

# Small Groups

Many churches are either programme structured or centred around the charismatic personality of the pastor. The problem with the former is that people responsible for running programmes are prone to burn out after several years, while the difficulty with the latter, building a church around a charismatic personality is that if the pastor dies, moves away, or loses his image, that church loses its following.

Small groups sometimes known as cell groups, do not largely depend upon programmes or personalities for their ongoing effectiveness. They are very much centred on transformation in Christ through relationships, love and body life. Many of the large churches around the world today, are experiencing phenomenal lasting growth through having a cellular philosophy of ministry. It does not matter to a person how large and unknown the congregation is if he or she belongs to a healthy cell. Such a small group cell offers love, safety, comfort, accountability, openness and perspective. With the infra structure of the church being cellular, everyone can find a place where they feel significant.

The cellular movement is based upon the premise that relationships are of prime importance. John 17:21-23 endorses this.

Most experiencing faith in Jesus want an authentic faith where they can live in their world with integrity, drawing people to Christ and having a meaningful relationship with God's people. Evidently this occurred for the believers in Acts 2:41-47 as they shared their lives together.

## *A relational chart*

|                                       |                           |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Intimate level<br>1-3 people          | ↑                         |
| Sharing level<br>5-7 people           | The cell<br>Church        |
| Caring level<br>8-17 people           | ↓                         |
| Functional level<br>20-40 people      | ↑                         |
| Greeting level<br>60-120 people       | The traditional<br>Church |
| Courtesy level<br>entire congregation | ↓                         |

There is a place for all those levels. In the larger gathering the majesty, holiness and exaltation of God are acclaimed. In the small group the emphasis which usually comes

through is that of Christ being in our midst, our friend and Saviour. He is immanent, but in the large group He is revered as transcendent. The cells need to meet regularly in the Sunday service to celebrate the fullness of God.

There are many types of small groups. For example.

- Bible study groups
- Prayer groups
- Caring for one another groups
- Social groups
- Task groups
- Accountability groups
- Covenant groups
- House Church groups

Because of the needs of people and the growth potential it is recommended 70% of the cells in a cell-based church are caring groups.

## Essential tasks

There are four essential tasks of cell groups. *Firstly*, they are to care for and nurture existing believers. *Secondly*, they are to reach out to prebelievers with the gospel. Some groups have an empty chair in the room as a reminder that someone they know needs to fill that chair and experience the love of God. *Thirdly*, the development of new leaders is a high priority. And *fourthly*, there must be the birthing of a new group. It is useful to set a target date for when that multiplication will occur. Ideally a group should divide every few months.

## Ten things that happen best in a small group

1. A close family.
2. Application of the Bible to daily life.
3. Sharing of life testimony.
4. Effective one-to-one pastoral care.
5. Encouragement and edification.
6. Unlimited opportunities for meaningful service.
7. Non-threatening friendship evangelism.
8. Formation of new converts.
9. Spiritual growth.
10. Development of strong leadership.

The effectiveness of a group will depend upon the *size* of the group, the *type of relationships* encouraged to develop, the *benefits* that are there for all and the *frequency* of meeting together.

Whatever type of group is established it is important that there is:

- a strong loving component in it.
- learning component and doing aspect.
- a means of deciding its vision and structure.

## Traditional home groups

Many home groups as we have known them have the following characteristics:

- primarily a place for personal. nurturing of existing Christians.
- are most frequently inward looking.
- strongly influenced by charismatic renewal.
- lack a direction.
- an optional extra to church life.
- few churches have small groups as an intentional strategy.
- dependent on the ability and vision of a gifted leader.
- little continuing development of leaders.
- often a cause of frustration, despair and burnout of leaders.
- usually fewer than 25% of active membership involved.

## Essential principles of successful cell groups

*Firstly*, there must be a narrow span of control. It has been suggested that a pastor can only have effective input into only five leaders, who in turn teach others.

*Secondly*, formational training for leadership is important. That is let others see how you do things then coach them in their doing and finally help them do those things.

*Thirdly* for effective caring the group should not grow beyond ten people. Otherwise, intimacy will decline.

