

THE CHALLENGE OF
CELL
CHURCH

Getting to grips with cell church values

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INTRODUCTION

It may have been the coffee, the weather or the shape of the seats. It could have been the bed of the night before or the busyness of the previous day, but I have to say that the first 24 hours of my first Cell Conference left me completely baffled! It's probably unfair, but when it all became clear on the second morning my reaction was, 'Why didn't you say so in the first place!' Having looked at graphs and tables and listened to some brand new 'jargon', I was in no mood for receiving fresh vision. So I have a lot of sympathy with people whose eyes glaze over and who instantly get bored at the mention of 'Cell Church'. That's partly why I wanted to write something that was simple to read and as easy to grasp as ABC. But why did I want to go and write a whole book about it?

I may be biting off more than I can chew here, but this is a book I want to see in people's hands because I believe it's a vision that can change hearts. How many times have you dreamed of a church that grows and multiplies? How many times have you longed for God to transform your small group? How many times have you wanted to see a good sermon worked out and applied in the life of the church? How many times have you wished that Christians could be real with each other—more loving, more available, adaptable and accountable? How many times have you asked God to move in your ministry without the need for some pastoral professional alongside? And how many friends would you want to be touched and drawn into the Christian faith without being embarrassed about the process? All those questions and more, I believe, are answered in the vision for cell church.

Not everything 'cell' offers is new—far from it. I remember when the Alpha course was first introduced and how many of us felt that it contained little that was new. Much of the teaching we'd been

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trying to impart for years, often in small groups. But the genius and beauty of Alpha is that it gathers the very best practices and the very best values from all the other courses and puts them together in a fresher and more relevant way. Not only that, but it takes out the 'cringe factors' and puts in a few 'cutting edge' features, emphasizing things like process, presentation and the need for spiritual power. The results, of course, have been phenomenal, not least in enabling the smallest, weakest church to do evangelism in practical and effective ways. As you can see, I'm enthusiastic about Alpha! And I'm passionate about 'Cell' for the very same reasons. All the values I've ever tried to teach, and all the vision I've been striving to build, are to be found in the cell church movement, but they've been put together in a way that can really work for any church and at every level.

Having made the claim, I'll now try and make the case, but first let me go back to that conference. The second 24 hours were exhilarating as the speakers hit the target again and again on every point of need and piece of baggage I'd happened to bring along. How could the church grow? How could every member feel a part? How could they all be mobilized for mission? How could we start looking out instead of in? This time, however, it wasn't just a strategy tagged on, but a whole set of values to be reaffirmed and a whole new vision to be released. I may not remember the graphs and tables, but I do recall some very quotable quotes that summed up the essence of 'cell'. I'll refer to these in appropriate places, but for now let me recall the story that left me saying, 'Yes Lord, I'll go for it!' It went something like this:

In the 1960s, Swiss watch makers apparently still controlled 88 per cent of the market with beautifully crafted timepieces. Around that time, a thing called 'quartz' was invented. It fascinated the Swiss and really impressed them. They constructed a watch using the new invention, but at the end of the day they decided, 'It isn't really a watch as we know watches.' They showed it to other companies, exhibiting and illuminating it in glass cases, but didn't

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bother with the patent. One day, a couple of Japanese businessmen arrived and loved what they saw. They went away and started producing electronic quartz watches. Everybody today wears quartz watches and yet the Swiss have less than 10 per cent of the market and less than 20 per cent of the profit!

That little story didn't just amuse me—it challenged me profoundly to act on the message it sends. In fact I agree with those who say that our traditional home groups have reached their 'sell by' date. The cell church movement has had an enormous impact on home groups up and down the country over the past decade. Most have not adopted the whole package, but the principles set out in cell church thinking have been adopted and adapted in many different settings. People like Bill Beckham and Ralph Neighbour have (through the American market) provided us with some excellent teaching on the subject in conferences and books, and I'm very grateful to them. I offer this shorter addition with three simple aims:

- to explain it to the uninitiated;
- to sell it to the unconverted;
- to offer it as a resource to those who want to implement it.

