39](#))

So just to give us kind of the scale of the numbers for a second, when you say there's thousands of people, that means thousands gathering on Sunday in one location in the house churches. Give us the large part of it for a second.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([02:54](#))

Yeah. There would be eight or 10,000 people who are regularly, at least connected and something that we're doing, whether that is a house church every week or Sunday gathering every week. And so on a weekend gathering, we may have 3000, 4,000 people. And so some people would say the numbers are even bigger than that, what would represent our regular attendance. So yeah, thousands of people and we have around 60 house churches in our one location in the Woodlands and then another place in Houston has their own house church, Centrality. And then we have those in other cities as well.

**Todd Wilson:** ([03:31](#))

So when we talk about the church at Houston, that is, I want to get my head around what that means. If we go back to the Bible, the church at Ephesus-

**Jason Shepperd:** ([03:44](#))

Yeah.

**Todd Wilson:** ([03:44](#))

There's a bunch of expressions of house church and things gathering around Ephesus. Let's do the analogy to Houston now. Is it one church in Houston with one large gathering and then lots of house churches gathering? Is it multiple large gatherings? What's the picture of the... Let's start with the large gatherings, one large gathering or multiple?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([04:11](#))

Well, we have multiple and you're meaning specifically a church project, right?

**Todd Wilson:** ([04:16](#))

Church project now. Right.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([04:17](#))

Yep. No, we have multiple just because when we started Church Project, 11 years ago, we started in 2010. We had 40 people that were ready together to pursue this idea. I didn't know, but about five or six of these people. And we just immediately started, we didn't build a huge core in our living room for a long time. We just said, let's go. But when I studied church history, I see that there was both this large corporate gathering and the smaller communities that people were really fleshing out life together in. And I think we saw, we start to see this from the beauty of the early church in Acts. And then there's thousands of people, but how are they doing church

discipline? How are they meeting each other's needs? All that's happening in house churches all across Jerusalem.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([05:12](#))

And that continued to spread, but they didn't neglect the large gathering. And we have seen, as we really started, as I started exploring house churches, 11 or 12 years ago, more in depth, I really saw that most house church movements or maybe micro church even at the time, were completely disconnected from anything else. So maybe 10, 15, 20 people gathered in a house church, but it lost any power beyond that. So I felt that the house church expression was impotent to a great degree because there was no connectivity between house churches. And so for us to be both, we are a centrality, one centrality of many house churches. So we have power together so we can care for the leaders and all the house churches, we can disciple them. We can help meet needs at house churches can't meet on their own, but they are fully functioning almost they're semi-autonomous, we would say. They're semi-autonomously functioning as a little church and I can delve into that as much as you want.

**Todd Wilson:** ([06:20](#))

Yeah, and so again, at the high level, church project would refer to, and I realize we're using new terminology here, but it's in the traditional sense of a congregation. You think of a congregation, that's the building down at such and such location. In this particular case, you do still have the big group gathering. You set up the 3000 people in the big group gathering. Is that, in a multi-site church, is the big group gathering still in multiple places or that several thousand people on a weekend in one place?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([06:57](#))

Yeah. That's several, we'll have three or 4,000 adults, plus however many kids that are gathering in one place. They'll come to a building, we'll do that because of space, we do it in two... We have a room that seats 2000 people. We do that in two gatherings and we're considering what we're going to do next because so many people are coming. So we get the expression of corporate worship and corporate teaching, but there's really not a bridge between that and a house church. For example, there's no office to call. We don't have a phone number. We don't have a [inaudible 00:07:32]. We don't have a receptionist. It's as if we're borrowing like the early church, they met in the temple courts, they got kicked out and they rented Solomon's Colonnade next door. But after that, they're meeting at homes throughout the week, but they'll come back together on Sunday. We're essentially doing something just like that.

**Todd Wilson:** ([07:49](#))

So the house church part is the front door. You're saying, it's not like you're going to go online or call a number to get to the large group gathering. The large group gathering, most people are going to get to the large group gathering because they came through the house church part?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([08:03](#))

Well, it's a both and. You can get on our website and look for a church. And so a lot of people who are looking for what we're doing, They look because it's hard to find and they'll find us. And so they may come on a Sunday just to see doctrinally what we're about or what is the ethos of our chair. So Sunday is a huge front door. But beyond that, it is any point of contact you reach out to us with, whether that be online or on a Sunday in a foyer, we'll immediately get you to a house church that you live closest to.

