

“Bethany World Prayer Center: A Perspective from 1996” by Joel Comiskey¹
(Statistics are from 1996 when this tutorial was written.)

Bethany World Prayer Center

In my opinion, Bethany World Prayer Center is the most successful example of the pure cell model in the United States at this time. Many other pastors believe the same. There were 1800 pastors who attended their biannual cell seminar this past June, 1996 (note 91). Bethany is following the pure cell model for ministry that is bearing fruit all over the world. Yet, many have concluded that this model does not work in the United States. Those who think such things should take look at what is happening at Bethany World Prayer Center.

The Context

To understand the growth of any church, it's important to analyze the context. Bethany World Prayer Center is no exception.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Located right on the banks of the Mississippi River, Baton Rouge continues to draw its very sustenance from that great river. Baton Rouge was explored and developed by the French, but by the middle of the eighteenth century a number of exiled Acadians from Nova Scotia had begun to settle in the region. The culture and influence of these Acadians are still felt today (Visitor's Guide 1996:5).

There are some 450,000 in greater Baton Rouge today. Baker, a beautiful town just about 15 minutes away from Baton Rouge is consider part of greater Baton Rouge (note 92). Baton Rouge is a civil war city. War Monuments are common. The city is particularly proud to note that the longest battle of the Civil War was fought in downtown, Baton Rouge.

The people of Baton Rouge are very friendly. I personally experienced their southern warmth and hospitality. Because politeness and hospitality is still a very important virtue, neighborhood interaction and friendliness is common. One cell leader told me that while he lived in California for fifteen years he didn't even know his neighbors. Now he knows many of them.

The Christian Context

In 1989, Jimmy Swaggart used to bring more business to this town than any other business in all of Baton Rouge (note 93). In fact, in the minds of millions, Baton Rouge is associated with Jimmy Swaggart. Surely the affects of his fall has been devastating on the psyche of many in Baton Rouge.

¹This article is excerpted with permission from Joel Comiskey, *Strategies for Cell-based Ministry Today* by Joel Comiskey (A Ph.D. Tutorial Presented to Dr. C. Peter Wagner In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy In Intercultural Studies, The School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, July 1996); available at <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/tutorials/CellStrategy-Part1.html>.

Yet, it seemed to me that Jimmy's brand of Pentecostalism still seems to be very much alive. I could sense some of Jimmy in the Bethany World Prayer Center. The songs had sort of a country twinge. The people rocked, shouted, and jumped in a pleasant southern fashion.

History of Bethany World Prayer Center

The background study of Bethany's history helped me to understand that there was a strong foundational structure before initiating the present cell ministry. Ministires Today Magazines notes, "For many years Bethany World Prayer Center in Baker, Louisiana, has been know as a church strong on prayer, evangelism and missions" (1996:37). God in His sovereignty had long ago been preparing Bethany for their present , powerful ministry.

Roy Stockstill and Early Mission Vision

Roy Stockstill founded Bethany in 1963. Only two years earlier Roy, a Baptist pastor, was baptized in the Holy Spirit after hearing Dennis Bennett. He soon met John Osteen, a fellow Spirit-filled Baptist, and John instilled in Roy a love for missions (Stockstill 1992:17). Missions has been at the heartbeat of Bethany from the beginning. Every year they hold an inspiring missions conference. During the conference, the missionaries supported by Bethany are encouraged to attend and be refreshed by the Holy Spirit.

The commitment to missions at Bethany is not just surface level. It reaches down deep into the purse strings of the church. In 1963, the first money contribution from the church went to missions. Roy's son, Larry, writes, "This check was to become a philosophical statement that missions giving would be the first in priority, with the belief that God would provide for the needs of the local congregation" (1992:18). Pastor Larry said, "Show me the checkbook of a church and I will show you its convictions. Just as the checkbook of a family reflects its priorities and patterns, the checkbook of a church shows where it is really willing to invest not just agree" (1992:57). Bethany World Prayer Center has been increasing its mission's giving every hear. Ministries Today states, "The church's missions budget was \$600,000 in 1985 and has increased \$100,000 every year since then. This year the church will give \$1.8 million to missions" (July, 1996:37). They currently give more than one-third of their budget to world-wide mission (Church Visitor's Guide: 1996:16).

The mission priority is not only seen by the church giving but also by the structure of leadership salary. Every pastor is paid exactly the same amount—from the zone pastors to the senior pastor (note 94). Pastor Larry made it clear that the missionary philosophy of Bethany had influenced their staff salary structure.

Note 94: Pastor Larry commented that, although he didn't know for sure, the salary plus housing benefits probably equals in the neighborhood of \$50,000 for each pastor.

Missionary Training

Bethany believes in raising up home grown missionaries. Any person considering this calling must first attend the MTI school, which was formerly a three year Bible School in Louisiana that eventually moved on to Bethany's property (Stockstill 1992:29). At the present time, there is an additional requirement: Any potential missionary must first have been successful in multiplying a cell group and serving in an upper level cell leadership position (i.e., section leader, zone leader, district pastor) (note 95). Bethany currently supports more than 90 of their own missionaries who serve on more than 24 countries around the world (Church Visitor's Guide 1996:16).

Heterogeneous Congregation

An interesting spin off from the intense mission vision at Bethany is their openness to other cultures and peoples. Bethany is located in the deep south where prejudice still resides in many people. Yet, this is not the case at Bethany.

The congregation has a mixture of about 70% white and 30% black (note 96). This might not seem revolutionary, even in the south. However, when I analyzed the social makeup of the cell leadership, I was truly amazed. Counting the cell leaders, section leaders, zone leaders, and district pastors, I discovered that 41% of these leaders were black. It's one thing to have members of a different race sitting in the congregation, it's quite another thing when they are in top positions of leadership in the church!

When I questioned District Pastor Bill Satterwhite about this racial mix, he made it clear to me that Roy Stockstill had always wanted to be a missionary in Africa. When he realized that he was not called to go personally, he made it one of Bethany's early goals to reach the African American community of Baton Rouge.