With these aims in mind, I've tried first of all to take away some of the jargon that's connected with the subject—apart, of course, from the word 'cell'. It may be helpful at the beginning to differentiate between the phrase 'cell group' and 'cell church'. 'Cell church' (or cell-based church) refers to a collective total of groups that make up a distinct Christian community, as opposed to the words 'cell' and 'cell group' which refer to one single small group.

As the writing of the book progressed, I decided to provide a cell outline at the end of each chapter. I hope these may be helpful for home groups and leadership teams considering cell church, or those who are in the early stages of transition. Not only do they give the flavour of a typical cell group programme, but I hope they will help the whole process of thinking it through and sharpening vision.



DOING TIME

OK, so the word ‘cell’ makes you think about Strangeways and Wormwood Scrubs! And what was wrong with the phrase ‘home groups’ (or ‘house groups’) in the first place? Isn’t this just another tacky import of jargon and window dressing to add to what we’ve already got? What’s the difference between a house group and a cell group, anyway?

All good questions, and to be really honest, if you run a house group the way it was meant to be run, then there may be very little difference at all at first sight. If we’re honest, though, many of us have had a love-hate relationship with house groups for some time now, and in most churches they tend to have had a pretty chequered history, with peaks and troughs of popularity, often depending on how much time there actually is in the church calendar to get on and do them.

Before we considered cell, our own church had seen a steady dwindling from 25 groups to 15, largely because our programme was overbusy, good leaders overworked and a review was well overdue. My first Cell Conference gave me the opportunity to begin this, but it gave a whole lot more besides. It didn’t take long to re-establish the fundamental importance of small groups, but what it gave me in addition was a wake-up call to their pivotal importance. More than that, it offered a strategy to put them at the very heart of the church’s life where they really could have the number one call on people’s commitment that they deserved.

Number one commitment? Doesn’t that mean that small group life is actually as important, if not more so, than Sunday services? Well, I have to come clean at the very beginning and say yes. To have

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a single cell is to have an authentic church. Having said that, however, let me also say that only one month after moving into a cell church model, the number of weekly communicants at our Sunday services had risen by 50! By the end of our first year, our main service had multiplied into three separate services—two in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Now I can't say that was all due to an instant impact on the unchurched community (I wish!), but what I can say is that the shift in focus from Sunday to cell had a profound and lasting effect on the congregation itself. People on the fringe were suddenly appearing more regularly. People who'd been missing had come back. People who'd been hit-and-miss in attendance were becoming more consistent and 'once a month-ers' were now coming once a week. In other words, as the whole life of the church was being refocused around its cell life, the congregational life was being renewed and refreshed and strengthened. Instead of Sundays being the main source of inspiration and recuperation for the week ahead, they were now becoming the major time of celebration where cells could gather for praise and worship and even greater doses of what they'd already been receiving during the week. People were rediscovering that the church is a seven-day-a-week shared experience and not just a spectator Sunday sport!

So, what was different? What had changed inside the groups that now inspired 350 people to attend where only 150 had previously? And what made it begin to impact the life of the church? What made it suddenly feel right where previously we'd obviously got it wrong? And what had been killing off the groups in the first place?

Let's talk about that before we go much further, because we need to see where small groups often do go wrong. The truth is that most groups are very strong in some areas and weak in others, depending on the make-up and history of the group itself. But then I expect most of us have had a few negative experiences in groups, and maybe some of us have even felt as if we're trapped in prison doing time! The first step, then, is to recognize the weaknesses that are there and

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to ask how we can work consistently at all the potential strengths. Here are half a dozen small group killers that you may well recognize and groan at:

1. The Club: strong on membership, weak on community

The feeling here is that house group is just something we do on a Wednesday night at 8.00pm. It's something we love doing and we're proud to be members, but during the six days in between we rarely talk to each other and never really care what's going on in the other members' lives. In other words, we treat it on the same level as going to the pub or attending any local club. It's definitely a membership thing but in terms of commitment it barely begins to register on the friends-and-relationships scale. That's not to say that everyone isn't very friendly and helpful at the meeting. But if a pastoral issue or practical problem arises, then this group may not even be aware of it, or will automatically assume that the vicar or the care team or whoever will deal with it first.