**Todd Wilson:** ([08:37](#))

And then, how many house churches did you say are attached to or connected relationally to the large group gathering?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([08:47](#))

So our one congregation in the Woodlands, we have 60 or so house churches right now, and we have about eight or more in an incubator this summer that are going to launch. So we're really working to scale it, which is one of the difficulties of replicating and multiplying leadership. But so we hope to have... we're hoping to have 80 by the end of the year.

**Todd Wilson:** ([09:11](#))

Okay. And those are, what size are the house churches typically, average?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([09:17](#))

Well, an average would be 20 or 25 adults regularly gathering. We have some that have more than that, some that have less than that. Some of that depends on their age or the stage at which they're ready to multiply. And so some of our house churches are way too big. They may have 35 adults and 20 kids coming on a week to a home. And then we have some that are smaller, whether people have moved away or they're new and they're starting and so some may have 10 or 12 adults.

**Todd Wilson:** ([09:46](#))

So using the average there, you've probably got somewhere between 15 and 1800 average attendance in house churches. If I just took 25 times 70 ish, that you're somewhere in that 15 to 1800 range. And then maybe double that for the total number that are in the large group gathering sort of thing.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([10:10](#))

Yeah. But that's per week. So we don't know if there are [crosstalk 00:10:16]. If it's 25 adults that week, there may be 40 or 50 who call it their house church, but they're out that night.

**Todd Wilson:** ([10:25](#))

Got it.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([10:25](#))

Whatever. Yeah.

**Todd Wilson:** ([10:26](#))

Got it. So, I'm going to press into some of the details just of the logistics of this. So let's start with staffing. Is this a full-time paid staffing model, a volunteer model, a bivocational model, what's the staffing model look like in this approach?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([10:43](#))

Well, the beauty of House Churches, those are lay leaders. So doctors, engineers, firemen, teachers, business people, these are lay people who are pastoring. So we have distributed almost a hundred percent of the pastoral responsibility to lay leadership. And so we don't have any pastors on staff who are employed to pastor. The only people that we would employ would be people who oversee the execution and the multiplication of these things. So we do have people that are employed on staff to help oversee a Sunday gathering, but our team is very small for that and our gathering is very, very simple because it's not the main thing we're doing.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([11:35](#))

So it's not so much actional model. It's very simple. We need to take care of a thousand kids on Sunday morning and that requires some oversight. And we do want to disciple kids on Sunday, but kids are in house churches and nobody's being paid to take care of them. Every house church is taking care of themselves. And so we do have some people on staff, but the beauty of a staffing model for a church, a church our size, across town, has literally five times as many paid staff as we do. And so able to hire many less staff.

**Todd Wilson:** ([12:11](#))

Just for perspective, what's the full-time equivalent staff that you have. If you add it up, like your full-time staff, how many full-time staff are you talking about?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([12:23](#))

Well, I'll let you do the math because you're the math genius ratio guy. But we have 13 full-time staff.

**Todd Wilson:** ([12:31](#))

Okay. And so just for perspective, when you're referring to the church across town, the app in the traditional model of church, if you want to an average mega church, you'd take the attendance, divide by a hundred and you'd have about what the staffing is. So if you were considered a church of 3000, let's say, just let's be modest and say 3000, the traditional staffing model would put about 30 full-time staff people into that. And you said you were at about what?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([13:05](#))

Well, we have 13 full-time pastors and 3000, I guess. So, yeah. That'd be great for the modest ratio, but we're able to hire a lot less.

**Todd Wilson:** ([13:17](#))

Yeah. And then you're saying, let's say you weren't doing the Sunday gathering for a minute, the large gathering, or whatever day that you happen to do the large gathering. And it was purely the house churches for a minute. What would that do to your staff... Of your 13 staff, what's the allocation of how many of them are, they exist on staff, paid staff, to oversee the house church part versus the large gathering part?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([13:49](#))

Well, we also have a couple of people on staff that are helping all the house churches be employed in ministries locally and globally. And so I would keep those people and I would keep myself as an overseer here. We have two full-time men who oversee house churches. We would probably still have somebody without a Sunday gathering to oversee children's things because these are things, like we have kids at camp this week and parents, we still need to support parents across the way. So there are probably only about three or four of our existing team members that we would get rid of, if we didn't have a Sunday gathering.