The Land

Bethany World Prayer Center is located on a huge piece of property that comprises 140 acres. This land was not bought all at once. Rather, as the church caught the vision of what God wanted to do through them on a worldwide scale, more land was purchased. Located in Baker, a lovely suburb of Baton Rouge, this piece of property is laced with beautiful trees and open fields.

Seven pastors and their families live on the property, including pastor Larry and his family. Along with their parsonages, there are various building located on the property. These include:

- A huge 6000 seat sanctuary

- A missionary prayer center

- The Missionary Training Institution (MTI)

- A large Christian school (grades K-12)

- A smaller sanctuary

The Baton Passed to Larry Stockstill

Larry was saved at age sixteen. From what I understand, he was 'messaging around' on the bleachers during one of Bethany's evangelistic campaigns, but ended up being so convicted by the powerful preaching that night that he came running forward to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

During his studies at Oral Robert's University he became an associate chaplain and key mission leader. He played a strategic part in sending short term missionaries around the world. In 1976, one year after graduating from ORU, Larry and his family went to Ghana, West Africa as missionaries.

However, God had his hand on Larry for even a more strategic role in missions. God wanted Larry to take over the pastorate from his father Roy Stockstill at Bethany World Prayer Center. In his new role Larry would have a direct impact on missions by raising up, training, and sending out multitudes of missionaries. Larry is now forty three years old (as of 1996) as has been at the helm of Bethany for thirteen years.

Church Statistics

Bethany does not keep a record of how many people attend the Sunday morning worship. In fact, I caught a subtle undercurrent that such record keeping might be a bit carnal. For example, during his panel presentation at the Post-Denominational Conference, Pastor Larry made the comment that his church wasn't in the book of Numbers (counting heads), but rather was now living in the book of Acts (note 97)

Celebration Statistics

From my initial observations, in just 3 ½ years since initiating their cell ministry, the church has grown from 3000 (note 98) people in attendance to some 7000 people (note 99). One of the secretaries at Bethany told me about a man who was doing a dissertation about Bethany in the year 1991. This man concluded that in 1991 there were 2400 people attending the morning worship services.

Cell Statistics

The cell ministry officially began on April, 1993 with 52 groups (made up of the warriors from the prayer ministry). By June, 1996, there were 312 cell groups, in which 70% of the adults at Bethany were attending. The official percentage concerning how the initiation of cell groups has caused the church to grow was 43%. In other words, Bethany has grown by 43% as a result of the cell group ministry. It is estimated that 1500 families have been added in the last three years and that between 25 to 30 people receive Christ every week in the cell groups (note 100).

Concerning multiplication, it took the initial 52 groups only three months to multiply. The next multiplication time frame was six months. Now the cells multiply in approximately one year (note 101).

TABLE 8

CELL MULTIPLICATION AT BETHANY

From July, 1993 to July, 1994: 85 cells to 256, 1995

(An addition of 171 groups in thirteen months)

JULY, 1993 CELL REPORT TOTAL: 85	FEBRUARY, 94 CELL TOTAL: 177
SEPTEMBER, 1993 CELL TOTAL: 104	MARCH, 94 CELL TOTAL: 200
OCTOBER, 93 CELL TOTAL: 141	APRIL, 94 CELL TOTAL: 226
NOVEMBER, 93 CELL TOTAL: 142	MAY, 94 CELL TOTAL: 233
DECEMBER, 1993 CELL TOTAL: 147	JUNE, 94 CELL TOTAL: 243
JANUARY, 1994 CELL TOTAL: 171	JULY, 94 CELL TOTAL: 256

From August, 1994 to June, 1996: 258 to 312

(An addition of 54 groups in 22 months)

AUGUST, 94 CELL TOTAL: 258	MAY CELL TOTAL: 297
SEPTEMBER, 94 CELL TOTAL: 266	JUNE CELL TOTAL: 295
OCTOBER, 94 CELL TOTAL: 282	JULY, 95 CELL TOTAL: 300
NOVEMBER, 94 CELL TOTAL: 290	AUGUST, 95 CELL TOTAL: 304
DECEMBER, 94 CELL TOTAL: 284	SEPTEMBER, 95 CELL TOTAL: 307
JANUARY, 1995 CELL TOTAL: 282	OCTOBER, 95 CELL TOTAL: 305
FEBRUARY, 95 CELL TOTAL: 286	NOVEMBER, 95 CELL TOTAL: 307
MARCH, 95 CELL TOTAL: 293	DECEMBER, 1995 CELL TOTAL: 302
APRIL, 95 CELL TOTAL: 293	JUNE, 1996 CELL TOTAL: 312

From the above tables, it is apparent that the cell multiplication has slowed down. Pastor Larry justifies the slow down as a needed quality check. They were simply not reproducing trained, top

quality leadership. However, they are making corrections. In the last twenty-two months, the church has also closed many groups that had not multiplied.

Giving Statistics

Bethany does keep very good records when it comes to financial contributions. In the Appendix there are several graphs that illustrate the increase in financial giving since the implementation of cell group ministry. It seems that there has been significant financial increase since the cells started.

Church Government

Since Bethany World Prayer Center is an independent work, Pastor Larry has placed himself directly accountable to three presbyters who are godly pastors outside of the church. These men serve in distinct church roles, are over fifty years old, and have been in the ministry for many years. In the case of moral failure or ethical problems, these men would have complete authority to take over the work of Bethany World Prayer Center until another suitable leader was chosen (note 102).

Although there is not an elected church board in the church, there is a committee which functions much like a decision making board. This committee consists of three staff people and three deacons (note 103).

Church Doctrine

Most of Bethany's doctrine is quite evangelical. All of the basic Christian are there (Church Visitor's Guide 1996:6). There is nothing out of the ordinary. However, with regard to the Holy Spirit, Bethany clearly takes its stand in the Pentecostal tradition.

Holy Spirit

The doctrinal statement reads, "Every believer should be filled with the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues as the initial physical evidence (Church Visitor's Guide 1996:6). Although I heard this doctrine only mentioned once in my five days at Bethany, I discovered that speaking in tongues is a requirement for every cell leader, from intern to district pastor. Although Pentecostal, they do not embrace the health and wealth gospel teaching (note 104).

