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## Cell or Small Group Ministry: An Essential Foundation for Christian Education, Discipleship, Leadership Development, and Church Growth

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**Cell or Small Group Ministry:  
An Essential Foundation for Christian Education, Discipleship,  
Leadership Development,  
and Church Growth**

**J. Gregory Lawson**

One of the most important ingredients of a biblical philosophy of church growth is the concept of the “cell” or small group. These groups provide a framework to fulfill the Great Commission mandate to “make disciples.” Although the size may vary depending upon the type and location, a small group has been defined as “an intentional gathering of three to twelve people who commit themselves to work together to become better disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Carl F. George, who is one of the North American leaders in the small group movement, is convinced that an effective small-group ministry must accomplish three goals. The goals of a small group should be to provide nurturing relationships in the presence of Jesus Christ, invite others to faith in Jesus Christ, and to reproduce a new set of leaders so new groups can be formed.<sup>2</sup>

Another expert in the field of small group ministry is Dale Galloway. While pastor of the New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, Galloway led one of the most successful small group ministries in North America. Galloway believes that there are five basic reasons why every church needs small groups:

1. They provide multiple points of entry into the church.
2. They provide a very effective form of evangelism.

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3. They are the only way to truly care for people.
4. They accelerate the spiritual growth of individuals and the church.
5. They properly shift the work of the church to the people and fulfill Ephesians 4.<sup>3</sup>

Cell or small group ministries are spreading throughout the world crossing cultural, economic, ethnic, and denominational boundaries. This model is effective, especially in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, worship, and pastoral care. It is imperative that church growth practitioners face the challenges and welcome the opportunities presented by a small group ministry.<sup>4</sup>

*The Theological and Historical Foundation for a Cell Ministry*

There is strong biblical support for a home cell ministry. Neal F. McBride asserts that “Jesus Christ is pictured as the greatest small group leader in history.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus recognized the importance of the role of corporate worship and often taught large crowds in the synagogues, and the temple, but also had a strategic ministry as He spent time with small groups in private homes. Robert Coleman comments on the simplicity of Jesus’ strategy: “Though He did what He could to help the multitudes, He had to devote Himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, in order that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of His strategy.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus chose twelve men as His primary small group and entrusted to these disciples the foundation of the Christian faith. Within the context of the small group of twelve disciples, Jesus was able to spend more time in leadership development with Peter, James, and John. Jesus gave an excellent example of continually training new leadership to carry on the task of world evangelization.

The early church continued Jesus’ pattern of ministry. In Acts 2:46–47, it is evident that homes were used as regular places of worship: “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor

with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”<sup>7</sup>

The largest church in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, under the leadership of Paul Yonggi Cho.<sup>8</sup> This church has effectively used a home cell ministry. Cho contends that the needs of the Christians in the early church were taken care of in the homes, not in the temple. He says that there is much scriptural support for home meetings and sees the church in the house of Lydia (Acts 16:40), the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3–5), and the church in the house of Philemon (Philemon 2) as indicating a pattern of church life.<sup>9</sup>

Ralph Neighbour, Jr. points out that the early church recognized there cannot be participation by every member when the gatherings are only made up of large, impersonal groups, so the people of God moved from house to house in small groups.<sup>10</sup> The early church did not begin to construct church buildings until about A.D. 200.<sup>11</sup> As buildings displaced the house church, the erroneous theological perception that the church was a building, not a body of people, became the norm.<sup>12</sup>

As the church has experienced renewal throughout the years, small group ministry in the home has played a vital role. “The use of small groups of one kind or another seems to be a common element in all significant movements of the Holy Spirit throughout church history.”<sup>13</sup>

Whether it has been the Waldensians before the Reformation, the Anabaptists during the Reformation, or the Brethren groups after the Reformation, there has been a striking similarity—the recovery of the priesthood of the believer, the blurring of lines between the clergy and the laity, an emphasis on the unity and oneness of all the people of God, and the recovery of the house church.<sup>14</sup>

Other groups such as the Moravians and Wesleyans as well as the Holiness, Pietist, and Pentecostal movements effectively utilized house meetings for prayer, Bible study, and discussion.