**Todd Wilson:** ([14:30](#))

Yeah. And even that, so you're at nine or 10 staff at that point. And we're talking, again, conservatively 15 to 1800 people in house churches. So you're talking to a staff of less than 10 for the 15 to 1800 people in house churches. And I think either way you look at it, whether it's at large group gathering or the decentralized house churches, is the staffing part of this is less paid staff members. You are mobilizing volunteers and lay-leaders. So let let's press into the house church leadership part for a minute. What does it mean to be the leader of a house church, the qualification kind of standard on it? Is that somebody who, if they came to you and said, I want to go plant a traditional church, is it the same standard as what somebody would go plant a church with a lot of money or something or different standards, same standard? How does the leadership of a house church compare to if you were planting large funded churches kind of thing?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([15:46](#))

Yeah. We would at least say all the biblical expressions or qualifications of an elder would be required for every house church pastor, but they may have different giftings, different wirings. We definitely have some house church pastors that can be, and some are going to be pastoring their own central church. But the majority of our house church pastors, that's not what they're called to do or gifted to do or want to do.

**Todd Wilson:** ([16:18](#))

The Elder qualification is what you're applying, you're saying? So the qualification of an elder for a house church leader.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([16:25](#))

Absolutely and I think beyond that, we would definitely be looking for some social acumen, some ability to handle people that would be beyond that list. But that list would absolutely be foundational for what we look at.

**Todd Wilson:** ([16:40](#))

Got it. And is there a... Is there some sort of, you said, in the summer you're getting ready to birth a bunch more of the house churches. Is there an apprenticing program or what's the leadership development pipeline look like with the house churches?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([16:59](#))

Yeah. We really, I love how Paul would go into a town, even if he was there for a night, we have a couple of examples of that and he would, I'm sure, it sounds like he was good at stay up all night, teach them as much as he could, left town the next day, appointed two people to oversee this church. And then this seems like they would develop leaders themselves. And so we say a house church, pastor begets a house church, pastor. A house church begets a house church. And so whenever we have tried to transplant a person into an existing house church, it hasn't worked. So when they multiply out of themselves, it's been natural and it's been beautiful and it's been lasting and enduring. So we say the best apprenticeship is that you're in a house church for a while. The house church pastor gets to know you, they hear your doctrine.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([17:52](#))

They see how you love people. They see what you're willing to step into. They allow you to handle some situations. We do have some processes that are written down on paper to help house church pastors know, what are you looking for? What do you start doing? When they think that they have someone who is ready and able and close to being able to be a house church pastor, then they let one of our, I guess you would use the word overseer for that though, the pastor who oversees house churches know, and then they meet.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([18:20](#))

And we make sure biblically, that they're really on point, we get into more acute ideas of doctrine, really explain this. And then we take them through an incubator. So they would go for a month away from their house church and do training weekly with our pastor who oversees all house churches. And then they're going to go back to their house church. And when they're ready to multiply, we have some standards for that too, then they're ready. So yeah, there is an apprenticing. It'd be time in a house church. They've been trusted with some things, they've gone through an incubator and then we'd launch them.





**Todd Wilson:** ([18:54](#))

Yep. For somebody who would ask, how do the house churches differ from a small group in a traditional church? How are they the same and how do they differ?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([19:07](#))

Oh, it's a great question. In fact, the show that I'm doing for the hub, starting in a few weeks, it's one of the main questions I'm answering because people ask that all the time. What's the difference in a small group and a house church? And what's the difference in a small group leader and a house church pastor? And I would at least say these things. For the sake of time, I'll compress it here, but one would be expectation and identification. We are expecting this house church pastor to pastor this house church. We have house pastors that do weddings. They do funerals, they're frontline of counseling. All benevolence happens in a house church. We're there to support them. We're there to train them, but they're there to do all of that. And when it gets above their head, we had somebody who went through a pretty difficult scenario of assault recently.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([20:01](#))

House church pastor needed some support. He calls us, we're in, we walk with everybody through that, but they're the frontline of counseling. And so part of it is expectation. Part of it is identification. If we call them a leader, well, what are they leading? And for me, what's the gap between pastoring and leading and who's doing that? Because if our leaders are only pastoring up to a certain level, who's doing the rest of the pastoring? Is it the staff at the church? And how do we get to those people and how do they get to us? And so we have elevated the expectation and we've identified a house pastor as the primary point pastor. And so now people know, this is the person I go to for all of my pastoral needs. And then the house church pastor elevates it above us. So we've elevated the expectation and we've identified this person as the pastor.

