

Unit 7: Methodist Historical DNA and Modern Cell Churches: Is There A Match?

Lecture: Pragmatic Obedience

We will try to clarify Wesleyan DNA in terms of our basic concepts of faith community, discipleship system and healthy core group. And we will consider what Wesley would have to say today if he had been on our guided tour of the cell church; once the shock wore off, I think he would find the uncompromising commitment of these churches familiar and that he would relish adapting new methods for a new Methodism.

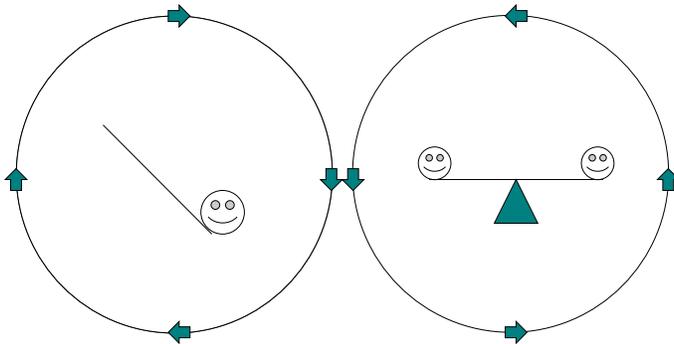
New systems must first overcome systemic resistance to change. People within a system accept or oppose change in a standard curve distribution. A visionary minority of 16% desires change and an 84% pragmatic majority desires for things to run smoothly and efficiently in comfortable channels. The standard approach to change calls for the visionary minority to proclaim the need for change persuasively and with urgency, stressing the pain and problems if the change is not implemented immediately. As visionary creativity and careful detailed planning rarely coexist, the proposal to change is often incomplete and risky. If the pragmatic majority question the need for change or ask for details, the visionary minority push for acceptance on faith. The increase in anxiety and the sense of manipulation inevitably create systemic resistance to change among the pragmatic majority. In other words, the standard approach to change encouraged by management literature and church leadership literature is guaranteed to fail.

The emergent church believes that the visionary minority is the hope for the future of the church. A system that is constantly evolving, as they encourage, is very unhealthy; this pacesetting style of leadership is as damaging as controlling, militaristic leadership. One of the most striking elements in common between cell churches and Wesley is a lack of ongoing innovation and experimentation. Once the system is up and running, the focus is not upon improving the system but in implementing the system exactly as directed. Wesley's instructions are every bit as direct as those in the cell church: don't mend our rules but keep them. With regard to those who insisted on varying from the rules, Wesley's response was simple and inviolable: they will either bend or break. Wesley's strength was the firm, consistent, unvarying implementation of his "discipline" in his discipleship system and within the healthy, leadership core. Neither Wesley or cell church leaders will compromise any factor of their system of making disciples and equipping for leadership. Both stress obedience in every detail. Wesley's position is to remind us all the origin of the movement at the Foundry, where a few "asked his advices on how to flee from the wrath to come." Those who did not wish his advice were free to go elsewhere, but those who remained were expected to simply believe.

This table, based on Peter Senge's systems archetype of a Reinforcing Process (visionary minority) bringing a trend of change to Balancing Process (pragmatic majority) illustrates the two differences between these two components of every social group. There are subtle but very important differences. Any social group has a visionary minority and a pragmatic majority. Both the early Methodists and giant cell churches practice their spiritual disciplines squarely within the realm and with the characteristics of the pragmatic majority. They are very comfortable with routinely obeying minute instructions. This reality has far ranging implications. Generally, it is assumed that an innovative, visionary minority (antithesis) brings new methods to an existing status quo (thesis); the interaction produces a new reality (synthesis). This is the simplest form of cultural change.

MODULE 1: SYSTEMIC APPROACHES TO CHANGE

Section 1: The Balancing Loop in Peter Senge's *Limits to Growth* Archetype



The image for a Reinforcing Loop is a snowball rolling downhill increasing in momentum and intensity. Happiness is an emerging trend.

The image for a Balancing Loop is a teeter-totter; happiness is keeping everything in balance.

Reinforcing Loop

Emerging Trend
Brings Change
Exciting
Conductors
Leadership
Big Picture
Vision
Proactive
Responds to Potential
Entrepreneurial
Ready to gamble
Visionary Minority - 16%

Church of Piety (sect)
Antithesis
External focus
Mission
Evangelism

Ignores Limits
Out of control
Pushes the trend

Balancing Loop

Smooth Cycles
Preserves Stability
Comforting
*Resisters*¹
Management
Micro-managers
Details
Reactive
Responds to Anxiety
Institutional
Risk averse
Pragmatic majority - 84%

Church of Power (church)²
Thesis and Synthesis
Inward focus
Maintenance
Resistance to Growth

Prevents Competency Limits
Under control
Thermostat correction

If this simple model of change typified by Peter Senge's systems archetype *Limits to Growth* were accurate in it's application to the cell church and to Wesley's discipleship system, you would find that they would be more similar to the characteristics of the Reinforcing Loop above, in process with the Balancing loop of the traditional church. Such a discipleship system would be similar to the constantly

¹John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 139-141.

²Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 40-48, 15-20.

changing, innovation seeking model advised by what is called today the “emergent church.” But the discipleship system practiced by the cell church and by Wesley was definitely an innovation compared to the existing churches in those environments, but the methods themselves more resemble a balancing or pragmatic majority structure rather than a reinforcing or visionary minority structure.

First, there is no innovation in the cell church or early English Methodism for the average participant. Although the leaders improve their system, the 84% of followers are simply told to implement the standard forms of implementation. Follow the rules, they are told. And they do.

Second, those who do not follow the rules are ejected from early Methodism. The original General Rules include specific behaviors and explicit restrictions. As the General Rules conclude: And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us, who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls (2004 Book of Discipline, 74).

Third, this changes the view of the situation. We do not have Methodism as a visionary movement for innovation with the Church of England. Wesley may have played that role, but Wesley's organization did not. Therefore, systematically, we have two separate balancing processes at work, the traditional church on the one hand and the Wesleyan system on the other. Both insist on obedience and conformity to the rules of the movement.

Fourth, rather than functioning as a force for institutional change, the Wesleyan and cell movements scoop up individuals who are read for a change. Their approach is more one that will appeal to the pragmatic majority. This implementation of the diffusion of innovations relies on conversations between peers and the demonstrated increase in quality of life evident in the daily lives of the early Methodists. It's unknown whether this is a matter of intentional evangelistic strategy to target pragmatic individuals or if their involvement is simply a byproduct of holy living that would appeal to such persons.

This latter thesis can be validated by the actions of individual Methodists. Do the societies leave the work of influencing kings to Wesley or do they likewise agitate for local social change? Or do they focus on implementing the Wesleyan system? This is a challenge to someone more knowledgeable in the history of the time than myself.

The cell system, as it is practiced, has more in common with the stable social environment of the balancing cycle loop. The means that once a convert enters the cell system, whether modern or early Methodist, there is a rapid conformity to social system norms and rules. The controlling social system, therefore, moderates behavior toward uniformity and a comfortable conformity. This consolidates behavior adoption and gives the person a comfortable, stable, smoothly running normality to enjoy, all needs important to the pragmatic majority. Rather than an aggressive visionary minority transforming the church of England, it is more like unchurched pragmatics could move easily in large numbers from one social system to another.

Both John Wesley and cell church pastors, then, do not innovate the traditional church so much as create a comfortable, substitute structure so that individuals at every place in the adopter framework can opt out of the church of England and into the Methodist social structure at a point that meets the needs of the adopter.

If this systemic structure is normal, it illuminates and may help explain some of the difficulties people have had in the United States in attempting to transition traditional churches to a cell methodology. The basic approach is to urgently insist the balancing structure or pragmatic majority accept the innovation; this continually fails for reasons clearly demonstrated in the *diffusion of innovations* theory. Theoretically, the proper approach is to refine the innovation for pragmatic values, establish a small segment among the middle adopters, and then expand that beachhead into a critical mass that will lead to rapid S-curve adoption. At each stage the innovation fills one segment, then adapts to the needs of the next segment, creates a new beachhead and repeats.

The Wesleyan model does not seem to follow this pattern of rolling from one element to another through the adopter framework. There is no time when the movement is entirely made up of innovators, then early adopters refining the system. Instead, there is always order, structure and discipline. And there is ejection for those who will not conform. Nothing could be more atypical for the visionary minority or reinforcing structure. There is no upheaval, revolution or constantly changing creative phase, as existed in the American camp meeting; Wesley arrives, standardizes everything as he sees fit, and runs it efficiently and smoothly like a well tuned machine.

Instead, it would seem, a separate but parallel social structure is created that is not at all innovative. It contains elements of the entire adopter framework. What is needed to recruit each kind of person from one social structure to another is carefully thought through, refined by experimentation, and then practiced in a routine, fully standardized manner. Individuals cross from one model to another without needing to change their orientation toward change. They do not become innovators and change their own environment; they just switch environments. The latter is much easier.

This is an unusual twist on the normal diffusion of innovations approach. It would seem that the innovators and early adopters would interact with the nominally church of England social structure. These “proclamation/presentation” communications would weaken the bonds of individuals to their portion of the adopter framework. The “conversation/dialogue” process of communications normal to the pragmatic majority would then just draw them into the other social structure.