2. The Class: strong on study, weak on ministry

This is a group where Bible study is the dominant task, and great effort goes into both preparation and discussion. The danger comes when the concern for truth about God and Bible knowledge becomes a smokescreen for avoiding the need for self-knowledge. It's the kind of group where we hide behind our Bibles and cherish important words like 'maturity' and 'depth', and the more study we do and the more commentaries and concordances we use, the better the group.

But what's the point of asking what the Bible means, if we don't then ask the question, 'How does this apply to me in my situation, and what is God saying to me?' And when he does start speaking

and I start applying his word, then the one thing I really need is ministry. I want someone to encourage me and identify with the issues, and then pray with me in a helpful and practical way. When Bible study is really effective, the whole group should come to that same position and if time isn't allowed for that, then how much truth and what kind of learning have we really taken on board?

3. The Clinic: strong on caring, weak on discipline

This group is everyone's dream when we're looking for sympathy or are genuinely in need of care. Where there is a problem, quality time will be given to listening and loving people through it. Again, it's a group with a great deal to offer but it can also be fraught with danger. Taken to extremes, the caring group degenerates quickly into a very large dustbin where all my worries, hurts and hassles can be unloaded, and by the time the whole group's done that, then, boy, are we depressed! What's more, there's a very real danger here of sticking plasters on deeper wounds that are going to keep on festering without proper attention.

The clinic is a group that's in danger of trying to make people happy instead of making them whole. When we encourage each other, we don't just sympathize and affirm that being a Christian's a struggle, we try and turn the 'why' questions into 'what': what is God trying to say to me and what does he want to do? The clinic's main concern is happiness: how can I make the hurting happy again? But if we really care for each other, what we want above all is to make each other like Christ. That, in the end, is what makes us really happy, and simply applying a plaster is not always the best answer. It also turns the group into a dumping ground for unresolved rubbish.

4. The Clan: strong on unity, weak on vulnerability

A group that's become a clan has a very strong identity, and that usually means they have a bee in their bonnet about something! They might be very strong on the power of prayer, or the importance of mission, or 'standing on the word', and they'll pursue that common interest with a passion. Whenever they meet, all their time and energy will go into defending and developing the thing that they're really hot on, so much so that they never actually get around to taking off their armour and becoming vulnerable to each other. The point here is that it's all very well being strong on unity and identity, but it's a total waste of time if we never identify our weaknesses and unite around our frailty. The clan presents such a strong corporate face that no one has a chance to show a personal face and share their real selves.

5. The Closet: strong on protection, weak on nurturing gifts

I suppose you could call this group the holy huddle. It's a group that concentrates on keeping things the way they are. And why? Because the group is very nice as it is, thank you very much, and we don't want to rock the boat or put people off or wind anyone up. If the leader wants to give us a little sermon each week, that's fine—it's his group. If somebody has always offered their home and hospitality, it's not very wise to suggest alternative venues. If two or three members gently disrupt the group and inhibit others, it may not be helpful to challenge them.

Unfortunately, a group like this becomes so claustrophobic that people can't breathe and they certainly can't grow. There may be people in that group who are potential leaders, and others who are capable of exercising all kinds of gifts, if we'll only let them. This group needs to get out of the closet, knock down a few restricting walls and then get producing. It needs to draw out the potential, release the talent and nurture the hidden gifts.

