

# Oikos

*Oikos* is sometimes used to describe a specific household unit of church life that is embedding discipleship and missional practices, a missional household; and it can equally be used to describe a missional community. I will unpack both of these later in this chapter. However, I want to use it here to re-emphasise that it's culture, values and lifestyle more than structures that support mission and discipleship.

*Oikos* is a word that is used 120 times in the New Testament and is primarily translated as house, home, or household. It is the word used in Acts 2:46 when the newly birthed church was breaking bread and sharing meals from house to house (*oikos* to *oikos*). It is the word in the epistles when Paul describes the church in the house (*oikos*) of Philemon (Philemon v. 2), Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5), and Nympha (Colossians 4:15). It describes the jailor and his household (*oikos*) when they are saved and baptised in Philippi (Acts 16:31). Likewise, in the same chapter, Paul encounters Lydia and her household (*oikos*). Her home then becomes the base for the church plant in Philippi (vv. 15, 40). In Acts 20:20 where Paul is summarising his ministry among the Ephesians he says:

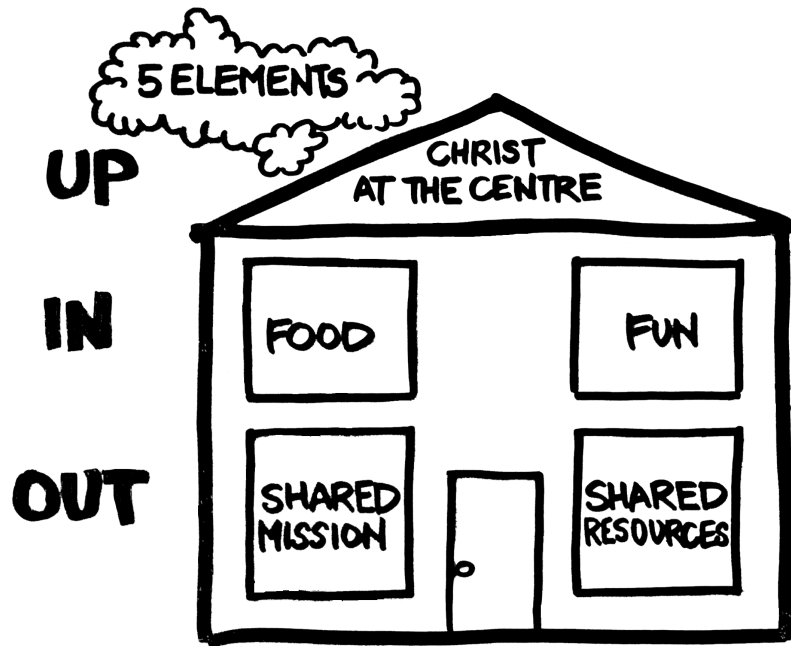
*"You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house [Oikos to oikos]."*

The hugely important thing about the *oikos* is this. It was the primary unit of both mission and discipleship for the first 250 years of church history. Before public buildings could be legally owned by Christians, and under periods of severe persecution, the church continued to grow exponentially. It was something to do with the dynamics of the *oikos*.

Typically the New Testament home (*oikos*), in Greco-Roman style, would have consisted of a number of rooms round a central courtyard where extended family members lived. Such a set-up was almost certainly true of the household where Mary, John Mark's mother, lived. When Peter is broken out of prison by the Lord, he goes to Mary's house. Acts 12:13 states, *"He knocked at the door in the gate"* (NLT). I imagine this as a large gate to an open courtyard. The smaller door within the gate would have been used to let individuals in and out without opening the larger gate, thus protecting the collection of rooms round the courtyard.

