

The Cell Group Church Structure: An Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

The modern Cell Church movement that emerged over the last two and a half decades of the 20th Century has been hailed by some as the Second Reformation¹. It has been credited for the rise of huge churches in many parts of the world, with membership running into the thousands. I would like to deal with one specific model in the Cell church movement. It is a model formulated by church growth specialist, Ralph Neighbour Jr., and fleshed out by several large churches in Singapore and Malaysia². For a while it received star billing here and overseas as a definitive answer to the growth and outreach needs of the church. Using Neighbour's terminology, we shall refer to this type of church format as the Cell Group Church, or CGC for short³.

¹ By authors such as William Beckham in *The Second Reformation – Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1997), and Greg Oden in *The New Reformation – Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

² The methodology of this church format is definitively set out in: Ralph Neighbour Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church* (Houston: Touch, 1990), and Lawrence Khong, *The Apostolic Cell Church* (Singapore: Touch Ministries, 2000).

³ The CGC format is commonly regarded as a Western adaptation of David Yonggi Cho's pioneer mega cell church in Seoul, South Korea. In his CGC Guidebook, Neighbour made many references to the mega cell churches in Seoul. We can recall that as early as 1979, Cho's Korean church crossed the 100,000 member mark, and stunned the West by becoming the largest single congregation in church history. A growing stream of Western church growth gurus and enthusiasts, including Donald McGavran and Ralph Neighbour (in 1984), descended on Seoul to scrutinise Cho's miracle product. The "5x5 cell churches"

A RADICAL "PARADIGM SHIFT"

CGC has been presented as a revolutionary paradigm shift from the traditional church format. Neighbour sees the traditional format as fixated on programs rather than badly needed people-centred practices. Boggled down in serving programs, traditional churches are seen as sterile and stagnant⁴. They are unable to effectively provide the all-important *koinonia*, or fellowship environment their members need for community relatedness, or for reaching the teeming lost ones out in the world⁵.

To be sure, Christian worshipping communities have operated in small groups since New Testament days. The Methodist system of societies, classes and bands established by John Wesley himself, provided the effective springboard for the vigorous expansion of early Methodism. But CGC advocates want their format to be understood as a radical commitment to a revolutionary way of running churches. Its radical features include the following:

1. The cell is the church. A CGC is never a church with cells. A "Heaven and earth" difference between the two modes is claimed and strenuously emphasised⁶.

label has been used to broadly describe churches that borrow Cho's basic format which employs the multiple of 5 as its basic supervisory unit.

By early 1990's, Lawrence Khong emerged as an eminent international spokesman for the CGC vision. Church leaders from various parts of the world were drawn to his series of *International Conference on Cell Group Churches* and his *TESS Training School* in Singapore to learn the bolts and nuts of the CGC format.

⁴ Neighbour insists that programs are irrelevant. His concept of the pure CGC is one that "has no Sunday School, Training Hour, Visitation Night, Midweek Prayer Service, or any of the other formal services which comprise other church calendars." Their presence only "dissipates the focus of believers and becomes counterproductive" (Neighbour, pg. 198).

⁵ Neighbour, pg. 51.

⁶ Khong, pg. 35. In the CGC concept, the Sunday corporate worship is styled as *Celebration*, that is, the coming together of cells to hold joined celebratory worship. The term *Congregation* has no other validity than to describe the

“The Church is formed from them (cells) and is the sum of them”⁷.

2. The cell is “the Basic Christian Community”. “The cell group is not just a portion of church life, to be clustered with dozen other organisations. *It is church life*”. “Cell churches are the only way that true community can be experienced by all Christians”⁸.
3. Nothing competes with the cells. “Everything in the church is an extension of them and flows from their combined strength”⁹. “Every department of the church is designed to serve the cell ministry. Indeed, departments do not have any constituency of their own”¹⁰.
4. Cell multiplication is essential. Neighbour expects cells to grow to 15 members in 6 months, and thereafter “multiply” into two¹¹. This process of multiplication is continuous. Khong allows 12 to 18 months for each cell to multiply. However, “if a cell functions for a long time without multiplying ...the cell is deemed unhealthy”, and is liable to be dismantled, and its members re-assigned to the vibrant cells¹².
5. Every cell begins with evangelism as its ultimate goal. “In the first meeting of every cell, the members by faith set a date by which time the group will birth another cell”. They must always reach out to evangelise the people around them¹³.

regional clustering of cells. Thus *Celebration* and *Congregation* are functional terms subsumed under the centrality of *Cells*. See Neighbour, pg. 194 – 208.