6. The Clique: strong on belonging, weak on reproducing

I think this is often the biggest danger for ‘successful’ groups. We become so effective in learning and sharing together and generally meeting each other’s needs that we secretly want to bottle up the formula and preserve what we’ve got. At last we’ve found a place where we belong and people we can relate to. So why go and spoil it all by bringing in new people? Often, we can find quite plausible excuses like the size of our home or the make-up of the group or the stage that we’re at, but in the end there’s a strong instinct in us all that says, ‘I’d rather belong than reproduce.’

This is where cell groups become fundamentally different from traditional groups, because in time they increasingly focus outwards till the whole group is enabled and equipped to be effective witnesses and evangelists. That means a little group of six is eventually going to grow beyond twelve people and actually give birth to a brand new group as a result. And when it does, there’s a whole ethos in place that enables people to let it happen. Instead of mourning the death of a group, cell members learn to celebrate a birth! In the cell church, belonging feels good, but reproducing feels right.

THE ‘CELL’ WORD

Speaking about ‘feeling right’, when I first investigated cell church, I was immediately drawn by the potential of weeding out all those weaknesses and drawing out all the strengths. As far as I could see, the cell church had a very strong agenda and strategy for producing community, ministry, discipling, vulnerability, nurturing gifts and multiplying members, and that excited me. Since then I’ve come to appreciate the word ‘cell’ in a whole new way. I’m not a scientist, but I do understand that our bodies are made up of millions of living cells, each and every one involved in keeping the body alive

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and active. Expanding, then, on that wonderful picture of the body of Christ that we talk about so often, what do we need to take on board when we think about the cells that make up the human body?

1. They are living and life-giving

Someone describing the world of cells as they appear under a microscope wrote this: 'A universe sprang to life. Hundreds of organisms crowded into view: delicate, single-celled globes of crystal, breathing, whirling, flitting sideways, excited by the warmth of my microscope light...'.¹ Cells are not just a bunch of chemicals that get switched on and off to fulfil a function. They have life and power and purpose. And when a small group starts doing all that it's capable of doing, it becomes far more than a meeting. A house group meets, but a cell becomes a whole way of life, a community that's growing and serving and constantly in touch with its members.

2. They are small and efficient

Cells are one of the smallest units of life, and although they vary in size, they are microscopically small. To be seen, they must be magnified many times and our bodies are made up of billions of them. And yet it's inside the cell that energy is actually made available for the whole body to function. Despite their size, cells are tiny little power houses! In the same way, a small cell group is the perfect environment for seeing God's power released. A basic principle in the cell church is that 'small is beautiful'. One of its greatest strengths is in recognizing that when groups are too large, people get lost, ignored and left out, and the agendas become too large as well. The result is often to stifle its purpose, sap its energy and drain away its life.

When St Mark's had only three house groups, one was actually called 'the main group' for a while because that particular gathering

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could easily top 30 people on a good day. Not surprisingly, the groups were not growing and involvement remained static. A cell group, however, can often begin with as few as six people. Over time it aims to develop and empower those people from being passive members, who are often doing very little in the church, into active ministers with a very real role and a desire to serve.

3. They co-operate and serve

Two things about biological cells are particularly remarkable. Although chemically they are very alike, visually and functionally they can be as different as animals in a zoo. And yet they move and work together in incredible harmony. And even more amazing is the way they deliberately let go of all but one or two abilities in order to specialize in a single task. Apparently cells are experts at taking turns and dividing up labour!

Now cell group members may take a lot longer to learn the art, but each and every person is encouraged to get involved in a servant way, discovering where they can fit in and what they can offer in gifts and skills and time. Like the human body, there's a carefully ordered structure to ensure that no one takes on too much, and nobody gets left to one side. Mind you, there's another analogy here because occasionally a cell can choose to live inside the body and share its benefits while keeping itself totally independent. Those cells become parasites and are called cancers!

