

# Emerging Church Leader Dan Kimball Interviews Frank Viola on *Pagan Christianity*?

## Vintage Faith

Dan Kimball: Oh, how I love Lemon Jelly



**Dan: Can you share a little about what kind of community or town you personally live in? And what kind church are you personally part of? How often does it meet? How many people are part of it? Also out of curiosity, what are some of your favorite bands or music that you listen to?**

Frank: Presently, I live in Gainesville, FL. This year, I'm concentrating on traveling to other cities and helping to plant new churches as well as encouraging existing ones. I'm also actively praying for direction regarding a new organic church plant in my town for the future.

The churches I work with and have relationships with meet all throughout the week. They are face-to-face communities, so the sisters and brothers are often gathering together and they are in one another's lives. As far as external size, typically they run from between 12 adults (on the small side) and 60 adults (on the large side) and 10,005 children ;-). But for these people, church is not a once or twice a week event. To borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it's a "life together."

The outstanding characteristic of these churches is that Jesus Christ is central. The members pursue Him all throughout the week. They have a life together around Christ during the week. Then when they meet together corporately, there is an explosion of sharing about their amazing Lord with one another. Every one participates, everyone functions, and everyone ministers Christ in the gatherings. And it looks different from week to week. This is very different from the Protestant order of worship where a few people function each time and everyone else passively spectates.

As for music, I love most types. I have my own personal "favorite artist" or "band" of the month club. It switches every so often. For the last year, it's been Kendall Payne. I love her song "Modern Day Moses." I find it very inspiring -- I think anyone who has a revolutionary spirit will appreciate it. You can give it a listen over at <http://www.myspace.com/frankaviola>

I also love movie soundtracks. My all-time favorite soundtracks are "Message in a Bottle," "Never Been Kissed," and "The Bourne Identity."

**Dan: So even you aren't in a house church now, can you tell me about the one you have been in? Gainesville has a quarter of a million people in the county there, so seems a lot of potential for growth and multiplication to occur. So can you specifically let me know how many house churches has the specific house church you were in launched and how many conversions from non-Christians have you seen through your house church? Did the new believers stay in the house church?**

Frank: In the book, we distinguish between a "house church" and an "organic church." I'm not really a proponent of house churches, since most of them are quite insipid in my opinion. I am a proponent of organic church life. That's not a particular "model" of church (as we've said repeatedly, we believe that no one right model of church exists). It's a kind of expression that will differ from culture to culture, but it will have similar features . . . just like human beings are similar but different from culture to culture. I believe the organic church (or the church as organism) is what the New Testament envisions in both its teachings and examples.

Over the last twenty years, I've been part of two organic churches. (I'm not speaking of churches I've planted, but churches in which I was a simple brother among other brothers and sisters. To use an analogy, Barnabas was a brother in the church in Jerusalem. But he was later sent out to plant churches in other places.)

Right now, I'm writing a book that releases in August which will explain in detail what organic church life sometimes looks like in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, both from my experience and from my what myself and others have discovered from the New Testament. Each chapter paints a picture of each aspect of organic church life, and then it tells stories from my own experience. I say this because there's not enough space or room to explain it adequately in this interview.

Essentially, they were face to face communities where Jesus Christ, and not a human being, was the functional Head. We lived as a family. We pursued Christ throughout the week, we had all sorts of meetings where He was expressed, and we sought to display Him in our local communities in many different ways and according to the spiritual season we were in. There was no legalism present, but we knew Jesus Christ in freedom. It was glory and gore mixed together. We learned Christ and His cross in living color. One of those churches sent me out to plant churches in other cities.

As for Gainesville, as I said in my last answer, I'm actively praying (with others) on the timing of planting an organic church here. Organic churches aren't like institutional churches. They can't be started; they must be born. Hence the timing and leadership of the Lord is critical.

Now as to your specific numbers question, I have to admit that this sort of thinking is quite foreign to me since I've been outside the institutional church. When I was in the Pentecostal/charismatic movement, numbers were constantly being thrown around – "1,000 were healed in the crusade last week, and 568 were saved and baptized." Forgive me for this if you're Pentecostal/charismatic, but as I began to examine those numbers, I came to a conclusion. All I had to do was take the reported number and divide it in half then subtract 15%, and I'd be pretty close to the actual figure ☺

Interestingly, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement was born with the tendency to exaggerate. (The history of the movement is well documented; I didn't make that up.) And it's never recovered from that tendency. A few Pentecostal leaders I know have admitted this to me which was quite refreshing.