In conclusion, the church should not be thought of as a

building or structure, but as the body of Christ called to fulfill the Great Commission. The early church used homes as regular places of worship. Throughout the years small groups meeting in homes have played a vital role in church renewal and spiritual awakening.

*The Development, Administration, and Implementation of a Cell Ministry*

In discussing the concept of a Meta-Church, Carl George makes an argument for a church structure which is large enough to celebrate, yet small enough to care. While acknowledging the importance of corporate worship and that God uses many strategies to build His church, George sees tremendous potential for cell group ministry.<sup>15</sup> He writes:

I believe that the smaller group within the whole—called by dozens of terms, including the small group of the cell group—is a crucial but underdeveloped resource in most churches. It is, I contend, the most strategically significant foundation, for spiritual formation and assimilation, for evangelism and leadership development, for the most essential functions that God has called for in the church.<sup>16</sup>

If a home cell ministry is to achieve these essential functions, strong pastoral leadership is necessary. The pastor must understand the importance of cell groups and see them as the key to the spiritual renewal of the church.<sup>17</sup> Cho speaks to the level of pastoral commitment required to lead a home cell ministry:

A lot of groundwork needs to be laid before the system can be implemented. I believe the pastor needs to commit his energy and leadership to lay the groundwork. And even after the program is rolling, he needs to remain the obvious leader, training the cell leaders and motivating them to reach the goals that have been established for each group.<sup>18</sup>

Cho provides for delegation in the home cell ministry. This is

necessary because the traditional pastoral structure is incapable of ministering to a large number of members. With this idea in mind, Cho believes that the “nitty-gritty” should be delegated to a cell leader, while the ultimate responsibility of leadership is to remain with the pastor. An active and ongoing relationship between the pastoral staff and cell leaders must be maintained at all times.

If the people are not convinced the pastor is behind the formation of cell groups, Cho says one of three things will occur:

1. The system will bog down and begin to stagnate. Cells will meet for “fellowship” only and there will be no real spiritual growth and no evangelism. Eventually, they will fizzle out.
2. Meetings will become ritualistic, or the groups will come under the influence of personalities. In this way the cells eventually will become something superfluous and harmful.
3. The system will become a cancer on the local body if the cell leaders are not required to report regularly to their peers or superiors, or to the pastor.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most important areas of leadership development which the pastor or staff must engage in is the concept of shared ministry. Many churches have traditionally seen the work of the ministry as the pastor’s sole responsibility. McBride observes that of all the legitimate ministry contexts a church can offer, small groups provide one of the most practical and ready platforms to achieve these vital goals.<sup>20</sup> The small group is an excellent context for genuine theological work by the whole body of Christ, rather than by professional theologians.<sup>21</sup> When the home cell ministry operates efficiently, it will free the pastor or staff to devote more time to the ministry of prayer and the Word. As this transformation takes place, cell members see themselves as ministers who have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the kingdom of God.

The success of the cell ministry depends upon the appropriate selection and training of the group leaders. McBride states that

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there are certain indispensable qualifications which every group leader should possess: "An understanding of spiritual principles, a growing relationship with Christ, a commitment to caring for people, a desire to serve, a willingness to learn, and a resolve to spend the necessary time."<sup>22</sup> A home cell leader must desire to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. "If leaders are not dependent on the Holy Spirit, they can actually begin to move counter to the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>23</sup>

Another important aspect of leadership training in the home cell ministry is the discovery and development of spiritual gifts in the groups. Because of both the abuse and emphasis on spiritual gifts among many Christian groups, this subject presents a unique opportunity to provide balanced biblical teaching and practical application. Neighbour writes:

There is no better place for spiritual gifts to be developed than in cell groups. All necessary conditions are present for the gifts to be received and used for edification. Needs present in the lives of the believers and the small size of the group make it possible for all present to exercise gifts for building up one another in the Spirit. The modeling of the proper use of gifts can protect new believers from abused excesses.<sup>24</sup>

In the use of spiritual gifts, it is necessary for each cell group to remain under the doctrine and authority of the supporting local church.