**Todd Wilson:** ([20:59](#))

Oh, that's really good. I'm assuming Jason, that when we think about reproduction in this context, there's probably two different levels. There's reproduction of house churches. How do we multiply house churches, but then I'm assuming there's also, when you look at the church project, Houston, there's another level of reproduction or multiplication, which is reproducing the whole thing to a different geographic area.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([21:32](#))

Yeah.

**Todd Wilson:** ([21:33](#))

Are those the two levels of reproduction for what you're doing?



**Jason Shepperd:** ([21:37](#))

Yes, they are. I would say, we want to reproduce individuals from disciples, making disciples. We want to reproduce house churches. And we also want to reproduce church projects. Those are our three levels of reproduction. How are we helping every person reproduce themselves in a discipleship relationship? And by the way, we're doing that in the thousands, which is pretty cool. How do we multiply? We've just because of scaling issues, we've just made some leadership changes to help scale better our house churches. And we've also recently made some changes to help scale better reproduction of church projects. So those are our three levels of reproduction that we're really pressing in on. And we've recently, two of my favorite words to use together are reduce and refine. We've reduced other things and we've refined this process and now we're heading back at it again in these three areas only.

**Todd Wilson:** ([22:35](#))

So, how many times have you reproduced Church Project? Is it to other cities at this point or other locations in Houston or...

**Jason Shepperd:** ([22:45](#))

Yeah, we've done that seven or eight times. We've had a couple of those not endure, but several of them have. Church project, Orange County is a beautiful community of believers with 10 or 15 house churches. Church project North County, which is north of us, about 20 minutes away from where we are located in the Woodlands. They have 15 or 20 house churches, their own lead pastor. I've never preached there. They don't know my name. They have their own group of elders. And we've done that in a couple of other cities as well.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([23:16](#))

We have church project, Winter Park, Colorado, which is really beautiful. Right now we have about 25 or 30 people who are looking to plant church projects that are in a pipeline of conversations. And we have about 50 or 75 who were looking to plant a church project type of church without calling themselves church projects. So we started something recently called house church network to also help multiply churches that aren't going to carry the name church project, but they'll have this conviction of distributed pastoral leadership and decentralized from a core. So we're working to begin that as well.

**Todd Wilson:** ([23:54](#))

What are your biggest challenges to growth and reproduction?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([24:01](#))

Yeah, patience, for me, would be my biggest personal challenge. I hate not scaling more quickly. I don't understand why scaling can't continue on at the same rate infinitum. I don't understand that. So that's what we're working on. Our greatest challenge of scaling is reproducing house church pastors more quickly at the same quality. And so we want to make sure that we have the same quality of house church pastor, but reproduce more quickly. One of our challenges has

also been quality control. We have most of our house churches that are really great and we have some of them that are just okay. We've had a couple that are bad, but when we find that out, we step in pretty quickly and so bad may be a wrong word. We've had some that are weak. And so quality control, making sure that every house church is doing things incredibly well, reproducing at the same quality more quickly has been it.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([25:01](#))

And then I would say, as far as planting church projects go, Todd, you're around church planters a lot. And I spend a significant amount of time around church planters. And it seems that everybody says they want to do something different. But when we start digging in, people are defaulting back to a rapid growth model that they've seen in some other networks or other places. And it seems to not line up with what they've been convicted about and what they're convinced they don't want to do. But rapid growth seems to take over as the goal. And so we've talked to plenty of church planters who they really love what we're doing, but when they understand that this is going to be, you're going to be planting something very new, that wherever you're planting. People aren't used to this yet, they don't want to do that. They just want to get a lot of people together on a Sunday so they can pay their bills.

**Todd Wilson:** ([25:53](#))

Hm. Well, can you give us a website address if people want to just sort of take a look at the church project, is there a website address to visit?

**Jason Shepperd:** ([26:04](#))

Yeah, I would give you three. One would be churchproject.org is just our local church in the Woodlands, that would give you an idea of what it looks like in a local place. churchprojectnetwork.com is a place where you can look at planting a church project. We have processes there that you can get into and people will respond to you. And then we have housechurchnetwork.com. If somebody is looking to plant a church of house churches, it's central church, which could become a mega church or maybe not, but that would also plant many house churches that would be housechurchnetwork.com.

**Todd Wilson:** ([26:37](#))

All right, Jason, thanks for joining us today. This was really intriguing, I'm excited to watch where things head here in the future and appreciate your time.

**Jason Shepperd:** ([26:49](#))

I'm honored. Todd, thank you for all that you and Exponential are doing for the kingdom, for the church. I'm grateful for your leadership.

**Todd Wilson:** ([26:55](#))

Thank you.