⁷ Neighbour, pg. 194.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 112.

⁹ Ibid., pg 194

¹⁰ Khong, pg. 36

¹¹ Neighbour, pg. 217.

¹² Khong, pg. 37.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 37

6. Cell membership is mandatory. “There is no buffet menu of options open to members except that they be in a cell group”. No one may join any training program or Bible class if he or she is not a cell member¹⁴.
7. Cell leaders shoulder the bulk of pastoral care through their shepherding responsibilities within the cells¹⁵.

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

1. The CGC concept does uphold many key biblical principles. It takes the Great Commission seriously, and urges us to take it up with a sense of urgency.
2. It sees the church as a great reservoir of untapped strength. In particular, it wants to mobilise the laity to impact the world. It sees the layman as a potential minister, thus freeing the church from over-dependence on and over-taxing her scarce pool of clergy. It sees every member in Christ’s Body as significant. It is an inclusive and a can-do concept.
3. It sees the church as capable of cohesive and meaningful community life. It encourages ordinary members to take the initiative to connect with and care for one another. It stresses that being community imbued with spiritual vitality and fruitfulness is the true form of the church.
4. It rewards the otherwise passive and stagnant believer in the pew with a sense of participation and purpose. It emphasizes that church life is not just up-front show, but real-life, widespread witness, down to the grass-root level. It caters well for those who have the need for highly organised activity and the hand of strong leadership over them.

¹⁴ Khong, pg. 36.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 104.

5. It places value on being repeatable, focused and result-conscious. It rightly disdains aimless, fruitless, going-through-the-motions normalcy. It rightly decries the maintenance-mode, building-bound, outreach-ineffective way of being church. It rightly rejects putting too much self-serving, academic interest into studying the Bible, rather than using the Bible as God's instrument for transformation and ministry.
6. The realities of globalisation and the re-assertiveness of leading world religions press Christianity to compete in the market-place. Global outreach does call for a range of methods that include modular and repeatable mobilisation methods. Whatever its short-comings, the CGC concept must be given due credit as a serious-minded effort to help the church to be globally effective. Where there is care to take stock in what one does and the boldness to switch tracks rather than be format-bound, such openness and integrity must be heartily congratulated¹⁶.

SHORTCOMINGS

1. There is no prize for guessing that the CGC model points to a rather stringent and regimented way of organising the church. It points to a rather hard-driving approach. While it is entirely biblical to stress the urgency of the harvest, and the need for believers to be fruitful, it is quite a different thing to over-step into tight mechanistic formulae for growing the church and reaching the lost.

¹⁶ We must applaud FCBC's willingness to switch to what it saw as a more helpful and discipleship-based cell format when it officially adopted the G 12 format in February 2002. Lawrence Khong is rightly held in high regard for his boldness to pioneer, take risks, admit shortcomings and keep trying for a better way to serve the Lord. So too, we must give unstinting credit to Ralph Neighbour for his sincere, indefatigable attempt to systematise the application of the cell group strategy in churches.

Human needs and life situations are multi-faceted. They do not readily lend themselves to wholesale mechanistic replication and regimentation. The church is a spiritual organism of human lives and not a machine. Repeatable growth procedures always have their right of place in church life. So do strategic patterns for the global mobilisation of the church. But towards people, room for flexibility and diversity is important. Depth and substance are even more critical.

Neither should the church be too spiritual to ignore sound organisation, benchmark setting, and best management practices. But we need to guard against the kind of hurried, numbers-hungry approach that the cut-throat world of business is fond of, and wherein Western modernistic managerial rationalism holds sway. Setting out to be a radical departure from the traditional, “impersonal”, “program-driven” church, the CGC, if driven too mechanistically, can become an over-programmed, impersonal monolith. Unless implemented with care, it can end up exchanging one form of imbalance for another.