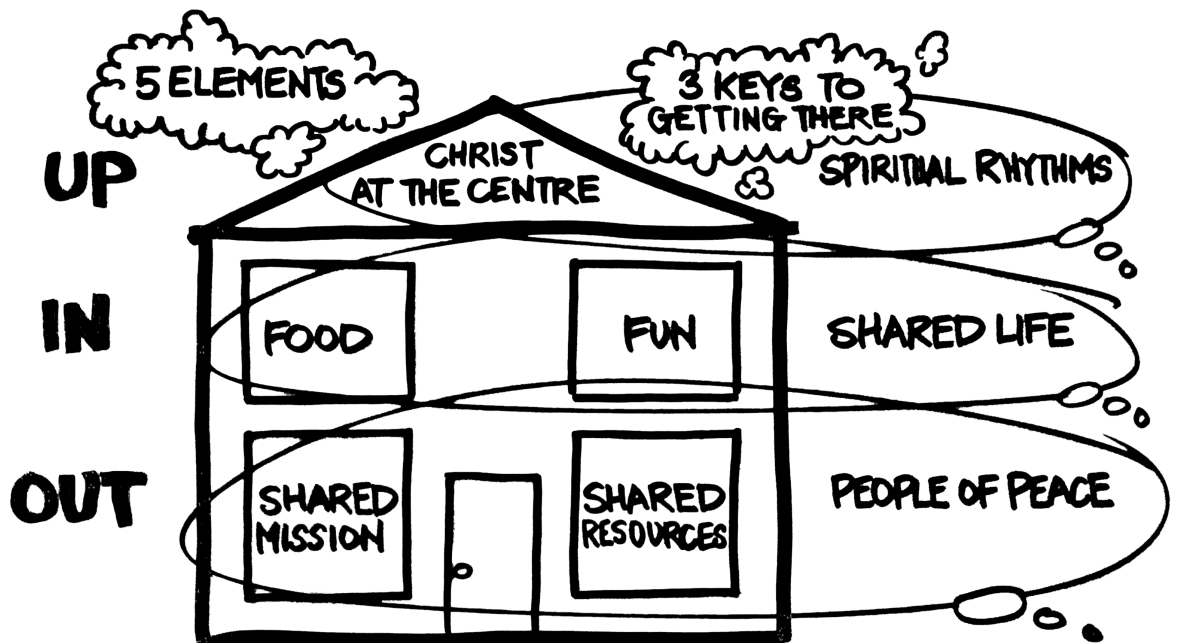
The household would usually have been the centre of commerce or trade of the primary family. It would have been the gathering place not only for the extended family but also work colleagues, slaves, neighbours, friends and more distant family. The church commandeered this unit as the most natural vehicle for the gathering, equipping and sending of disciples into the world of the day. It proved to be mightily effective. By the time Emperor Constantine himself became a Christian, it is said that half of the entire empire had to some degree owned the name of Christ. In 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, decriminalizing Christian worship.

Coming back to Acts 2:42-47, the prototype church, we see a number of key activities which demonstrate the underlying set of values that the early church, under the influence of the Holy Spirit adopted. We can distill those activities and values down to five simple elements. These were the values and building blocks of the newly Christian household or *oikos*, and they can help us understand more of the practical outworking of family on mission values. Here's a simple picture of the elements of an *Oikos*



Each of these elements is pretty self-explanatory. When the five elements are functioning effectively among a group of Christians, these believers are likely to be tapping in to something of the dynamic of the early church's community life. They also all fit around one another in aspect of the Up, In and Out Triangle.

The three keys that help to propel the development of oikos culture are added to the diagram below:



I describe these as keys because they are simple ideas and practices that open up the broad spectrum of oikos life.

Jenny and I have for all of our marriage lived some variation of the oikos values. We have for forty-two of those forty-three years had extra people living with us. The numbers of those who have lived with us for extended periods is probably in excess

of three figures. We didn't always know what we were doing, but we have certainly had a sense of living as an extended family with purpose, as well as a lot of fun! That purpose may not have always been purely missional, but it has been a deliberate attempt to live out some of the dynamics of the early church's lifestyle.

