

Growing Disciples in Small Groups



Mark 3:14-20

¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons. ¹⁶ These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. ²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat.

Though this is a short time into Jesus’ ministry, it is day one of Jesus’ small group and that right from the start we can identify some of the key marks that set it out as important for us.

Why only twelve? Why did Jesus gather such a small group as his daily expression of community?

Discuss this in twos or threes for a couple of minutes and then feedback.

Some of the reasons that may be mentioned could be:

- being able to invest in people personally;
- to know people more in depth;
- to spot gifts and opportunities for releasing ministry;
- to be able to fit round a dinner table, etc.

NB Symbolism of the twelve,- mirrors the twelve tribes of Israel.

Theological significance of the small group being representative of the whole community.

Does it still work?

Divide into groups of three people. Each of you should take a few minutes to talk about your own experience of small groups in your Christian journey and, if appropriate, in other contexts as well. Here are some questions to guide you. Be as honest as you can in your conversation.

- What is the best small group you have ever been part of?
- Why was it so good and helpful?
- What is the most difficult small group experience you have had?
- Can you identify the reasons it was difficult?
- What advice would you give to someone exploring building small groups as part of their fresh expression of church?

Having identified some of the opportunities that lie behind this mark of Jesus' ministry, we are bound to consider whether this was something that was relevant specifically for the context Jesus ministered to, or whether it still holds weight as a direct example for us today.

Roots of small groups

There is a rich seam in Christian history of patterns for small groups meeting.

Jesus and the disciples

Jesus and his group of disciples are the basic pattern for the church in every generation: a small community in mission.

The New Testament church

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. **Acts 2.46-47**

The New Testament church had no buildings of its own. The basic pattern of meetings was in each other's homes with some large public spaces. This meant that the numbers involved in each meeting were small.

The early catechumenate

The first Christians were instructed for a period of two or three years before they were baptised and became full members of the assembly. As the church grew larger, these periods of instruction recreated the experience of the first disciples with Jesus as an intense period of instruction and formation.

The monastic movement

From the 4th century onwards, communities of Christians began seeking a more radically different lifestyle and withdrew to residential communities to seek God and live counter-culturally. These communities evolved habits and patterns of life together and distinctive emphases.

The Reformation and beyond

Following the Reformation, there was a new emphasis on groups of Christians meeting together for informal instruction and fellowship. Instruction in the home was emphasised by Richard Baxter in his manual *The Reformed Pastor* and by the Moravian communities.

Methodist class meetings

This movement began to flourish within early Methodism as a means of community and discipleship for many new Christians who formed the early Methodist societies. Class meetings were based on the principles of mutual accountability and were the heart of the missionary movement. They were mirrored in parts of other British churches in what were called 'cottage meetings' for prayer and study in the 18th and 19th centuries.

How can it work for us today?

Throughout the last half of the 20th century in the West, local churches began programs to introduce all sorts of small groups which were broadly called home groups or house groups. Their focus tended to vary, with some of the following characteristics:

- fellowship;
- prayer;
- bible study;
- pastoral care.

It was Robert Warren, during the 90s decade of evangelism, who observed that most of these groups had become pretty tired. His diagnosis was that any group that persists with an inlet but no outlet, like standing water becomes stagnant. His recommendation was that small groups needed to get

a missional dimension and that is just the sort of small group that came onto the scene.

In the last two decades of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st, two very significant movements in the world church have begun to affect and influence the church in the United Kingdom. Both emphasise in different ways the power of small, transforming communities as the foundation of church life:

Base ecclesial communities (BECs)

- Originated in the Roman Catholic Church in South and Central America. The theological background to the movement is that provided by liberation theology, itself a broad movement with many strands.
- The concept of mission which guides the communities and the movement is mainly bringing about social, economic and political change.
- The emphasis in the groups is on empowering the members in their everyday lives.
- Approach to scripture starts by considering what the shared context or struggles in the group are and then seeks to discover what Scripture says about those things, asking 'What does Scripture have to say about this?'
- Shared leadership within whole group