2. The relentless focus on quick numerical results can compromise the quality of spiritual formation and deeper understanding of Christian values and virtues. Spiritual fruit does not ripen at rigid, arbitrarily pre-determined regularity. It takes time, patience, in-depth teaching, reflection and the ordering of the Holy Spirit to achieve spiritual maturity. Relentless pressure for quantitative growth can degenerate into a meaningless numbers game. For example, in January 2000, the cells in one CGC were told, “without ifs or buts”, to start 5 new cells before that year was over. Many were at a loss at such frenetic haste. Despite constant drive and strictures by the church leadership emphasising mandatory cell membership, very rarely does the CGC come close to 80% participation and attendance.
3. A common complaint in CGCs is insufficient Word nourishment. In CGCs, the format of cell meetings is standardised into the so-called 4 Ws: Welcome, Worship, Word and Works. It is not uncommon for CGC enthusiasts to speak of “CGC technology”

when referring to their non-negotiable *modus operandi*. The 4 Ws format is a star feature in the CGC technology. Typically, the time allowed for Word in a cell meeting is no more than 50 minutes. The Word content is usually based on the previous week's Sunday pulpit sermon. The crammed cell meeting format and the need to overcome the practical difference between preaching and systematic teaching, both place constraints on in-depth teaching of the Word in CGC cells. But due to their entrenched antipathy towards concentrated bible study, CGC leaders regard over-feeding rather than under-feeding as the greater danger¹⁷. While it is true that prolonged one-way intake without output is counter-productive to spiritual growth, the learn-as-you-go approach should be balanced. It should not be overtaken by some kind of Word miser logic.

4. CGCs are usually in a scramble for cell leaders. Obviously, if every cell is required to multiply in 12 months, the number of cell leaders must double every year. As Neighbour asks for cells to multiply every 6 months, under his purview, the numbers of cell leaders actually have to quadruple every year. For Neighbour, cell leaders “may or may not be effective teachers, counsellors, or evangelists, but they must be lovers”¹⁸. A minimalist approach seems to rule both the teaching of the Word and the development of leadership. It increases the possibility of people of doubtful spiritual competence getting rushed into cell leadership pre-maturely.

It does take a leap of faith to simplistically equate basic compassion with shepherding competence. And to equate a rushed, assembly-line process with spiritual formation. Since the CGC format, on one hand, places the primary burden of evangelism and pastoral care of the whole church squarely on the shoulders of the cell leader, while on the other, it tends to mass-produce cell leaders in great haste, it is likely to be only a matter of time that the whole system catches up on itself.

¹⁷ Note Neighbour's derisive reference to “Bible Worm groups” (pg. 65).

¹⁸ Neighbour, pg. 210.

The re-discovery of the small group strategy rightly attracts many accolades in our time. However, a lot more careful consideration need to be given to how we prepare people for the critical role of small group leaders. It is useful for us to remember that Jesus painstakingly took three years to develop his twelve disciples¹⁹. This observation is not to prescribe any time duration for leadership training than to point to the degree of care needed for the process²⁰.

5. Another common complaint in CGC cells is a feeling of tiredness and being over-stretched. Every cell member is expected to be involved in cell activity at least two nights a week²¹. Numerous special church-wide projects, training seminars, conventions, etc. frequently require cell members to take more nights out on top of these. Notwithstanding the disdain for “programs”, a CGC calendar may be very crowded with programmed activities. For time-poor urban people like Singaporeans, the CGC system with its crowded calendar and “do-or-die” pushiness, may cause burn-outs more than it is able to succour. It is one thing to charge up and mobilise lay people, but it is quite another to overtax them, and downplay the demands they face at work, in their own families, their need for further education, and the special needs they may have in certain phases in life.
6. What works for one part of the world cannot be claimed to have lock-stock-and-barrel applicability in another place where the cultural settings are quite different. The strong Confucian acceptance of conformity and authority in Korea, among other

¹⁹ See Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), and A. B. Bruce’s classic work published in 1871, *The Training of the Twelve*, and re-issued by Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971.

²⁰ David Yonggi Cho points out that an ingredient in the successful growth of his cell church is his strategic use of women and his departure from the popular axiom of giving the job one wants to get done to the busy person. His comments underscore the critical issue of leadership supply in a cell church. See David Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (North Brunswick, USA: Bridge-Logos, 1981) pp. 23-29; 58-59; 108.