Our earliest attempts at this way of living involved a shared mortgage and a shared property with two other couples and a single guy (who actually provided the deposit). I was still a medical student at the time and it was quite a miracle that we were able to buy the property. When we bought our first house by ourselves it was a little two-up two-down with a small attic extension. At one point, we managed to accommodate Jenny and me, our first two children, three single girls who shared a room, and a young woman who I had invited to live with us having met her in the psychiatric unit I had been working in. Later on we gave a temporary home to an ex-convict (from the local prison) who slept on our lounge floor for a few weeks. I say this to make the point that "where there is a will, there is a way", and it doesn't depend on having a big income or a large house.

Sometimes people lived with us to help us at very busy stages of life. One New Zealand couple, Malcolm and Janice, were literally a lifesaver for us when our fourth child was born. For a season, we had four children under six years old. This wonderful couple moved in for three months and made life work for us.

Other people moved in simply because they needed accommodation. But by far the majority moved in because they needed the environment we provided, to find healing and stability in their lives, or because they wanted to be discipled by us. One day, one young woman was found standing on a windowsill ready to jump from one of our upstairs windows. Some of us were trying to coax her down from above, while others stood below in case she jumped. I'm not sure what we would have done if she had jumped – I don't think we'd have tried to catch her!

The man who had recently been saved in our prison outreach came out of the prison with nowhere to live. He had been the getaway driver in a less than successful bank robbery gang. Naïvely we offered him a place in our house. The gentleman wasn't very acquainted with the idea of personal hygiene, so Jenny would regularly put cotton wool balls soaked in perfume behind the storage heaters to try and mask the smell.

He took off a couple of times stealing Jenny's hand bag and then my camera, before he eventually returned and found a time of stability in a house of singles from the church, who lived down the road. Sometime later he moved away and we lost touch. God in his grace allowed us to see the long-term fruit in his life. On the very day we were moving to Liverpool, with the removal van in front of the house, he turned up on our doorstep and told us his story. God had kept him strong in his faith despite having experienced some sadness in his life. How good of God to let us see that. This is the power of living in community.

We learned a lot of lessons in those early days of how not to do community, but we also saw some great moments of breakthrough for many individuals. In recent years, we have been fine-tuning our practices of community-based mission and discipleship, as we have more clearly understood the worth and values of the New Testament oikos.

Let me state clearly that you don't have to have people live with you to practice oikos and family on mission. It is a very powerful way to live in community but not one that is either right or practical for everyone. But our homes and families are some of the most amazing resources God has given us to offer to a broken world looking for a place to belong and for spiritual reality. Our homes are also a great place of imitation for those who have never experienced a "normal" family. Many years ago, we had

one particular young man live with us for a year. We had little idea that he was learning anything from us. Let's just say that he didn't wear his "teachability" on his sleeve! He recently admitted that everything he had learned about family life, he learned from living with us (much to our surprise). He now has a fabulous family of five in our neighborhood. They also interestingly have others living with them. It's the power of imitation – Jesus' greatest method for training his disciples.

Back to the three keys in the picture above which have been so helpful.

Having good *spiritual rhythms* in the life of our household has helped us to stay connected both to God and each other. This has included breakfast with the Bible. We invite whoever is living or staying with us to share ten to fifteen minutes of reflection and prayer from the daily Moravian set Bible text.<sup>1</sup> We have also sought to eat together as often as possible in the evenings, inviting others from outside the home to eat with us frequently. In the evenings, we will try to break bread and pray after those meals whenever possible.

These rhythms, though far from perfect, are helping to build the oikos spiritual value of "Christ at the center". It's important to be intentional and have a go, and not to worry about having the perfect lifestyle! People sometimes like to tell me what they can't do because of their busy or complicated lifestyle. My response is usually to say, "Don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you can do."