When I made that discovery, I raised a standard in my life that I wasn't going to measure anything by numbers. That to me was a very superficial basis for measuring that which has eternal and spiritual value. Consequently, we never counted people who were saved. So I really have no idea. I remember we baptized numerous people throughout those years; but I can't tell you the number as we never kept track.

I know there are some people in the house church movement who do keep tabs on these kinds of figures in the United States and overseas, and the numbers I've seen are astronomical. But again: I'm not the guy to ask this sort of thing since my measuring stick is of a different type.

What we did see is this: We saw real and genuine transformation in the lives of people. We saw a number of demon possessed people get delivered. We saw a number of emotionally unstable people get liberated. People were encountering Jesus Christ in ways I've never seen in the typical institutional church. And . . . they were learning how to function in a face to face community without human headship. I've seen this in the churches I've worked with and planted as well. People begin to grow into Christ, and they do it together . . . not as individuals.

The evangelical mind has a penchant for counting souls saved. That essentially means, "How many said the prayer." The problem is (and the Barna Group has documented this in their research) many people who are "saved" don't continue to follow the Lord. And many people who attend an institutional church aren't being transformed at all. (Again, Barna has documented this with solid research.) Consequently, the converts I've seen in my church life experience stayed and most (not all) of them experienced transformation.

So to be honest, Dan, I'm monumentally unimpressed whenever someone tells me, "Our church got 1,234 people saved last year." That to me means very little.

Here's my standard of testing the fruitfulness of a church. And this is a question I've raised to many institutional church planters as well as to many "house church" planters.

Can you (and your pastoral staff) leave your congregation right now under the Headship of Jesus Christ? Can you say goodbye to the people you've been preaching to every week for years, and walk out on them, not seeing them for six months to a year? And you won't establish a surrogate clergy over them, but you will do as Paul of Tarsus did and leave them on their own totally to the Holy Spirit and to the Headship of Jesus Christ.

And if you did that ... what would happen?

Will they scatter? Will they look for a substitute and erect a pastor to rule over them and do all the ministry for them in your place? Or ... will they and can they ... take care of one another, will they love one another as family, will they know how to have meetings where they make decisions together under the Holy Spirit's leadership, will they be able to nourish themselves spiritually, will they be able to have regular meetings where everyone participates and Jesus Christ is displayed to principalities and powers through His every-member functioning body, will they know how to experience Jesus Christ with others during the week, and will they want to share their incredible Lord to the world around them, not out of guilt, duty, or obligation, but because they can't help but share Him with one another and others?

Do you have a gospel that's powerful enough to do that?

Or to put it another way: Do you believe that Jesus Christ is alive enough to be Head over His own church, and can you equip God's people to the point where they function under His Headship instead of your own?

To my mind, a pastor or church planter will never have his gospel truly tested nor will he be able to really tell if he has truly "equipped the saints" unless he puts it to the proof like that.

When Paul of Tarsus was on this earth, he planted approximately 14 such churches. That was from the time he came to Christ to the time he died in Rome. And most of those churches were made up of no more than 40 people. (Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Antioch were exceptionally large churches in Century One. Most were quite small. Large enough to meet in a single first-century home.)

(If someone wants documentation for the above, they can read "The Untold Story of the New Testament Church" – [www.ptmin.org/untold.htm](http://www.ptmin.org/untold.htm) )

In short, in the eyes of many contemporary Christians, Paul was a failure. But to my mind, he was one of

the greatest church planters who ever lived. But his standards of success were much different than that of most Western Christians.

In short, if you want quality, it takes time and lots of breaking and building. In my opinion and experience, if a genuine church planter can leave on this earth a dozen organic churches that are truly under the Headship of Jesus Christ and they are strong, healthy, and pure, I'd tip my hat off to that person. As far as I'm concerned, that's an incredible work for a lifetime. If someone doesn't think so, I'd simply offer this thought to them: You don't understand the kind of quality of church life I'm speaking of nor what it takes for it to come into existence and to be maintained.

To answer your other question, one of the churches I was part of multiplied into two churches after four or five of years. The other did not, but I wasn't with them for that long as I relocated.