Doctrinal Training

Someone asked the question about the training of the cell leaders. Larry responded by saying that the leaders practically receive too much training. He then mentioned his verse by verse Wednesday night meeting, his Sunday morning preaching, and the Wednesday night training. However, there is no Sunday School training or TEE training. They do have a ministerial training center on the property, but this institute is for those who are called into full-time ministry. This is clearly spelled out in the entrance requirements, "Only those who are actually going into the ministry attend" (Stockstill 1992:92).

Generosity of Church

Bethany is a church that prioritizes the living out of the Scriptures in daily life. No where could this be seen more clearly than in their generous spirit. This church was the most generous church that I have ever witnessed. First, the conference was totally free. There was free food, free tapes, free handouts, and just a general generous spirit in each church member and minister (note 107). They would literally bend over backward to meet our needs.

Bethany has long had a policy of no offerings on Sunday mornings. The people simply place their tithes and offerings in boxes on the way out of the sanctuary. There is no pressure whatsoever. No one could accuse this church of begging for money.

Church Culture

There was a very definite church culture that prevailed at Bethany World Prayer Center. I noticed this phenomenon by the unique language at the church. Words such as 'anointing', 'Holy Ghost' (instead of Holy Spirit), and 'broken wings' (people experiencing difficulties) were just a few of the more common expressions. Everyone is called brother or sister.

At Bethany the King James Version is still the Bible of choice. Whenever a Bible verse was projected on the overhead screen, it was the KJV version. Pastor Larry read and preached from the KJV and thus modeled to the rest of the flock the priority of that version. The KJV vocabulary was evident in the repeated use of such phrases as Holy Ghost and anointing.

There is definitely a gift attraction at Bethany. The staff act very much like their pastor, Larry Stockstill. I noticed this in their humor, preaching style, and mannerisms. All of them continually ask the audience to shout a louder amen, repeat something to their neighbor, or raise their hands to heaven. Since, many of the current staff ministers were converted at Bethany, they have probably not known any other style. They all have that charismatic edge.

Cell History

Bethany has taken meticulous notes about their cell history (some 35 pages). I have included here only the a few excerpts that I felt were important.

Early Influences On Larry

It was in 1992 that the original idea for Cells was introduced to Bro. Larry by Victor and Ruth Ann Martinez, who direct the Faith, Hope and Love Center in El Carmen, Mexico. They had begun a Cell Ministry in their church based on the concept used in El Salvador by Pastor Sergio Solarzano.

Bill Clinton was elected President in November, 1992. On election night the Lord spoke to Bro. Larry that He was about to move Bethany into something new. At the end of November, Larry read Dr. Ralph W. Neighbour's book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*. It was this book that solidified his direction. He was convinced that God had spoken to him regarding a Cell Group Church. His next step, in December 1992, was to discuss his convictions with Bethany Staff Pastors. Most saw the benefits and this conviction found strong approval among them.

Training Of Early Cell Leaders

In February , 1993 Bro. Larry began training the 500 members of the Gideon's Army prayer group for 10 weeks on his vision, the implementation of cell ministry, personal responsibility of each leader, and the church commitment to this new cell concept. The Gideon's Army formed the original group of Cell members and leaders.

In the first year of cell ministry, great care was taken to train and care for the initial leadership. Here are some from the early history of cell ministry at Bethany:

On May 5, 1993, Pastor Billy Hornsby began Cell Group Leadership Training on Wednesday evenings for over 300 Leaders and Interns. This 13-week training

course was designed to help prepare potential leaders to fill the slots of leadership that would be created by the multiplication of the cells.

On May 5, through July 28, 1993, there was a Wednesday Prayer Cell Leadership Training, taught by Pastor Billy Hornsby. Subjects covered were:

1. OLD WINE SKINS -AND PARADIGMS *05-05-93*
 2. WHY BECOME A CELL-BASED CHURCH *05-12-93*
 3. HOW DOES THE CELL GROUP CHURCH FUNCTION? *05-19-93*
 4. LIFE CYCLE OF A CELL *05-26-93*
 5. OIKOSES: L RECOGNIZE L PENETRATE L BUILD *06-02-93*
 6. HANDLING PROBLEM SITUATIONS (DEALING WITH THE "ANTAGONIST") *06-09-93*
 7. THE HEALTHY CELL *06-16-93*
 8. THE SHEPHERD'S LIFESTYLE *06-23-93*
 9. HEALING THE HURTING *06-30-93*
 10. THE CHRISTIAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD *07-07-93*
 11. CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERSHIP *07-14-93*
- PLUS - TECHNIQUES OF GROUP LEADERSHIP
12. REVIEW/FACILITATION/VISITATION *07-21-93*
 13. SHARE GROUPS & LIFELINE *07-28-93*

On January 22, 1994 there was the first all-day Saturday Cell Intern Training class.

Attendance: 199

Trips To Cell Churches

Throughout the history of cell involvement at Bethany, I noticed one reoccurring theme. The church was willing to learn from those churches already involved in cell ministry. Here are some excerpts:

From March 1-7, 1993 Pastor Larry Stockstill and four key staff members went to Singapore for the International Conference on Cell Group Churches hosted by the Faith Community Baptist Church. During this time Bro. Billy Hornsby ('second in command' under pastor Larry) had lunch with Dr. Ralph Neighbour.

On March 7-10, 1993 Pastors Larry Stockstill and Mike Ware travel to Seoul, Korea to visit Dr. David Yonggi Cho's church. While there they traveled to Prayer Mountain on the border of N. and S. Korea.

On April 18, 1993 Dr. David Yonggi Cho speaks at Bethany World Prayer Center during the Sunday morning worship service.

On June 5, 1993, Pastor Sergio Solarzano, pastor of the largest cell church in Latin Ameica-120,000 people (5000 cells), speaks at Bethany during the 8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. services.

On June 27, 1994 Bro. Billy Hornsby travels to Portland, Oregon to Pastor Dale Gallaway's church.