²¹ Khong, pg. 40.

special factors, may favour the formation of super-mega cell churches there. Care should be taken not to idealise the size of South Korean churches and imply that they are repeatable in other cultural settings. Neither should what suits America be exported wholesale to places like Singapore and Malaysia. Sound underlying principles rather than the intricacies of methods should be the focus of our attention. Importantly too, size and glitz should not be elevated into idols of success in God's Kingdom work.

7. Many CGC equipping programs tend to over-rely on set manuals and treat such set manuals as largely self-sufficient. One cannot argue against well-written, concise and user-friendly teaching tools. While these are indeed invaluable, equipping cycles could do more with direct exposition of the Bible. A long-term strategic vehicle to meaningfully engage with the demands of the Great Commission cannot afford to be shallow in theological content, and big on "technologies" or charts-laden "how to's".

Sound theological grounding supplies the sturdy inner drive that sustains ministry. Lacking that, a system may find itself relying on strong external motivations and managerial controls. Observers like Joel Comiskey have been taken aback by the heavy presence of salaried supervisory staff in some CGC set-ups²². Being a top-down, command-mode operation, the CGC system may find it harder to generate the self-starter qualities and the spontaneous vitality that flatter, more ground-empowered systems (e.g. the personal chain discipleship system) have. Cell leaders, who are the vital linchpins and coal-face operators of the whole CGC system, tend to be placed under layers of zone leaders who supervise them. What these redoubtable lay cell leaders really need are competent people to support and service them and to make their work lighter and more ministry effective rather than management compliant.

²² An analysis by Joel Comiskey on his visit to a certain Singapore CGC in April 1997.

8. Warnings have been sounded on the possibility of abuse through the CGC system²³. The lure of fame or some other motivations may tempt some CGC pastors to drive their cells hard onto high visibility projects and evangelism, and de-emphasise feeding the flock. Evangelism for them may take high priority over discipleship²⁴. They may diversify ministry activities into more directions than their flocks are ready for. They may be tempted to ignore that growth should be sustainable, and that even in a spiritual enterprise, it takes time to develop resources. They may risk taking on change without proper follow-through plans so as to grab quick visible results. Even in a spiritual enterprise, change should be properly managed. The more pushy CGC advocates need to fully grasp the implications of their aggressive growth targets. When one happily recommends such growth rates as cells to multiply once in six months, they need to appreciate this. For say, a church that starts out as only a 15-strong, single-cell congregation, one has to be ready to manage a staggering 3.9 million strong church in just 10 year's time if that target is consistently fulfilled in those 10 years²⁵.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The value of small groups as a centre-piece in any strategy to revitalise the church is widely endorsed. But few would want to

²³ See Daniel Koh Kah Soon, "Celling Churches", *Truth to Proclaim: The Gospel in Church & Society*, ed. Simon Chan (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2002), pp. 51-52.

²⁴ Neighbour's remark that "the church of America has spent so much time discipling itself" cannot be regarded as an accurate observation, nor an insightful use of the word "discipling" (Neighbour, pg. 18).

For a more helpful understanding of discipleship, please see books written by authors, such as Robert Coleman, David Watson, Walter Henrichsen and Oswald Sanders.

²⁵ This is assuming that Neighbour's target is fully met: each time a cell multiplies, it reproduces its original size of 15, and every cell is able to multiply once in every 6 months.

see unrealistic radicalism, nor an excessively mechanistic and a numbers-hungry drive in any effort to improve the church. A desire to expeditiously fulfil the Great Commission is always a valid priority. So is the quest to cohere and move the church through sound community focus and up-building. But these priorities should not lead to overlooking deep anchoring in the Word of God, the sensitiveness of spiritual needs, and the human need for flexibility and diversity. Neither do they call for the whole body to perpetually operate on overdrive mode. Everyone must acknowledge the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the church and leave room for Him to move extraordinarily. The biblical concepts of God's appointed seasons and God's rest should be acknowledged alongside the call for diligence and whole-hearted sacrifice.