*Fourthly* it is essential that an apprentice is taken alongside the leader and trained to do a similar work in a new group. Choose that person wisely.

## Training of leaders

In training potential leaders look for:

- a person with a teachable spirit.
- someone who is growing in their relationship with Christ.
- appropriate gifts and personality.
- no major unresolved issues.
- a supportive spouse if married.
- a person willing to train others.

The leadership community is probably the most important factor which will determine the success or failure of the cell groups. The senior pastor must give a strong lead and it is helpful to have these at least monthly. The primary purpose is to minister to the leaders by:

1. *Maintaining vision.* Reaffirm core values, focus on future direction and worship together. Share faith stories. Set long term objectives (30 minutes).
2. *Build relationships.* leaders can pray for one another, talk, listen and be listened to. Brain storm if necessary. Provide counsel (30 minutes).
3. *Develop skills.* In depth teaching to equip in practical ministry skills (30 minutes). The leader of the cell group leaders needs to ask them constantly 'what do you need to know to do your job better?'

This leader of leaders will attend his leaders' groups from time to time in tune with what is happening and give encouraging guidance from behind the scenes.

## Cell group programme

These programmes differ depending on the main purpose of the group. However, a typical group will only meet for one and half hours - no longer. It is important for couples to attend together so that they will grow in their spiritual lives together.

Through that time a typical group will:

- commence with coffee and fellowship.
- worship .
- study ( 10 minutes teaching, 10 minutes application).
- personal sharing and prayer.
- fellowship.

The atmosphere is such that non or new Christians are welcomed and accepted with love. The amount of worship and personal ministry time will vary.

## Future planning

Never be in a hurry to implement the cell group structure until the homework has been done thoroughly. Some leaders believe that traditional churches will almost never be able to transfer over to these cell group concepts, while others disagree. The latter believe that there is room for a number of different types of groups which can operate successfully within a church.

Sometimes the term 'Cell groups' is off putting, so other terminology should be used instead. However, most agree that it normally will take from 18 months to three years before a church will be established as a small group type of church.

## The New Testament and Today's Church

### A Study in Contrasts

|                                    | <b>The New Testament Church</b>   | <b>The Church of today</b>                           |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>LOCATION</b>                    | Moves from house to house   | Meets in church buildings                            |
| <b>SIZE OF GROUPS</b>              | Small, intimate groups  | Large groups   |
| <b>ACTIVITIES</b>                  | Frequent fellowship, weekly worship services                                    | Weekly worship services, programmes and activities   |
| <b>SUPPORT SYSTEM</b>              | Building up one another   | Dependent on pastor                                  |
| <b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>               | Intimate, helping one another, accountable                                      | Often superficial                                    |
| <b>DISCIPLING</b>                  | Interaction, modelling, personal values shaped                                  | Teaching, little modelling, programmes               |
| <b>PRIMARY TASK OF LEADERS</b>     | Every believer equipped to do the work of ministry                              | Administration of programmes and do the ministry     |
| <b>PRAYER LIFE</b>                 | Heavy emphasis  | Individual choice, limited                           |
| <b>PASTOR'S DUTY</b>               | Model the life of a believer, equip others for ministry                         | Preach and do ministry                               |
| <b>EXPECTATIONS OF MEMBERS</b>     | Ministering to others, servanthood and stewardship                              | Attendance; Giving; Work in the programmes           |
| <b>KEY WORDS</b>                   | "Go and make disciples"   | "Come grow with us"                                  |
| <b>TEACHINGS</b>                   | Application of Scriptures to life   | Knowledge of Scriptures                              |
| <b>SPIRITUAL GIFTS</b>             | "Exercised by all believers of people using their gifts in ministry"            | "What you know", Number of attenders                 |
| <b>BASIS OF EVALUATION</b>         | "How you serve", number of people using their gifts in ministry                 | "What you know", Number of attenders                 |
| <b>SOURCE FOR RECRUITING STAFF</b> | Servant workers developed within; tested before they are set apart for ministry | Trained, professional clergy brought in from outside |

(Most of this material used, with kind permission, is based on 'Developing New Groups for Care and Growth Seminar' by Robert Orr).