I've worked with numerous churches that have multiplied into various different cities. This is rather common after a period of years when the foundation is strong enough to sustain such a transition.

**Dan. The primary criticism I have repeatedly heard about your book, is that it feels as though you are saying if something was developed later than New Testament church days, that it only gets in the way of being a true healthy church. I fully do understand that you have uncovered a lot of things established churches do isn't biblically based but developed through culture. But say things like the printing press for publishing books, the internet, computers, cars for transportation etc. were also not around in the early church, yet we depend on them for getting to church meetings, reading and communicating. How are you responding to that repeated sort of criticism?**

Frank: Yes, I have heard this criticism. Though I'm not really sure it qualifies as a criticism because it's a critique of a point we never make in the book. Here are two direct quotes from the book on that score. I think they answer your question 😊

"Does it really matter how we practice our faith, as long as the activities enable people to love God and obey Him? The preponderance of evidence shows that these perspectives, rules, traditions, expectations, assumptions, and practices often hinder the development of our faith. In other instances, they serve as barriers that keep us from encountering the living God. The way in which we practice our faith can, indeed, affect the faith itself.

Does that mean we must go back to the Bible and do everything exactly as the disciples did between AD 30 and 60? No. Social and cultural shifts over the last two thousand years have made it impossible to imitate some of the lifestyle and religious efforts of the early church. For example, we use cell phones, drive in automobiles, and utilize central heat and air. The first-century Christians had none of these forms of human convenience. Therefore, adhering to the *principles* of the New Testament does not mean reenacting the *events* of the first-century church. If so, we would have to dress like all first-century believers did, in sandals and togas!"

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"It is clear that the Protestant order of worship did not originate with the Lord Jesus, the apostles, or the New Testament Scriptures. This in itself does not make the order of worship misguided. It just means it has no biblical basis.

The use of chairs and pile carpets in Christian gatherings has no biblical support either. And both were invented by pagans. Nonetheless, who would claim that sitting in chairs or using carpets is "wrong" simply because they are postbiblical inventions authored by pagans?

The fact is that we do many things in our culture that have pagan roots. Consider our accepted calendar. The days of our week and the months of our year are named after pagan gods. But using the accepted calendar does not make us pagans.

So why is the Sunday morning order of worship a different matter than the type of chairs and

carpeting we use in the place we worship? ..."

**Dan. I agree there are many churches who do what you say in terms of the paid staff and pastors and sermons being an unhealthy way people become dependent on pastors and don't exercise their gifts and grow in healthy ways. but there are also many churches who do have paid pastors, do have buildings etc. - yet do empower and train people to be the "ministers" not just in theory but in reality. Do you feel that a church can have paid pastors and staff and be healthy if paying attention to the priesthood of all believers? Do you believe that a church can exist of 300 or 3,000 people with paid pastors, preaching, a pulpit (or music stand) and have a missional emphasis and seeing believers living out the priesthood of all believers?**

Frank: To me, this is a question of "good" versus "best." And the good is often the enemy of the best.

The present clergy system is good for teaching a large number of people en-mass in a one-way communication. It's weak on equipping them to function in community and under the headship of Christ in open-participatory meetings. I personally challenge how effective it is in equipping people for ministry.

We admit in the book that although we believe that a professional clergy is at odds with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, God still uses it. George and I make the point that we owe our baptism and salvation to churches that have a paid clergy. So God uses it, no doubt. But that's not the question we're addressing in the book. We are asking a much deeper question. Namely, "Was the institutional church/clergy-led system God's intention or is there something better that He has ordained for His church"?

Second, while God works in His people despite the clergy system, in every case I have personally witnessed over the last 32 years, I've always seen the clergy/laity dichotomy (pastor/staff/congregation model) create negative effects right along with the positive ones. And this effect is often unnoticed.

Let me give you one quick example:

Not long ago I was in a conversation with a pastor of a small church. Some of the church members were present with him in the living room. He told me how much "his people" didn't look to him before they make decisions. How "his people" were free. How "his people" were not controlled by him in any way. Nor were they dependent on him but on Jesus. Interestingly, everyone in the room would look *to* him before they threw in their comments and *at* him as they spoke. Both he and they were completely out of touch with this.

Anyway, this pastor was completely unconscious of the fact that he kept using the term "my people" as he continued to tell me how they belonged to the Lord and not to himself. And the others were not in touch with the fact that they felt they needed to look to the pastor for a non-verbal cue before they opened their mouths.