From December 1-7, 1993 Karen Hurston gives a three day seminar on cells (note 108). She spoke to the congregation on Sunday morning.

On April 27, 1995, eight pastors travel to El Salvador to learn from the cell-based church there.

Major Obstacle

The main initial obstacle to the church accepting the cell concept was the paradigm shift from a program-based ministry to the Cell Group Church ministry. The idea that Cell Groups would be the basic unit of the church instead of just an addendum to the existing church was a foreign concept to most of the congregation.

Initiation Of Cells

On April 11, 1993 the church initiates the cell groups. There were 518 total attendance in a total of 53 groups. There were 5 people saved and 1 water-baptized.

Immediately the church was divided into four districts.

District 1 , Central, Greenwell Springs, Baker an area north of Baton Rouge to the state

line, and east to the Amite River was pastored by Bro. Ted Long, with Jonathon Samuel and Gordon Atwell assisting as Zone Pastors. District 1 had a total of 22 Cell groups with an

attendance of 182 members and 46 visitors.

District 2 , Pastored by Ken Ellis encompassed the area south of Baker, Scotlandville, Zion City, Southern University to Airline Hwy. They began with 8 cell groups with 39 members and 21 visitors.

District 3 , Pastored by Jake Benton included the areas of downtown Baton Rouge to Airline Hwy. and I-10. They began with 10 groups, with 68 members and 21 visitors.

District 4 , Pastored by Cell Coordinator Billy Hornsby included all southern areas below I-10, and Florida Blvd. to Airline; it also stretched across the Mississippi River north to New Roads and east to Denham Springs. Rick Bezet, Rick Zachary and Ron Kairdolf assisted as Zone Pastors. They began with a total of 13 groups which included 116 members and 25 visitors.

Fine Tuning

Various principles were discovered and added to make the cell ministry more effective. These included:

"Spiritual Mapping" materials were distributed to the cells. "Prayer walks" in the neighborhoods begin.

Cell Leader mailboxes installed in the District Offices.

District Pastors reports formatted.

Cell Leader Application forms made.

Need for a Coordinator's Office Report form discussed. This would be a form that would combine all the statistics that the different Districts accumulated each week to provide an over-all picture of numbers and growth.

Cell Group Weekly Report forms ordered.

Goals Established

On June, 1993, only two months after initiating the cell ministry, clear, bold goals were made for cell group multiplication until the year 2000. Here are the goals of district 4 under the care of Bro. Billy Horsby:

30 Cells by Oct. 1,993

50 Cells by Apr. 1,994

80 Cells by Oct. 1,994

100 Cells by Apr. 1,995

135 Cells by Oct. 1,995

175 Cells by Apr. 1, 1996

200 Cells by Oct. 1, 1996

550 Cells by Apr. 2, 2000

Initial Cell Conference at Bethany

In June, 1994, just a little over one year after initiating the cell ministry, Bethany held their first cell conference called, The Cell Church in America. There were 568 registered from all parts of the USA (including a few from Mexico and one from Holland). On January 18, 1995 Bethany held their second conference with over 800 pastors present.

Prayer

From the beginning, Bethany has intimately connected prayer with the cell ministry. Here are a few examples:

On May 18, 1993, just one month after the cell ministry began, Bethany's missionaries were assigned to each Cell group for active prayer duty.

On September 10, 1994 Touch groups [the name for their cells] pray for Baton Rouge area churches. They are encouraged to call the two churches assigned to their group to find out prayer needs and let them know that prayer will be focused on their congregations.

On September 17, 1994 the Touch groups pray for unreached people groups, missionaries and nations assigned to them on a permanent basis by the Missions Office. The names of the people groups were obtained from Dr. Peter Wagner.

On September 24, 1994 the Touch groups pray for government leaders, specifically the President, Vice President, Governor and two names each from a list of Louisiana government officials.

Cell Groups Perform Church Tasks

From early on there was a vision to involve the cell groups in the tasks and ministries of the church. For example:

On September 1, 1993 the Cell Leaders begin to minister during altar calls. They prepare by using Bro. Jake Benton's Training Material for Altar Workers.

On January 1, 1995 Bethany services begin to be staffed by TOUCH Ministry members. From the nursery to the ushers, greeters to the parking lot attendants, each District and Zone send volunteers to man the different areas of service on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Principles Derived from Bethany's Cell History

Here are a few key principles that can be learned from Bethany's history:

The leadership studied other cell models around the world before initiating their own model.

Several of these experts were invited to the church to teach about cell ministry (note 109).

The cell leaders were well-trained before beginning the cell system and then they were trained on an ongoing basis.

The church was committed to the pure cell system from the very beginning (e.g., districts were set up, mail boxes for cell leaders, multiplication emphasized, etc.)

The system was fine tuned as needs were discovered.

Prayer was a very important factor in the cell system from the very beginning

The cells became more involved in the various ministry tasks of the church

Goals were established for cell growth.

Cell Philosophy

This section reveals the very heart of Bethany's cell structure. It covers the most important core principles of the cell ministry. There is a fine line between the cell philosophy and the cell system. Under this heading, I will try to cover the broader concepts that steer the more practical rules of the cell system.

Three Major Components or Purposes

At Bethany, the reasons why cells meet together are clearly stated. They are:

To get to know God

To get to know each other

To multiply

These three aspects might seem simple, but at Bethany, they form the very reason for the cell group's existence.

Emphasis on the Components of Cell Life

Unlike the Meta Model that defines the small group by its size, the emphasis at Bethany is on the three major purposes or components of the cell. If these elements or purposes are not actively present in the group, then it is not a cell group. At Bethany, each group is defined by these three principles. Said in a different way, the components of the cell groups are:

Pastoral care in each group

Evangelism as a team (net versus hook)

Exercise of the gifts in the cell group

At Bethany, the cells are a microcosm of the church.

