

Lecture Unit 2: Yongii Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups*

The world's largest church is the Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, Korea, with over 700,000 members. As the first and the largest cell church, it is the flagship example of the species and the "first wave" of cell church innovation, the church that started it all. And Yongii Cho's best known book, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1981), is the place to begin an acquaintance with Yoido.¹

Dr. Cho has long used a western name; first "Paul," then "David." You will find books published under both names. Yongii, his actual Korean first name, when pronounced rhymes with "long-gee" with a hard "g" as in "go." The church is named for the island in the middle of the Han River on which it is located and is pronounced "Yoh-EE-doh" with the first and last syllables rhyming with "oh." While many Western Christians have heard of the world's largest church, few know its name.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, Korea, provides the fundamental pattern for all cell churches.² Dr. Cho says: "Our cell group system is a net for our Christians to cast. Instead of a pastor fishing for one fish at a time, organized believers form nets to gather hundreds and thousands of fish. A pastor should never try to fish with a single rod but should organize believers into the 'nets' of a cell system."³ A cell church is "a church that has placed evangelistic small groups at the core of its ministry;" the primary purpose and focus of the cell groups is evangelism.⁴ We will use two units to examine this gigantic church; next week will focus on what Westerners saw and adopted because it was different than the western way of doing church. This week will emphasize the big picture and some of the frequently details missed in the early Western understandings of Yoido.

Yoido Church began in the slums of Korea in 1958 in a time of great poverty, suffering and upheaval. The old ways had failed miserably to meet the needs of people, and they were ready for good news. The Yoido Full Gospel Church was founded on May 15, 1958, by a middle-aged woman. Jashil Choi had found Christ after she and her three daughters were abandoned by her husband. Mrs. Choi attended the two-year Assemblies of God sponsored Full Gospel Bible Institute where she met and encouraged another student by the name of Yongii Cho. Mrs. Choi set up a tent on ten thousand square feet of land given to her in the poor section of Bulkwangdong and asked Yonggi Cho to be the pastor while she would serve as his assistant. John Hurston, an Assembly of God missionary, arrived later that summer and began to conduct four daily services in week-long tent crusades in six Korean cities; Yongii Cho served as his interpreter. These three faithful Christians are the instruments God used to build the

¹Page references to this book are given in parentheses within the text of this article.

²The history and pattern of Yoido Church is explored in more detail on pp. 11-29 in Chapter Two: Discipleship Systems, online at www.disciplewalk.com/resources. Footnotes to sources for this lecture will be found there.

³Karen Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1994), 107, 164.

⁴Joel Comiskey, quoted by Steve Cordle, *Church In Many Houses: Reaching Your Community Through Cell-Based Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 22.

world's largest church.

By 1961 the church in the slums had grown to 600 members and relocated to Sodaemon, occupying a facility built for them by the Assemblies of God. The cell church system was born due to the physical collapse in 1964 of Pastor Yongii Cho, age 28, due to overwork functioning as the traditional pastor of a church of 2400 members (1-12, 39-42). Heart palpitations caused him to faint at the slightest effort; at first he was unable to even preach from a chair.

In the forced time of Sabbath that followed his collapse, Cho began a practice of praying for hours each day; he was able to do little else for over a year due to complete exhaustion (15). During this time of reflection he wrote two books which became best sellers in Korea on the topics of divine healing and communion with the Holy Spirit. Jashil Choi and missionary John Hurston assumed his work in the church as well as their own. As a result of months of prayer and study of the scriptures, he came to a realization that would change his life: he "needed to delegate responsibility in the church" (15). Three statements from God came to him in prayer that day:

"Let my people go and grow."

"Let my people go from the kingdom of Yongii Cho, but let them grow."

"Help them to stand on their own feet. Help them to carry out ministry" (16).

With these words, Cho moved from a concept of ministry which encouraged dependence on the pastor to a concept where God's people, all of God's people, were to be equipped to do God's work, from house to house as well as in the temple, just as in the New Testament book of Acts. Cho's leaders needed to move from dependency upon the pastor to their own ministry as a healthy core group. Note that this is not just a shift from the pastor meeting the needs of dependent lay members to one of church leaders operating programs that meet the needs of dependent lay members; ministry moves from the *temple to house to house*, from the *ministry by the pastor to all of the laity*, and from the needs of dependant *church members to the needs of lost people*.

Cho found that his male leaders were unwilling and "too busy" to follow his vision, even though they agreed that it was based on Scripture. Women, however, who were disrespected in Korean culture, had the time and were willing to obey God; they were organized by Cho's female co-founder, Jashil Choi (29) who is at the center of many of the turning points of this church.

As problems arose, they were resolved by fixing rules which managed the small group experience; submission to standardized rules is stressed in these churches rather than the continuous innovation and experimentation typical of the Emergent Church movement.⁵ The *diffusion of innovations* indicates that 16% of persons love change and innovation while 84% prefer a stable, smoothly running familiarity. At Yoido, the pragmatic majority obediently practice the cell system rules with great productivity; Cho notes that his Sunday worship is also "very structured, very traditional (49)." If all of the laity are to be in ministry, eventually innovation must yield to faithful obedience to a system of rules if the majority of people are to be able to practice disciple making. Yoido Church focuses upon the consistent implementation of the Great Commission, not on innovation. Apart from its focus on cells and evangelism and adaptations forced upon it by size, Yoido is fundamentally a traditional

⁵Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 11-26.

church.⁶

The home groups began to add to the converts while Cho focused on preaching and prayer. After the purchase of property on the newly developed Yoido Island in 1973, relocation allowed the counting of members revealing that the church had grown in nine years of cell practice from 2400 to 18,000 members. Eight thousand remained behind at Sodaemon as a new church, while 10,000 moved to the new location (43). The church at Sodaemon eventually transitioned to a more traditional system under their pastor's leadership; as the cells lost their focus on evangelism, the church dwindled to less than two thousand (114). The cell system at the new church at Yoido yielded 3000 new members the first year and soon began to yield as many as 3000 conversions per month (44).