The love of Christ builds relationships in cell groups. These relationships provide the opportunity for needs to be expressed and meaningful prayer to take place. A high level of intimacy develops as Christians learn to "bear one another's burdens." Martin and McIntosh believe that relationship building in the small group will meet deep spiritual and emotional needs:

People participating in a small group feel wanted when there it a feeling that no one objects to their presence, that they are sincerely welcome, and that they are honestly needed for themselves, not just for their hands or money.

The creation of emotional security in a small group, brought about by unconditional love and acceptance, releases people to praise God and grow together.”<sup>25</sup>

The Bible study plays an important role in the home cell group. A person does not have to be a Bible scholar to lead a Bible study. The home group provides a supporting environment for developing skills in the area of Bible teaching.

McBride states that the best Bible studies are discussion-oriented. He writes: “Each member should have the opportunity to discuss and interact with the other group members. Your role as the leader is to facilitate the active participation of the members, not dominate the discussion or give the answers.”<sup>26</sup> Even though the leader should not give packaged answers, it is important to help the participants learn to personally study God’s Word and then to apply the biblical truth. As members discuss the Bible, they begin to see the relevance of Christianity to their daily lives.

There are different approaches to selecting what type of Bible study should take place in the home cell groups. Cho places an emphasis on the Bible study fitting in the overall program of the church. He states: “It is a good idea for cell group lessons to follow the pastor’s Sunday sermon, perhaps to enlarge upon some of the most important points of that sermon.”<sup>27</sup>

Home cell groups provide a unique opportunity for outreach and training in evangelism. Cionca writes:

To become fishers of men necessitates going out to the waters of our jobs and neighborhoods where non-Christians live. People are won to Christ through participation in a nonthreatening, informative Bible study. The homes of our members, and even of nonbelievers, are great ministry sites away from the larger church campus.<sup>28</sup>

Richard Peace believes that small groups are the ideal place for evangelism to take place. He writes, “In a successful small group, love, acceptance, and fellowship flow in unusual measure. This is the ideal situation in which to hear about the kingdom of



God.”<sup>29</sup> George indicates that in North America during the next twelve months, one out of every four church-related small groups will win someone to faith in Christ.<sup>30</sup>

When evangelism takes place as a result of the ministry through home cell groups, a multiplication process begins to occur. There is an unlimited potential for growth as cell groups divide and reproduce new groups. Each cell leader should be training another leader in anticipation of generating a new group.<sup>31</sup> There are many churches around the world who have experienced growth as a result of implementing home cell groups. Cho believes that any church which adopts home cell groups is going to grow. It is allowing God to build “His own Church in His own way.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Cell or small groups are not the solution for the world or the church’s problems. Jesus is the answer. However, the home cell groups present an excellent opportunity by giving the church a structure to reach the world for Christ and to disciple believers. A home cell ministry has a strong biblical and historical precedent. Cell groups are useful because of the tremendous potential to lead people to a saving and intimate knowledge of Christ while preparing them for ministry. A danger of cell groups is that they may become another form, method, or ritual of the “institutional church,” another “god” that people follow rather than the true and living God. The small group ministry should be flexible and can be adapted to the needs of an individual church. Pastoral and lay leadership are the keys to the success of the small groups. Evangelism and personal ministry is the heartbeat. Home cell groups have been tried all over the world with amazing results. It is an issue that is worthy of consideration by each local church. The contemporary church must accept this challenge and take this approach to ministry seriously in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

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#### NOTES

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