Means to Accomplish the Purpose of the Cell Group

If the components of getting to know God, each other, and multiplication, define what a cell group is and what it does, there are also three key ways to fulfill those components:

Partnership : The group is a team, not a group of spectators. From the beginning the cell group realizes that they are called to fulfill a goal that is greater than themselves—the goal of reaching the lost for Jesus Christ. This goal drives them on as a unit and unites them under one purpose. As the cell group walks toward that united purpose of cell multiplication, they will get to know each other in a more intimate way.

Prayer : Prayer invades every part of the cell group. Prayer to God through worship is the starting point. Then there is prayer for missionaries, unreached people groups, and especially family and friends.

Penetration : Dr. Neighbour has popularized the Greek word *oikos* which means household (1992:60-65). . The goal of each cell is to penetrate society through reaching out to friends, family, and loved ones.

Importance of Terminology

There is an emphasis at Bethany on using the proper phrases. For example, the word ‘division’ is avoided. There is already a natural tendency to become ingrown instead of outreach oriented. The last thing that cell members (who are already having second thoughts about starting a new group) need to hear about is their upcoming ‘division.’ Speaking of this negative terminology, Ric Lehman, says, “You ‘divide’ people with barriers like the Berlin Wall or the Iron Curtain. Because of the...negative connotations, we exchanged these words for more life-giving words or phrases like releasing a new leader, multiplication, and birthing (1994:8).

Bethany also emphasizes the importance of naming the group. Their counsel is not to call the cell group a care group. By doing so, the purpose of outreach and penetration very subtly takes a back seat. They call their groups, TOUCH groups because their purpose is to touch the lives of the community around them.

Every Person a Potential Cell Leader

As was note earlier, after multiplying so rapidly in the beginning, Bethany ran out of leaders. They have learned in a new way that:

Every new person is a potential leader.

Start your leadership discipleship track from day one.

Be willing to equip potential leaders immediately. Paul didn't take long period of time to equip leadership.

The Cells Must be the Key Program in the Church

Larry is very dogmatic about this fact (note 110). In a recent interview with Ministries Today magazine he says,

We assigned all competing programs an attrition life span so they could be phased out as the cells were able to take over their functions. Within two years, we no longer needed a separate follow-up ministry, ministry to the bereaved, altar ministry and so on. All of those functions were handled by the cells (July, 1996, 38).

Several key principles that Pastor Larry has discovered include:

You can't have your cake and eat it too. In other words, you can't expect to administer all of the normal programs in the church and have an effective cell ministry

You must focus on the cells and not anything else.

Any event that the pastor sponsors takes away from the cell church. There is a certain train that takes place when other programs are allowed to enter. An event can be like an infection. It could drain the church.

They keep events to a minimum. They only prioritize their yearly missions conference. Wedding, funerals, etc. are done by the zone and district pastors.

All programs must be replaced by the ministry in the cell groups (note 111)

It's the same vision. No one competes for the budget in the staff meeting. It's a powerful concept when everyone is on the same page.

Perhaps it's best to view programs and cells like DOS and WINDOWS 95. Bill Gates took software that did not relate to each other and gave them a common window. Larry says,

Under the Windows operating system, the programs are still there, but they are little icons inside a new environment. In the same way, cells are not a separate program, but an all-encompassing environment...As you look on the 'screen' of your church, you can still see a youth ministry, singles ministry or follow-up ministry, but they are now there as cells. The ministry functions are still being served, but with relationship-based cells instead of volunteer based programs and activities. Best of all, there is a common ministry environment that each cell shares with the rest of the church (Ministries Today July, 1996:39).

Predictability and Similarity

The groups at Bethany are similar, predictable, and repeatable. Quality control is the issue here. During one session the point was made how that McDonald's hamburgers are the same. They don't allow every franchise to make an individualized hamburger. McDonald's guards the quality by requiring each hamburger to be identical. According to Bethany, each cell group needs to be teach the same thing, have the same vision, and follow a similar (not identical) format. The purpose is to pass down a similar recipe to the intern, so that he will know exactly what to do.

Sharing, Encouraging, Producing and Protection

One important illustration at Bethany that is heard often among the cell leaders is the illustration of the flock of geese:

Sharing

The first reason that a flock of geese fly as a flock is because they can rotate leadership. The first goose has to get the major impact of the wind. But they can change roles. The point: Cells take the burden from a few people and spread it to many.

Encouraging

The second reason is to honk at each other. They honk because they can encourage each other. That's why they honk. The point: We need to meet together to encourage each other.

Production

The third reason is that geese fly 71% faster when they are in a flock than when they are alone. The point: We are more productive in a cell than by ourselves.

Protection

The fourth thing, if a goose is shot, two geese escort that goose until it recovers or dies. If it recovers they join the next flock that flies by. The point: Pastoral care takes place within the cell.

Lack of Pressure

When Bethany began transitioning into the cell model some three years ago, no one was pressured to join a cell group. The pastors never insisted that all of the members had to be in a group or they were 'second class members'. Larry states, "A common pitfall is for enthusiastic leaders to force cell groups on the congregation, rather than starting something successful and letting it gradually replace the existing programs and structures" (Ministries Today July, 1996:38). He goes on to say,

We consistently focus our attention on new converts and visitors: the 'growing edge' of the church where the least resistance to relationships is found. Gradually, many of the 'late adopters' have seen the benefits of a cell relationship and are becoming involved. Now about 65 percent of the congregation attend a cell each week. At the beginning of the transition, we informed the congregation that no one was second-class Christian if they were not in a cell. We do require our staff to be in cells, strictly for the increased accountability they need in leadership. However, a rank-and-file member feels no direct pressure to join a group (Ministries Today July, 1996:38).

Cell System

In the previous section I tried to set forth some of the key reasons for cell-based ministry that I heard and saw at Bethany World Prayer Center during my five day stay with them. Now I will cover some of the nuts and bolts of the cell ministry at Bethany.

Senior Pastor Involvement

An assistant pastor cannot inspire the people like the senior pastor. In order to truly lead the cell ministry, Pastor Larry does the following:

Prepares the cells lesson each week

Participates in a different cell group each week

Pastor Larry doesn't let them know beforehand if he is coming or not. He just drops in on them. Oftentimes it's the best way to see firsthand whether or not his ideas (cell lessons) really work. It's going from the ivory tower to the real thing.

