

Unit 6: The Fourth Wave of Cell Innovation

Lecture: Up Close and Personal: My Experience with Church Planting Movements

The fourth wave of cell church innovation is a *Church Planting Movement* strategy rather than a church growth strategy. In the fourth wave, as in the New Testament, all energy is invested in disciple-making and no energy is wasted on creating an institutional church or rebuilding the Temple. More aptly named a “disciple multiplication movement,” fourth wave churches begin small, remain small, and continually spin off new small churches rather than grow one larger church. I believe that these evangelistic methods can be highly effective in small churches where individuals are ready to make a serious commitment to making disciples. They are discipleship systems that can operate without attachment to a traditional church. I’ve had two periods of my life when I’ve been a part of such groups: after my conversion and through college, 1972-1976, and then in 2002 when I met two leaders involved in planting such churches.

Research from George Barna's book *Revolution*¹ indicates a developing trend of people deepening their spirituality in small groups outside their churches. From the back cover of the book: *World-renowned pollster George Barna has the numbers, and they indicate a revolution is already taking place within the Church—one that will impact every believer in America. Committed, born-again Christians are exiting the established church in massive numbers. Why are they leaving? Where are they going? And what does this mean for the future of the Church? Using years' worth of research data, and adhering to an unwavering biblical perspective, Barna predicts how this revolution will impact the organized church, how Christ's body of believers should react, and how individuals who are considering leaving (or those who have already left) can respond. For leaders working for positive change in the church and for believers struggling to find a spiritual community and worship experience that resonates, Revolution is here. Are you ready?*

When you delve behind the hype, this is a reality. People who believe that the institutional church prevents or hinders their spiritual growth and are seeking spiritual freedom without the confining practices of traditional spirituality. In the terminology of this course, they do not find a discipleship system within their traditional church, so they seek to participate in a discipleship system outside of their church. Some have left the traditional church behind and some participate in both worlds.

What motivates this separation from the limitations of a traditional church. One could call this spiritual athleticism; I’m stronger, I’m fit, and the traditional church has no right to control me or hold me back from fulfilling my spiritual potential. This desire to rise above the mundane and live a higher life than others is definitively spiritually adolescent; it has great power and energy, which we envy. It is often balanced by little consistency, maturity and care for others. It can be smug, shallow, self-exaltation or spiritual narcissism. The natural result of catering to spiritual consumerism is the demand for luxury spiritual nurture for the elite consumer. Church history is full of people who desire to ascend from the mundane and live on a higher plane, closer to heaven than the others.

When you think about it, this is nothing new. ***There are an abundance of discipleship systems***

¹George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

that are entirely separate from participation in a local church. My own spiritual history, while a bit extreme, can serve as an example. I grew up in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and was well grounded in systematic theology by two years of confirmation classes; after that, I drifted and was not very active in church.

In 1972, while a high school junior, the Jesus People swept through town and I had a powerful religious experience on Tuesday, February 29, 1972, in the YMCA on the campus of the University of Illinois. The following day I stood up in each of my classes at high school and gave my testimony, shocking some of my teachers and (I think) secretly pleasing a few others. Ten days later, after baptizing me in the Howard Johnson's swimming pool, they left town. My Lutheran church suddenly was not exciting enough for my new spirituality and I began to work on my discipleship elsewhere. I attended one church on Sunday morning and a different one on Sunday evening. I often walked seven miles to worship Sunday evening, hoping to catch a ride home after the service; I did not join either of these churches or become involved other than attending.

I had a different small group to attend every night of the week except Saturday. On Mondays, it was a youth gathering at the Sunday morning church that drew people from a 30 miles radius. On Tuesdays, it was the Catholic Charismatic Prayer Group at the Newman Center at the University of Illinois; one of the leaders there was Lenny Bartlotti, who wrote the song "Tell the People I Love Them," later spent 13 years as a missionary to Pakistan and is now a college professor at Biola University.² On Friday night, the meeting was a Joe's, a classmate, and led by his father. I don't remember the other places. I took my bible with me to school and soon was involved in many a discussion with others. In the summer, a group would gather every morning in a pavilion in a city park where we would occasionally be roused by juvenile delinquents; when they left, like birds we would return to roost and continue reading the bible and praying. In college I participated in a dozen different small groups for college students, including Intervarsity, Campus Crusade, Navigators and various denominationally sponsored campus ministries. I played guitar in all sorts of Christian settings. The words "Jesus Christ Is Lord" in 11 inch high letters decorated my dorm room window. When I went to seminary I had virtually no experience in a traditional church as an adult, and the seminary rightly viewed my application with suspicion.

I had extensive experience in spiritual communities that formed and dissolved rapidly. I had intense, vital dramatic spiritual experiences where God acted, often miraculously intervening in the lives of people that a year later disappeared from my life forever. I learned a great deal, but in a constantly shifting spiritual context with little long term continuity. Discipleship systems are powerful but they are ephemeral. Without restrictions, they can move into bizarre and aberrant behavior and be susceptible to one spiritual fad after another. They do not endure the test of time; they are fruitful, but the fruit remains within the people whose lives they touch. I have had no contact for decades with people who were once my most intimate companions on a spiritual journey. That's the weakness of a discipleship system without the structure of an institutional church to sustain it. As people come and go, the spiritual network continuously reinvents and reforms itself. Nothing stays the same.