This is what the clergy *system* breeds. It's a mindset that runs deeper than many of us have realized.

In my personal judgment, unless a group of Christians has experienced the freedom and the glory of open meetings that are under the headship of Jesus Christ opposed to the headship of a human being, it may be hard for them to understand how a clergy would be unhealthy. If one views "church" as mainly a spectator event built on hearing sermons, then the clergy system works great. But if you see it as something very different, then you will view it through a very different lens. We are espousing a view of church that's very different from the "*let's go to church on Sunday to worship, tithe, and hear a sermon to be motivated to go out and win souls and help others*" model.

Over the last 50 years, countless books have been written to try and reform the institutional church. Those books have been well received for the most part. Most of them talk about how pastors should give better sermons, how they should operate in a less-business-like fashion, how they should lead the flock

more effectively, how they should pray more, how they should and can avoid getting “sheep-bite,” etc. etc. Elton Trueblood said, “The basic trouble [with the modern church] is that the proposed cure has such a striking similarity to the disease.”

“Pagan Christianity” takes a unique position in that it doesn’t advocate repairing the system or tweaking the structure. Right or wrong, our position is that the modern pastoral office (the clergy system) just may be one of the major problems. The book suggests that for too long we’ve been treating the symptoms and have failed to go to the roots. But this approach is unthinkable in the minds of many Christians. Our traditions are entrenched and even deified. J.C. Ryle put it best when he said, “Experience supplies painful proof that traditions once called into being are first called useful, then they become necessary. At last they are too often made idols, and all must bow down to them or be punished.”

I stand with John Howard Yoder’s critique when he said, “The whole concern of Reformation theology was to justify restructuring the organized church without shaking its foundations.” For better or for worse, “Pagan Christianity” seeks to shake some of its foundations.

**Dan. When I hear stories of how house churches were formed, a pattern seems to exist. They originally met each other in a larger church, got dissatisfied with the larger church and left to form a house church. But then, their relational network dries up, as all their relationships and those in the house church came from the larger organized church. So as time goes by, they don’t grow in terms of getting new people in them who weren’t part of any church. Since their source of people in their house church came from the very church they were dissatisfied with or criticize later. So they wouldn’t have even existed or known each other if it wasn’t for the larger organized church, with paid pastors and buildings. Any response to this?**

Frank: I’ve seen some house churches follow this pattern. But to my mind, those that did began on a wrong foundation. I address some of my criticisms of house churches at this page: <http://ptmin.org/movement.htm> In it, I discuss seven of the most frequent types.

I personally think the only motive for gathering as a church is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If it’s not by Him, through Him, and to Him, then it’s just another human organization. Jesus Christ is the only foundation upon which a church should be built. Anything less will prove defective and will ultimately lack spiritual value. So it seems to me anyway.

**Dan. Do house churches really see conversion growth? Not in theory, but multiplying from new believers? Would you say that the established organized church with paid pastors, buildings etc. see more conversion growth than house churches? Is there any data about conversion growth in house churches? Or in your church, how many were already Christians, how many conversions have you seen, has your house church multiplied, how many times? (I ask numbers just to try and really grasp things, I understand numbers aren’t reflective of health).**

Frank: One of the reasons why I’m not an advocate of “house church” per se is because many “home/simple churches” are insular, navel-gazing communities. In my observation, I don’t see much more real spiritual growth in many house churches than I do in many institutional churches. A lot of “growth” in institutional churches is merely church hopping. There are also many conversions that, in my judgment, haven’t “taken root.”

Of course, that’s my experience and observation. But the studies I’ve read on this confirm it. George Barna has done a lot of work showing the ineffectiveness of the institutional model in spiritual transformation and cultural impact. I think it’s a mistake to ignore his findings.

Organic churches, which we describe in the book, are a different creature all together. They experience seasons of growth on many levels. I’ve never kept count on these things, so I can’t give you hard and fast numbers. (I used to be a Pentecostal once and paid great attention to numbers ;-))Your mileage may vary, but in my personal experience, I’ve seen more people come to the Lord in a way that \*actually changed their lifestyle\* and caused them to \*continue following Him\* in organic church life than I have in the typical

house church or institutional church.