He has learned from going to these events. He went to one group and the lady happened to be using a white board in the lesson and prayer time. Larry was so impressed that he ordered 300 boards for the cell groups. At another meeting he noticed that the worship songs cassette tape that the church had prepared was not user friendly. He immediately had that tape redone.

He ties the cell ministry into his Sunday morning message

He encourages with fresh vision all of the cell leaders every Wednesday night

According to Larry supervision is just that—super vision. On Wednesday he tries to pump them up with an understanding of the importance of their role.

When there is a cell multiplication, Pastor Larry introduces the new cell before the entire church.

It is Larry's role to guard the church against subtle programs creeping in.

He is the main speaker during the cell seminar at Bethany World Prayer Center

He meets with his cell staff each week

Accountability to Leadership and Authority

They require that each leader fill out a report form each week. In this way, the top leadership know what is happening in the cell groups and each leader is held responsible.

Writing the Lesson

Pastor Larry took over the responsibility of making the questions because he felt that those done by the cell leaders were oftentimes done too quickly. Larry now writes the lesson, but then he gives the lesson to a team of people. This team fire the questions at each other to determine their effectiveness. Through this process the questions are often edited and reedited. In the end, they come up with four questions that will really make the small group relevant and powerful

Homogeneous Groups

At Bethany, they believe that the cell groups must be family oriented. The family is already fragmented enough in society, so the reasoning is that the cells should help bring the family together. Therefore, Bethany does not allow women's or men's groups to meet by themselves. However, if certain people within a normal family oriented cell groups wants to meet on another night, that is acceptable.

Children

Normally, the children stay in the cell group for the praise and worship time. Then they will go to a room in the house where they are taught a lesson, shown a video, color, or play. The cell members rotate as teachers of the children. There are some 1000 children in cell groups each week.

Format of the Cell

Normally the cell format uses the following order:

- 15 minutes of icebreaker

- 40 minutes of lesson (topical and always has a text)

- 15 minutes of application time

On-Site Training

One of the great strengths of the cell system is the training that takes place within the group. New converts are assigned a mentor who takes him or her through the Leadership Development Training (LDT). The training system takes on the following order:

- New convert receives individual follow up by member of the cell group

- New convert takes new believer's class on Wednesday night

- New convert receives more hands on training within the cell group with the intention of making that person a cell leader apprentice and eventually a cell leader.

Music

Bethany has designed their own music tapes for each group. One of the cell groups that I visited was using this tape with effectiveness.

Follow Up Of New Converts And Visitors

The process up follow-up for first time visitors goes something like this:

- Visitors fill out a card

- The card is funneled to a cell leader according to zip code.

The cell leader then goes to the home of that person with a loaf of bread to give to the person as a gift. **All of this takes place within 24 hours.** The person might pray for the visitor

The cell leader invites the person to attend the cell group and church

Becoming Fishers of Men/Prayer Triplets

Each member of the cell group is encouraged to reach out to friends and neighbors. For example:

Cell members are asked to spend one hour per week with non-Christians

Cell members are encouraged to invite friends and family versus strangers. The goal is simply to ask people to meet a group of your friends. You don't catch a fish by telling them what you're doing

Cell members are instructed that their bait is helpfulness. Everybody can be helpful. If someone will just be helpful to those who are lost and hurting, there will be fruit.

Cell Administration

One of the marvelous things that I noticed at Bethany was how the cell ministry brought a unity of vision and purpose to the church.

Pastors Secretaries, Leaders, and Members Doing the Same Thing

This is the stated goal of the church. Before the cell system took root at Bethany, there was a constant battle to interrelate programs. According to Billy Hornsby, there was such difficulty trying to divide the pulpit time, the budget, the pastor's attention, etc. He mentioned how that the pastors were constantly competing with one another.

However, now the cell groups are everyone's department. When everyone is working toward the same thing, there is no competition. The cell groups bring synergy.

According to Pastor Hornsby, the cell group concept gives the church a better understanding of what the body of Christ is doing. When the church moves, it moves in unison. Pastor Larry says,

Our staff is broken down into five geographical districts and twelve zones. The 20 pastors do nothing but pastor, motivate and evangelize through the 15 to 25 groups each is responsible for. In staff meetings we now have nothing else to discuss but cells. With everyone on the same page in our approach to ministry, cells have become our common environment of church life (Ministries Today July, 1996:40)

Jethro Model

The administration system is very much like all of the cell churches around the world. The basic building block is the cell leader and his intern. Over the cell leader is a section leader. The section leader can have up to five cell leaders under his or her care. However, I heard from one zone pastor that its best to have three cell leaders under the care of the section leader.

Over the section leader is the zone pastor. The zone pastor might have eight sections under his care. I believe that the maximum is ten for one zone leader. Over the zone leaders are the district pastors. There are between five and eight district pastors at Bethany. These district and zone pastors serve five districts and fourteen zones. Each district has approximately three zones (although this varies). The youth and college and career function like districts but they are not included among the five. The reason for this is to keep them more homogenous rather than by geographical location. The five districts are divided geographically. When a new visitor comes to church or someone is saved, that person is assigned to a cell group according to the person's zip code.

The districts are congregations within themselves. Each district might have 250-350 active cell participants. The district pastor and the zone pastors perform weddings, funerals, visits, counseling, etc. for the members of their district.

There is also a coordinator who serves directly under Pastor Larry. This coordinator blends the focus of the distinct districts into a unified whole.

Equal Opportunity to be on Staff

How does one become a section leader, zone leader, or a district pastor? First, everyone must start as a cell leaders. Everyone has equal opportunity. The key is fruitfulness in ministry. If the person is successful in multiplying his or her cell group, there is immediate recognition of God's hand upon his or her life. Obviously, the call of God also plays a role, but that call must be seen by the fruit.

Evangelistic Emphasis

Many times during the seminar did I hear the importance of evangelism in the cell groups. Larry made the comment that fellowship comes naturally for a cell group; it's outreach that must be encouraged and maintained.