In 2002 I traveled to Fuller Seminary for a Doctor of Ministry class on cell churches. There were

²http://www.biola.edu/faculty/profiles/profile.cfm?n=leonard_bartlotti.

seven students in our class, including one who was involved as a Southern Baptist church planter in communist China, working at a time when planting such churches was illegal. As he may still be doing this work, I'll call him "Jack." Simply put, Jack told us many stories about the new model for church planting at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board called *Church Planting Movements*. He secured a number of copies of a little black booklet which is now available online.³ Jack's role, he explained, was to put together a network of lay led small churches; this new model was extremely productive, resulting in hundreds of churches and thousands of converts in a very inhospitable environment. As we studied the various alternatives, as a class we came to the conclusion that mother churches networking cells worked better in congested, urban areas and that the church planting movement form of independent cells worked better in more isolated rural areas.

Our class did not meet over the weekend, so I was able to achieve another wonderful first. I had first heard of Neil Cole through the training resource on "leadership farm systems" entitled *Raising Leaders for the Harvest*.⁴ In a leadership farm system you raise up pastors for next year's church plant out of this year's converts; the primary tool for making disciples is a small 2-3 person group called a Life Transformation Group, originally based on John Wesley's bands. Neil's book, *Cultivating A Life For God*, talks more about these groups and how they work to make disciples.⁵ Life Transformation Groups became the foundation of the equipping track I designed for that cell church class, and a foundational concept for the D.Min project. They are described as JUMP groups in Seminar Three. In 2008 I attended a second Greenhouse training in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and became aware of how great a debt I owe to the thinking of Neil Cole.

I am a United Methodist today because the pastor of the United Methodist Church on campus back in 1973 loaned me a copy of John Wesley's journal, saying that he believed that I would find in Wesley a kindred spirit. He was right. Wesley brought structure to a discipleship system that endured; people continually tested and rebelled against his "discipline" as adolescents have always rebelled against structure and limitations. Over time, the discipline brought forth spiritual maturity.⁶

If George Barna is correct, I believe that we will see, almost thirty years later, another cycle in the coming decade of the ferment similar to charismatic movement within the mainline churches in the seventies. Small groups outside of local church control will stoke up the fires of personal revival. In the past, most of this spiritual energy was wasted on chasing after one spiritual fad after another. Can this energy be harnessed and directed in order to make disciples and fulfill the Great Commission?

If Barna is correct, pastors have three choices. If the past repeats itself, people in your church will soon be looking for opportunities to grow in their faith outside their church. Perhaps this is already

³<http://www.imb.org/CPM/>; this link is also in the Assignments folder for this course.

⁴Robert E. Logan & Neil Cole, *Raising Leaders for the Harvest*,
<http://www.churchsmart.com/store/viewItem.asp?idProduct=1065>.

⁵<http://www.cmaresources.org/Store/tabid/303/List/0/ProductID/17/Default.aspx?SortField=ProductName%2cProductName>

⁶Hebrews 12:5-11 RSV.

happening in your church. In my experience, these groups typically bless their participants, but they drain energy from a local church and are not evangelistic; they add no new disciples to any church. Nor do they do much ministry in the community, focusing instead on exciting spiritual experiences ... sort of like a spiritual version of the rides at Disney World. A discipleship system that does not result in new disciples is just another self-centered indulgence.

Another option is to harness that spiritual energy that laity have for service in the community, both locally and internationally. This is what Ginghamburg UMC, Saddlback and Willow Creek have done, motivating their members to invest themselves in reliving suffering in the world. That is a noble cause, but it also does not fulfill the Great Commission. It may add members to the church, but it does not make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. More often, channeling energy into higher and higher levels of service seems to burn out those who serve. A very high percentage of the church dropouts identified in Barna's research are lay leaders and pastors who find that more missional service does not meet their needs.

Church planting movement spiritual disciplines can be practiced within traditional churches and have great power to make disciples. The model that developed to be practiced without a traditional church can also be inserted into an existing church. Just as one can enjoy a bonfire outside, one can build a fire inside the home ... if you build a fireplace to contain it. A network of trained disciple makers ***within a local church*** has the potential to send out disciples ***from the church*** to make disciples, nurture them in small groups ***within the church***, involve them in missional service ***through the church***, and support them in the making of their own disciples. And with each cycle of the discipleship system, the number of disciple makers can double. I believe that the highly effective discipleship systems of these movements can bring significant balance and wholeness to traditional churches.

I believe that "disciple making institution" is an oxymoron. The church with an institutional worldview fails to thrive because it is more focused on rebuilding the temple, an unchanging institution, than on providing the spiritual nurture necessary to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. Cups do not make coffee; institutions do not make disciples.⁷ It is sheep that make sheep. This nurture requires personal sacrifice. The transition from missional service to spiritual nurturing involves moving from an exciting but shallow ministry with many people to calm, deeply nurturing relationships with just a few people who have names. These people who have names are called disciples.

As I drove south from Michigan and my second Greenhouse experience, I came to an important realization. By my nature and calling, I am a bivocational, "tent making" church planter; my day job is just that of a United Methodist pastor. I work within the traditional church and earn my pay with quality work. But the purpose of my life is to live within the community created by an effective discipleship system. And the first place to plant such a community, I would think, is within the shelter of the very church that I pastor.⁸ Wouldn't it be wonderful?

⁷A visual parable on this concept is at http://www.disciplewalk.com/parable_coffee_cup.html.

⁸I'm working on this theory of bringing the Greenhouse concepts of simple church into the traditional church; the first step can be seen here: www.greenhouseSTL.org.