2. The church need not shy away from organised effort, target setting, and sound management practices. For global impact, we may also need to employ repeatable formats and training tools which may, with adaptation, be transferred to all over the world. But we have to be a little suspicious of any claim that one size can fit all and catch all. The need for contextualization and the diversity of human needs call for a range of methods to be used creatively and sensitively. Sound principles and adaptability, more than over-dependence on format-bound methods, are what the church really needs. The value and deep history of the small group strategy in the church²⁶ do not warrant a quantum leap onto any claim that the CGC format should be the norm. A non-purist *church-with-cells* approach is a highly valid and viable proposition²⁷. Other prayerfully thought-out variations are also admissible. The efficiency of methods cannot be allowed to ride

²⁶ See Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), and A. B.

Bruce's classic work published in 1871, *The Training of the Twelve*, and re-issued by Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971.

²⁷ See argument in Daniel Koh Kah Soon, "Celling Churches", *Truth to Proclaim: The Gospel in Church & Society*, pp. 41-56.

roughshod over sound spiritual criteria. Neither should flat-out pushiness be regarded as the best way to serve God.

3. The key thrust of the CGC paradigm against the traditional format lies chiefly in its substantial downward transfer of pastoral care and outreach effort, specifically, from the pastors to the lay cell leaders. Much hinges on the successful broadening of the ministry base of the church. The effectiveness of the lay cell leaders is therefore key to the success of the cell church strategy. Proper thought and care must accordingly be given to equipping and supporting the cell leaders. The two extremes to avoid in equipping cell leaders are, on the one hand, the heavily academic method, and on the other, the theologically skimpy, “technology”-laden method. A balanced approach includes effective mentoring. Only when a steady supply of competent ground-level ministry leaders is secured, will it lead to the effective release of untapped lay power that the cell church vision so passionately calls for.
4. We should be sensitive about the load that working lay people can conscionably carry. It is important not to overtax them. Kingdom service is meant to be wholistic, wholesome, and joyous (Matt 11: 28-30). It should not be overly extractive.
5. We may err on methods, but on no account may we err on our message, Christ’s glorious gospel message. Dr Neighbour had ignored the fact that a major problem in the church in the West is that the gospel message has been compromised or trivialised²⁸.
6. Unrestrained and unwieldy church growth should not be the preferred option. Churches may be encouraged to reach for optimal critical mass, be it 1,000 strong, 10,000 strong, or whatever the figure, but thereafter, plant new ones. There should

²⁸ See Thomas Reeves, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); and Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, *Church Next, Quantum Changes In Christian Ministry* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2001), pp. 48-68.

not be growth for growth or status sake. The competition for size cannot be healthy for God's Kingdom.

7. The use of progressive growth methods should include review criteria. The review criteria should not be just numerical ones, but wholistic ones, and biblically based. There should also be room for fine-tuning or even methodological overhauls along the way. Goals and principles, once prayerfully and soundly identified may remain constant. But methods should be allowed to evolve to align with new operational insights and the dynamic context. The CGC format has already been around in Singapore and Malaysia for more than a decade. For the long haul, it is perhaps not inappropriate to consider some form of periodic review and public discussion within the wider fellowship of the church. Hopefully this short paper will be taken as a modest, objective, and constructive step in that direction.
8. To sum up, the CGC concept no doubt has been envisioned for the right reasons. Its underlying motivations are entirely salutary. But in its crafting, there should have been more care to resist uncritical pre-suppositions. In its implementation, all need to guard against getting side-tracked for the wrong ends. Let us remember that our Lord cares more for quality than superficial success. On the day of judgement he will separate the wheat from the tares (Matt 13: 30), and the sheep from the goats (Matt 25: 32). It is instructive to review Christ's parting words to his disciples, as these words are critical to how we serve in his Kingdom. The set of words in Matt 28: 18-20 is well understood as Christ's Great Commission. But we must remember that in John 21: 15-17, Christ pulled aside Peter, and painstakingly repeated three times to his chief disciple, "Tend my sheep".

Outreach and body care, along with other basic biblical criteria, are not optional alternatives. Their inseparability calls for sound balance in whatever we do. We may close by quoting Edmund Chan, whose voice is gaining increasing respect in Singapore church circles, "Plan big, start small, build deep."

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