Other rhythms include eating and storytelling with the wider community twice a month. We do something one Sunday per month that connects us with our wider community and network of friends e.g. a brunch, a BBQ, a shared litter pick and picnic in the local park with the volunteer park organization, or lunch together in one of the eating establishments on High street. Some in the community will try to have a weekly "shared table" evening when others from the missional community or wider community can be invited.

The *people of peace* key has been massively important to us as we have tried to build the shared mission/shared resource piece of our missional community life. As I said before, it takes a whole community to raise a disciple. We have found this to be true in terms of time, giftings, finances, and material stuff. Sharing what we have for the sake of the mission has prevented any one person or household taking the brunt of the load. However, when it comes to seeing people come to faith (and the early church was seeing people added to their number daily –Acts 2:47), understanding the people of peace principle is very releasing. Whatever the context we are always looking for Luke 10 people of peace. It's part of the adventure, starting each day by asking God to bring me into contact with people of peace

Having a clearly defined missional purpose is not always easy to achieve for a group who don't necessarily live in the same street. I've found it helpful to think in terms of *common mission focus* and *shared mission focus*. The former is a place or group of people that we all agree are a common focus for everyone in the group. For example, Jenny and I live in Victoria Park in Liverpool. For everyone in our missional community, this is a primary focus for our MC whether they live in our area or not. Everyone agrees to invest in our activities in our neighborhood. That's why it's a common focus.

Another example of a common mission focus is the comedy club that a missional community of creative types decided they wanted to invest in. As they all attended the small club, they built relationship with the owners and others who went. After a while, the owner offered the main couple the opportunity to have a go at stand-up. The wife proved to be very good at it! They were also offered the opportunity to run some of the evenings. What a great chance to change the culture of the club. But this only worked because they all went; they all owned this *common mission focus*.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.moravian.org/todays-daily-text](http://www.moravian.org/todays-daily-text)

However, all of us have a circle of contacts at work or in the places we go. The various people of peace (or potential people of peace) that individuals are in contact with can be shared among all of us. This is what I mean by a *shared mission focus*. This happens as we introduce each other to our friends, and deliberately invest in forming friendships with those who others bring to our events. By doing this, our people of peace will see multiple examples of Jesus in different ones of us, and this will have a compounding impact on them.

Jesus was pretty at home at parties. Parties are a great way of meeting each other's friends and beginning to invest in each other's people of peace. This is a simple way of developing a *shared missional focus*.

The third key to developing Oikos culture is *shared life*. This is only really possible when there is reasonable proximity. As we like to say, "Proximity is powerful" when it comes to developing a shared life. If we want to have regular food and fun together, we will find it difficult if we always have to get in a car or on public transport to get to be with our extended family. The psychological barriers are too great for most of us to overcome, and the risk is that missional community life is reduced to some regular planned activities or meetings. We need the organized stuff, but we also need the organic, the spontaneous, where we can drop in unannounced for a cup of tea, to borrow some milk, stay for a bite to eat, or to ask for some prayer. This is a shared life.

To develop a shared life means that some people will move house, like the couple I mentioned who left their very comfortable house in a leafy suburb of Liverpool and moved into an old rundown convent round the corner from us because they knew they needed proximity to fully develop that shared life. We used to say in the early days of the house church movement, that carpet slipper distance was the gold standard for proximity!

Others won't move, but will stay where they are and try to build oikos lifestyle where they are with a view to eventually becoming the center of a new emerging missional community. This is one of the powerful ways of multiplying missional expressions of church (more of that later).

Another expression of the desire for shared life is the practice of knocking down internal dividing walls or building extensions on kitchen and eating areas. This enables the gathering spaces in our homes to specifically cater for the needs of and desires for extended family. I call this process "oikosification"! It's the nearest most of us are likely to get to the courtyard culture of the early church, based in households. A number of people in Frontline church have done just that.

So family on mission and oikos are tools for understanding the biblical culture of communities of missionary disciples, and the values that need to underpin all our small or mid-sized groups – the essential nature of the scattered life of the church.