With regard to evangelism, Bethany copies the example of the 100,000+ cell-based Misión Elim in El Salvador. They instill vision in their leadership by constantly repeating these principles:

I have a purpose

My purpose is winning souls

I fulfill my purpose best in a group

I will never be satisfied until I fulfill my purpose

I have no promise of tomorrow

From what I understand, they actually shout these principles to one another.

Seeker Sensitive Night in the Cell Group

Another important concept of evangelism that Bethany has learned from La Misión Elim in El Salvador is alternating the emphasis of the group meeting from edification to evangelism on a regular basis. In other words, one week, the groups will be seeker sensitive and directed to non-Christians. The following week, the cell will focus on the believers. The week that the cell is seeker focused or seeker sensitive, the leadership will plan a variety of activities. For example, at Bethany:

Sometimes they will have a service oriented week

Sometimes they will have a video night

Sometimes they will have a Mother's Day outreach, or Father's Day outreach, or Vietnam Veteran outreach.

Missions through the Cells

Bethany has not lost their zeal for missions. That zeal is simply redirected through the cells groups. This summer (1996), they will send six teams of cell leaders for three week, on site visits to their unreached people groups (Ministries Today July, 1996: 38). At Bethany's conference I heard about one cell church in Singapore which is sending 140 cell groups (with all of their cell members) to unreached people groups. According to pastor Larry, all growing churches around the world emphasize prayer, cells, and missions. The ultimate goal of Bethany is to send cell so plant churches among unreached people groups.

Cell Evangelism And Multiplication

The pastors at Bethany make it very clear to the cell leaders, "Don't allow your people to think that they are going to stay together forever." Rather, cell multiplication is taught as the most natural thing for a cell to do. The pastors teach that God places in everything the ability to reproduce. In every seed there is the ability to reproduce itself; Cells are a living organism that have the capacity to reproduce. God's first words to Adam was to be fruitful and multiply. The district pastor tell their people to reproduce themselves. They teach that this is the true foundation of the cells.

Why some groups multiply and others do not is one of the key questions in my Ph.D. research. I asked some of these same questions at Bethany.

Reasons behind Cell Multiplication

What is the key behind cell group multiplication? I asked five people why some cells multiply and why others do not.

The first man had multiplied his group six times. His name is Carl Everett. He is now Zone Pastor of District 5. Even though he's extremely shy, he had been very successful as a cell leader. I asked Carl the secret to his success. He said, "It's simple: prayer, prayer, and more prayer." Carl would fast the day of his cell group and would not eat until the

refreshment time afterwards. This type of Spirit-led openness was common at Bethany.

I talked with another cell leader who also mentioned prayer as the chief reason behind cell multiplication

I talked with a zone pastor (on staff) who told me that he believes that the difference is one word: commitment. He felt that those cell leaders who have a higher rate of multiplication understand the ramifications of multiplication. They understand what they are doing and they know it will cost a lot of time and energy.

I talked to a section leader during the night when a group under his care was about to multiply. There must have been 30 people at the meeting. This section leader felt that the key difference was the love and friendliness of the leader. He felt that a leader must reach out and meet people if they hope for their groups to multiply.

I talked to another section leader who also led a group and had multiplied his group. He felt that there were a number of variables. It was hard for him to pinpoint one.

Possible Reasons for Stagnation

I was in one cell group at Bethany which had not multiplied, although they had been together for more than one year. There was one particular female member (studying law) who had previously been part of several cell groups that had all multiplied. I asked her to analyze the difference between her previous cell groups and her current cell group which had not multiplied.

She told me that they had invited several people to the present group, but those people had not stayed. However, when I asked her if all the people from her previous groups stayed, she said no. She did notice, however, that in the previous groups, there were more visitors. In other words, they had tried more times until they found success.

This suspicion was somewhat confirmed when I participated on Friday night in another group which was celebrating the birth of a new group (multiplication). The section leader testified how that when they only had six people and were earnestly trying all of the 'right things' to do, nothing was happening. Yet, they kept on trying. They kept on praying. They kept on inviting. Suddenly, it gelled. Some key people were added who reached out to others. The mix came together. In that group I met about four people who had come to Christ within the last four months. For at least three of them, they had come to know Christ in the cell group.

Homogeneity of The Group Contributes to Success

One aspect of cell multiplication which I would like to analyze more is homogeneity. For example, on Friday, the group that was multiplying was thoroughly homogeneous. On Thursday, the group we visited had not grown. It was frustrated. I also noticed that this particular group was heterogeneous. I noticed that the two black people in the group talked quite a bit, while the others were more apt to listen.

My theory (and only a theory) is that the reason that the heterogeneous group did not grow is because the visitors were not attracted to come back due to the lack of similarity among the members. In other words, like attracts like. As McGavran said, "Men like to become Christians

without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers,” (1990: 223). The heart of this principle is summed up by Rainer, “First, rapid evangelization takes place best when people of a culture share their faith in Jesus Christ with others within their own culture. Second, Christians must not insist that a person abandon his or her culture in order to become a Christian. Such is the essence of the homogeneous unit principle” (1993:260,261)

It seems to me that the lack of cultural attraction is one important factor behind the slow growth in the Thursday night group and the rapid growth in the Friday night group.

This possibility was strengthened when Pastor Larry presented four groups on Sunday morning who had given birth to four new groups. Each one of the groups was homogeneous. Two were completely white and two were completely black. Here, I’m simply making an observation, not promoting a principle. I for one believe that the today’s racial reconciliation movement is sorely needed. However, when a cell naturally reaches out along similar cultural lines, it does seem to grow more rapidly and naturally.

Five Stages of Cell Development and Multiplication

These five stages are regularly taught to the cell leaders at Bethany. These stages of the cell which leads to reproduction are the following:

1. The Learning Stage:

The cell starts as a blob of protoplasm. It just starts with new people looking at each other. The first stage of a cell in the human body is like that. During this stage it’s important to emphasize the ice-breaker. The time frame of the learning stage is approximately one month.