**Dan. At least from reading who has blogged about your book so far, some seem to be paid staff on churches. So isn't a great percentage of people buying George Barna books and Pagan Christianity - pastors at churches who get money from being on paid staffs. so isn't it somewhat ironic that Barna group and you are going to paid pastors and large churches to promote your materials? (I know you also promote them via house church networks, but numbers-wise I can't imagine it isn't the established larger church with paid pastors where you will have more of an audience and basing what I have seen on blogs at least, the ones reading your book so far and reviewing them are paid pastors on church staffs.**

Frank: That's interesting you say that, because many pastors do not like this book and want it to go away. The only pastors who are promoting it seem to be those who have left the clergy system or who are on their way out. Or ... those daring souls who are grappling with the issues straight-forwardly. I suppose another reason why some pastors would buy the book is to use it to start a campfire ;-)

I'm told that there are over 100 reviews on Pagan Christianity right now. (I'm also told that a good portion are from those who haven't read it.) Most who have reviewed the book are from what used to be called "the laity." :-)

While we didn't write the book for pastors, some who are struggling with the system are reading it. Some have written us letters, some with tears, telling us how much the book has impacted them.

As one who writes controversial books yourself, I'm sure you know there are many people seeking new answers to old questions. And they are now questioning things that have rarely been (or "shouldn't") be questioned. I think this is a good thing. At bottom, "Pagan Christianity" is a conversation starter.

**Dan. If a church was large and had paid pastors, buildings etc. but they did pay attention to people being in smaller communities and experiencing what you talk about in the book in addition to the larger weekend gathering and they were seeing people coming to know Jesus from outside the church - would you be part of it?**

Frank: What you are describing sounds like something I've seen before dozens of times. And it's not something I find impressive. Let me make clear: the kind of church life we mention in the book is not the typical small group meeting where there's prayer, bible study, and java. It's something far higher, richer, and deeper.

Let me tell you what's typical in the model you're describing above. The larger "church service" always wins out over the smaller gatherings. Further, there's usually a leader in the small group who is calling the shots or setting the agenda. It's not the organic expression of church life we speak of in the book where Christ's headship is seen and known visibly.

In all the cases I have seen at least, the "small groups" were tacked onto the larger organization as another program. Members view the church service – the big one – as "church" and the small groups as something supplemental and optional. Further, I've never seen what you are saying done where there was true, out-of-the-soil, organic church life. It was always organizational.

On the other hand, I think that a large, professional pastor-driven institutional church can transition to an organic church without (necessarily) losing the building or (necessarily) the people; but not without monumental, earth-shattering, costly changes. Tweaking the system won't take us there. So says my observation and experience, for whatever you think that's worth ☺

Now for a postscript: I challenge the necessity of owning a building in many cases. The edifice complex runs very deep among contemporary Christians. The staggering fact is that the institutional church in the United States alone owns \$230 of real estate. And we spend well over 10 billion dollars a year just to maintain it (again, this is the U.S. alone). Notwithstanding: many institutional churches are deep in debt

because they felt they “needed” to own a building. A good deal of the “pledges” that are put forth in such churches are to secure loans to purchase buildings.

Consider the above paragraph for a moment. The early church didn’t own buildings for the first 300 years of its existence. And they didn’t have the debt we do because of our affinity for buildings. (We show in the book and in the sequel, that this was deliberate on the part of the early Christians; it wasn’t because of persecution as is commonly taught.)

While there’s nothing inherently wrong with owning a building, in light of the things that my friend Brian McLaren has written about in his recent book, we should ask ourselves: Can God’s people do something more meaningful with all those billions of dollars than to keep a building afloat?

Just a question to consider.

**Dan. Anything you want to say or add or clear up?**

Sure. I’m dialoging with people about the book on this site: <http://www.ptmin.org/answers.htm>  
People who have read the book or who have heard various reports about it can take a look. The site also has interviews with George Barna and I, endorsements, reviews, bonus chapters and other such things. There’s also a list of definitions that we use in the book, which will appear in the next reprint.

Thanks for the opportunity, Dan. You are doing a good work, my friend, and I applaud it very much. Your books are making an impact. And in some pretty basic ways, “Pagan Christianity” and your most recent book has more points of contact than people may realize. Namely, both seek to glorify Jesus Christ and make a distinction between Him and the institution that so many of us have been calling “church.”

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Dan Kimball’s web site/blog is <http://www.dankimball.com>