How It's Done: Faith Communities

Cho writes, "the number one requirement for having real church growth - unlimited church growth - is to set goals" (158). Without goals to bring a teleological focus, trends lapse into cycles of stability in church systems and numeric growth halts. Without the organizing power of goals, the interest in making disciples wanes, the interest in training laity as disciple makers wanes and the network of cells falls apart or shifts focus to fellowship. Cho uses goals to keep the church focused to bring thousands of lost sheep home to the Shepherd (73-74, 158). As the church grows, relationships remain intimate and personal; each new Christian is personally known to their cell leader and lovingly supported by the faith community of the cell. Cells prosper under the careful management and leadership development of the mother church.

Yoido as a faith community evolved to fulfill goals set in motion by the pastor. The four common priorities of the cell church evolved to meet Cho's goals for growth:

Priority #1: If Jesus is Lord, then specific goals result from prayer and reading scripture.

Priority #2: The Great Commission is for every Christian; all church activity is subordinated to it.

Priority #3: Christians are trained to be obedient disciples and then disciple makers (Mt 28:20).

Priority #4: Cells are the preferred and primary means of making disciples.⁷

Yoido has created a faith community that makes disciples and disciple makers as standard operating procedure. There is no need for a "revival," or special emphasis, Cho declares; with the cell approach, there is revival every day in every neighborhood. All that is needed for an increase in conversions is to just motivate the cell leaders (80). The constant threat of a communist invasion of South Korea also helped motivate the development of a decentralized church functioning as a network of cells under capable leaders (82).

How It's Done: Discipleship Systems

Cell groups at Yoido have an explicit neighborhood focus (64, 56) as Christians literally fulfill the command of Christ to love their neighbor. Cell group members practice "holy eavesdropping" (57)

⁶A *diffusion of innovations* understanding of cultures questions the value and necessity of change in the church. Only 16% of persons inside or outside the church prefer change. The continuous, never ending institutional innovation proposed by the emergent church school of thought is contraindicated to reach the 84% of lost people who have little interest in change for the sake of change.

⁷These priorities were introduced and explained in more detail in the Unit 1 lecture, *Faith Communities, Discipleship Systems and Healthy Core Groups*. They are the topic of Module Two in *Seminar One: Diagnosis* found at www.disciplewalk.com/resources, pp. 10-23. Cell churches vary on their implementation of the priorities.

to discover the simple problems of their neighbors and then offer assistance and prayer; they ride elevators in high rise apartments, helping people carry groceries and packages (60). Conversations build relationships through these acquaintances which are strengthened by regular visitation by cell members. Usually, the relationships are built with the wife first because they are available in the neighborhood and have time for conversation (59). Korean Christians have a custom of hanging a red cross on their apartment doors; this helps cell members to not attempt to proselytize members of other churches (89).

The focus of the ongoing visitation and small acts of mercy is evangelism; Cho says that the church “does not have home meetings that are strictly for fellowship. It is all right for our members to meet for fellowship on their own, but I believe the meetings need to be highly disciplined if they are to produce the kind of evangelism and growth we have seen at Full Gospel Central Church. Groups that meet without having evangelism as a goal do not produce growth in the church. There is a great danger that they will only feed on themselves” (113).

How It's Done: Healthy Core Group

Yoido Church's healthy core group consists of 100,113 leaders, most of whom serve as cell leaders.⁸ They are trained in both on-the-job coaching in ministry and through educational opportunities at the church (108-109).⁹ They are supervised lovingly and carefully in a network with five leaders per supervisor; this “5x5” system with a *span of control* of five creates an organization of many layers, but allows supervising leaders at each level much more time to work with each of their people.

Yoido church is slow to advance people to leadership; people first have to prove themselves faithful. Cho looks for five qualities (107-108):

-*enthusiasm*

-*a clear, powerful testimony of what God has done for them*

-*dedication shown by attendance, tithing and commitment to unity (not overcritical)*

-*spirit-filled* (Yoido is a Pentecostal church which believes in spiritual & physical healing.)

-*time and money*. “Although there is an axiom that, if you want a job done, give it to a busy person, that axiom does not apply to spiritual leadership. The busier a person is, the less time his is going to have to listen to and receive direction from the Holy Spirit. The best cell leaders are those who do not have to go to work outside the home; they usually have much more time for prayer and Bible study” (108).

Yonggi Cho's book, *Successful Home Cell Groups*, provides a general overview of the cell system at Yoido Church. For more details, two other sources are recommended in this unit:

Karen Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church* (see description in the unit materials.)

David Kueker, *Chapter Two: Discipleship Systems* at www.disciplewalk.com/resources.

⁸Yoido Full Gospel Church Organization, <http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/Organization.htm>.

⁹Yoido Full Gospel Church Education, <http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/Education.htm>.