4. They need each other to function properly

There are millions of cells inside a hand alone, but a hand can quickly be rendered useless by the breakdown of a handful of tiny nerve cells, for example, when somebody has Hansen's disease (leprosy). Just the breakdown of one type of cell can cause havoc with the whole organ.

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Every active cell communicates and co-operates constantly with the rest of the body; and in the cell church, although at one level every cell group can operate as a fully functioning church, there's still a major emphasis on unity of purpose and vision, on working together and communicating at every turn. In every cell church, there's a carefully laid-out network of mutual support and shared leadership to enable the whole body to move and grow together. And unlike the human body, when one of the cells breaks down it can soon be rebuilt with the help of other cells.

5. They share the same ingredients

Although there's a vast variety of different cells that make up the body, they do still share a single ingredient that guarantees a single overall goal. It's called DNA and all the cells in one body contain it, sending out the same basic blueprint of instructions to each and every cell. At the end of the day, a cell church is far more than a clever structure with a clear religious purpose. It's a living thing that's been infused with the DNA of Jesus—'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27). Everything a cell aims to do is centred on him and his teaching, and that's what makes it authentically 'church'. In fact, that is what attracted me to embrace the whole package, because it increasingly appears to be the best possible vehicle in our time for enabling people to follow Jesus.

6. They grow and multiply

One of the unique features of white blood cells in the body is that they don't have a very long life in themselves, because they go on multiplying. Similarly, the cell group is uniquely different because its chief and ultimate aim is to grow and then multiply. It literally lives to divide and if it doesn't, it eventually degenerates and loses its life.

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I don't really know of one home group that hasn't eventually dried up and died when it's failed to grow. Sometimes a group can seem to thrive for year after year but eventually, even if it's through sheer old age, the group passes its sell-by date and loses its reason for existence. On the other hand, let's just reflect for a moment on some of the more dramatic examples of cell church multiplication.

Perhaps the most famous example is Dr Paul Yonggi Cho's story of his church in Seoul, South Korea.² He began his ministry in the 1950s with five people, and within ten years his church had grown to two thousand. At this size, however, he found it increasingly difficult to pastor along traditional lines. He said, 'I was only 28 years old, but my body was a wreck.' Let's face it, many of our leaders end up feeling like this. Ministry is a tiring and tough job and we need all the help we can get. Yonggi Cho found it through focusing on a cell-based model, and today his church is fast approaching a million members.

Other exciting examples are well documented in Howard Astin's Book, *Body and Cell*,³ as well as Ralph Neighbour's *Where Do We Go From Here?*⁴ What I think is particularly exciting, however, is a growing transformation of smaller churches. It isn't just the super-leaders who are seeing the fruit of the cell church approach. In Hong Kong, for example, all the churches recently did a survey of their shift in membership over the past five years. They discovered that, as the population grew by nearly 13 per cent, the church as a whole in that period actually shrank by 23 per cent. There are now 118 churches in Hong Kong (of all denominations) that have become cell churches or are in the process of doing so (that's about 20 per cent of the total). Those churches were so horrified by the results of the survey that together they decided to conduct their own. They discovered that in the same period, their cell churches had grown by 130 per cent (in other words, ten times the population growth), and the vast majority of their new members were all new Christians. Meanwhile, a few sums to work out the true figure of decline in most of the other Hong Kong churches leaves a very sad picture.

Doing Time

I'd hate this chapter to give the impression that cell church is all about success and number chasing. I hope I've given the impression that rather it is about coveting quality and authenticity, but you can check that out in the chapters ahead. Nor would I want to pretend that cell church provides an easy, painless formula for being church. There's no such thing, and this is a vision like any other, where that which costs nothing is worth nothing.