2. The Loving Stage

The chromosomes in a cell begin to pair. They look like tiny xxs throughout the cell. In the church cell group, this stage might be called the conflict stage. In the second month of the small group’s life cycle, the mask starts coming off. When the person forgets the potato chips, everyone else has to love that person. If you don’t know that there will be conflict, people are going to be very discouraged. The loving stage also takes about one month.

3. Linking Stage

In a human cell, the chromosomes that are freely floating around suddenly begin to link in a north and south formation. In the same way, the people in the cell group begin to find their role about the third month. Someone is good with the new converts, others can lead worship, others are great at visiting others, bringing refreshments, etc. This is a good time to train people in evangelism. This linking stage takes about one month.

4. Launching Stage

The cells begin to move to an east, west position. They are getting ready to launch. In the same way, in the church cell, at this point, the people are ready to evangelize. They are ready to reach out. They have left the other three stages behind them. The launching stage takes place during the fourth, fifth, sixth, and maybe, even to the seventh month.

5. Leaving

This is the fifth stage of all development. During this stage, the cell must multiply. In fact, at Bethany, they doesn't allow a cell to live more than one year. Something is wrong with a cell that does not multiply after one year. As Pastor Larry said, "Usually, a group that only has four people sitting around looking at each other after one year are quite happy to leave get out of there!" The leaving stage lasts up to one year.

Dissolving a Cell that has not Multiplied

Everyone knows at Bethany that if the cell has not multiplied within one year, it will be integrated into the existing cell groups. For the integration to take place as naturally as possible, certain points should be emphasized:

There must be clear communication with the cell leader.

The group itself does not need to feel that it has done something wrong. It hasn't.

The section leader and zone leader need to graft the group that has not multiplied into a healthy group in order to give it an excellent opportunity to experience multiplication.

Various Ways to Multiply

Bethany has developed various principles that help in the multiplication process:

The part of the cell that is going to form a new group begins to meet in the same home, but in different rooms. This helps the two groups to experience what it will be like when they actually do give birth.

The cells are multiplied along relational lines. That is, those people who have formed natural links to each other usually share the new group together. If someone has invited a visitor, he or she will go with their invitee.

Cell multiplication should be festive events. At Bethany, they celebrate cell multiplication like parties. They might go to a park and have a big barbecue. They will celebrate with a birthday cake.

They avoid terminology like divide.

The old and new group are presented on Sunday morning with prayer and celebration.

Pastoral Care through the Cell Groups

At Bethany, the wilderness church is the best example concerning how to pastor a church. They are shepherding people exactly like Moses did. Pastor Larry remembers the poor altar call card that had to pass through so many loops before Bethany implemented cell groups. It was truly a miracle if the card didn't get lost. Today, everything is different. For example:

Immediately the cell leaders are there for the new convert

The cell leaders are praying in back throughout the altar call

The cell leaders hear when the altar call is taking place. They then stand behind the new believers

Within 24 hours of the person accepting Christ a zone pastor and the cell pastor visit the new convert.

Discipleship training starts the first time that the new Christian enters the cell group

If and when they complete that LDT six week course, they can then enter the class on Wednesday night.

The goal is for them to eventually become cell leaders.

Cell Makeup

One thing that greatly impressed me about Bethany was the racial mix between leaders and members. These are not strictly homogeneous groups according to racial and cultural backgrounds. There is a mixture of black and white leadership and a mixture of black and white cell membership. No attempt is made by the church to make the groups more homogeneous, although I believe in practice they probably are. However, they do direct people to a cell group according to geographical location and not according to racial mix.

I went around to the various district offices at Bethany. There are five. I counted the number of cell groups and section leaders. I came up with 363 of these leaders. I then counted the number of black leaders among these 363 cell leaders and section leaders. I counted and zone pastors. My goal was determine the race mix among the cell leaders. 149 out of the 363 cell and section leaders were black (41%) Really, 149 is not high enough because some 20 of the cards did not have their photos. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that 155 out of the 363 principle leaders are black. This is in a church where 70% of those who attend are white! I also counted 22 district pastors and zone pastors. Out of those 22, six of them were black.

This statistics are highly significant to me. It means that half of the cell and section leaders are black. Could this be the reason why the cells group are growing so rapidly. Generally speaking, black culture is more friendly and family oriented than white culture. It is also true that the blacks oftentimes live in the poorer sections of the city. Generally speaking, in these areas, there is a greater openness to accept an invitation to come to a special event or to receive a free hand out (note 113).

Cell Leadership

There is always a foundation class taking place. However, to enter that class, you must be in a cell group and must have completed the six week LDT beginning course. They are working on three more modules to complete the training of the new Christian. Several points were made about leadership:

Originally, they just tried to get the best people

Everyone now is on a level playing field. Everyone starts with a cell group

A race has an automatic sifting affect.

You never know what someone can do until you put a bat in his hand.

Sometimes people talk a good walk but do not walk a good talk. On the other hand, there are those who are very effective, but might be passed over due to personality, etc. The cell system places everyone on the same playing field.

One carpenter multiplied a group six times in one year. He soon became a full time staff person at Bethany. Bethany has now hired some 12 people who were sitting in the pews before the cells started. When they got into cells, the cells started multiplying; Now they are section leaders or district leaders. According to pastor Larry, the cell system has finally given this church the ability to decide which leaders are truly effective.

They don't even send missionaries until they're at district pastor level.

They have various levels:

Apprentice (little jobs)

Intern (there are 10 factors; The cell is not ready until the intern is ready). When the intern is ready and there are enough people, then the cells will multiply.

The leader then can lead a group.

Evaluation of Bethany

I believe that Bethany is the church to watch in the future. They have bold plans. Larry states, "At Bethany we fully intend to be ready with 1,000 cell groups by the year 2000. That will enable us to assimilate and disciple 1,000 new converts per month" (Ministries Today July, 1996:40).

I have only positive comments to make about Bethany. They have made their cells the top priority and the result is an outstanding pastoral care system, a powerful evangelistic outreach, and an administrative system that is second to none. I only hope that more churches will follow their example.