When I think of prison cells I often think of the Church in China, where there are so many examples of persecution. One pastor spoke at a national leaders' conference here a few years ago. He spoke of his twenty years in solitary confinement, put to work each day in a pool of human waste. He also spoke of his faith and his walk with God and said that even in that prison 'the cesspool became my private garden' for worship and praise. Meanwhile, the Church in his land has seen the most rapid church growth in the history of Christianity, despite the persecution. Never before, anywhere in the world, have so many accepted Christ in such a short period of time. Indeed, when the borders of China were opened again after the Cultural Revolution, Christians in the West expected to find a dying and desecrated Church. The buildings may have disappeared, but they soon discovered that a miracle had taken place, one that continues today.

How does the Church survive in these places and why does it thrive through the fires of persecution? Apart from the amazing testimonies of people like the Chinese pastor, that speak of an awesome and gracious move of God in the face of suffering, I can't help thinking that when the outward facade of the Church is stripped away completely, what's so often left in these places is huge numbers of tiny cells, worshipping, learning, ministering together, and actually growing!

Let me close the chapter with the words of Samuel Rutherford, the 17th-century pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and persecuted for his faith. When he found himself in prison, he wrote this in his diary: 'Jesus Christ came into my cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby!' I would never pretend that cell groups

don't occasionally feel like prison. They can, as we'll see, be frustrating, challenging and even painful, but they also reverberate with the life and joy of our faith. And anyway, what's our faith about if it doesn't involve a little counting the cost and 'doing time' for the kingdom?

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CELL OUTLINE

These outlines are particularly geared to help your group discuss the contents of each chapter and consider the challenge of cells. The Word sections are therefore not heavily based on particular Bible passages. They should be used selectively, so that you don't run out of time for the Witness section. A typical cell meeting might aim to spend fifteen minutes on the Welcome, fifteen minutes in Worship, an hour on the Word, and half an hour on the Witness. Please read the explanation of the four Ws in Chapter 2 before using the first outline. Remember that the Welcome and Worship sections in particular are only suggestions. If you don't feel comfortable using these particular ideas, be creative, but follow the principles!

Finally, I realize that for churches considering cell for the first time, it may be very difficult to cover all the issues raised in a single chapter at one meeting. It may be appropriate to spend a couple of meetings discussing the content of one or two of the chapters, particularly in Chapter 8. Again, be flexible, but try to have a true taste of a typical cell programme.

Welcome

If you were locked up in a prison cell and allowed to keep hold of one personal item what would it be (apart from your Bible!)?

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Worship

- Build this time around the theme of freedom to worship!
- Play a reflective piece of music. Think about all you would miss if you were locked away for your faith, and reflect on the freedom you have to meet with others in fellowship.
- Use Paul's letter to the Philippians as a tool to help you. Glancing through chapter 1, meditate on the verses that stand out as you read them, mindful that they are written from prison. Read out any that you feel would be particularly helpful to the group.
- After a few minutes of personal reflection, move into a time for corporate prayer. Express the things you are thankful for, with simple one-line prayers; for example, 'Thank you, Lord, for the freedom we had to come here today.'
- End this section by reading Philippians 2:1–4. Invite someone to close in prayer, asking God to help you be mindful of each other's needs and interests as you talk together about the life of your group.

Word

'The truth is that most groups are very strong in some areas and weak in others.'

1. Discuss the list of six cell killers:
 - The Club
 - The Class
 - The Clinic
 - The Clan
 - The Closet
 - The Clique

Applying this list to your own group, allow each person to highlight

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one area of strength and one area of weakness. Is there a common thread of opinion about the health of the group?

2. Reflect together on the image of cells in the body:

- They are living and life-giving
- They are small and efficient
- They co-operate and serve
- They need each other to function properly
- They share the same ingredients
- They grow and multiply

Which of these do you find most attractive and would like to see developing further inside your group?

Witness

Summarize what you have shared by identifying the areas for which you feel most thankful and the areas in which you feel most challenged.

Pray together for the development of your group and ask God to help you:

- nurture the strengths
- address the weaknesses