The cell church movement

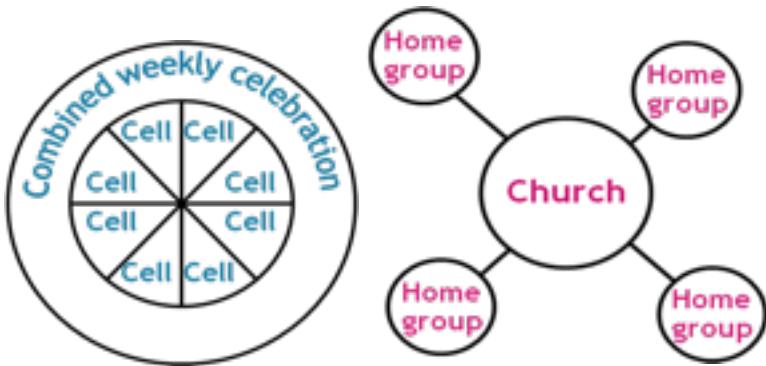
- Originated in the Pacific Rim countries, esp in Korea and Singapore but now spread right round the world. Protestant and Pentecostal in origin although some Roman Catholic congregations have deployed its insights. The theological background is evangelical.
- Cell mission focuses mainly on making disciples and upon church growth.
- There is an emphasis on accountability.
- approach to Scripture: based on application rather than gaining new knowledge starts with Scripture and seeks to apply it to life/particular situations, asking 'What should I/we do about this?'
- Leaders of each group grow other leaders



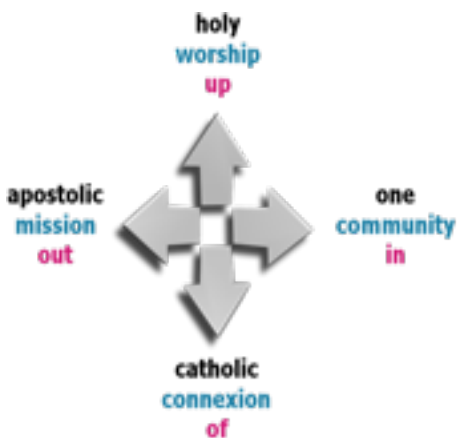
Dramatic shifts that these movements introduce

Both base ecclesial communities and cell church introduce very significant changes to the previous practice of home groups.

1. Mission is at the heart of their identity.
2. There is the world of difference between adding home groups (which is just one extra program among many) but in cells or base ecclesial communities the small group is no longer treated as an optional extra to church, expressed in its 'proper' form in congregational mode. Instead, the small group is treated as having the nature of church in itself; sometimes the larger congregational element is treated as optional.



How can a small group express the marks of church?



Read through the Mark 3 passage again - can you identify examples of up, in, out, of from this first day of Jesus' small group community? To what extent is a larger congregation essential to being church?

Part two: building small group community

As we look to build small group communities we need to make sure we don't lose sight of the reasons for doing it, or the values that lie at the heart of what we seek to build. Nor must we lessen our hope and expectation of experiencing God's transforming presence as well as the fruit and growth this brings with it.

A four stage process

Stage 1: telling stories, sharing values, clarifying mission

A group of complete strangers begins to grow together, get to know each other and take the first steps along the road to community together by being given opportunities to say something about themselves. This can be something about their own personal history - so icebreakers and questions which give people chance to share are vital. It can also be about their own values and priorities - this is a different kind of sharing and requires different questions. Sometimes the group might be formed through exploring the Christian faith together - many Alpha groups become strong small groups which continue after the course has finished.

This stage is also the time to begin clarifying the mission focus and purpose of the group. This is essential if the group is to mature into a missional community - it is so much harder to inject mission vision and values at a later date as groups can become too settled into an 'inward looking' environment.

Stage 2: honesty, affirmation and some conflict

As groups grow together by sharing stories and values and caring for each other, the degree of honesty will grow. At that point the group will be able to affirm and support one another in some depth. They will also need to find a way of discovering and cherishing differences and of handling conflict and disagreement. This is all part of the growth to maturity. The role of the leader at this point is about challenging and supporting the group as it becomes a community, and creating safe space to deal with this level of honesty and shared lives. A key part of this honesty and affirmation is the discovery of different gifts and talents of group members and deploying them creatively.

Stage 3: engaging with shared task and mission

Many Christian groups never reach even the first or second bases of community but shelter behind an impersonal activity (normally deductive Bible study). This can often be the result of neglecting forming the group around a shared purpose, as discussed in stage one. However, many do intend to become missional groups but get stuck at the place where they are honest and supportive, but still facing inwards.

The group needs now to invest more intentionally in the mission that has been identified as being at the heart of its life and purpose. This can be partly achieved through supporting one another in their discipleship, which can also include an element of accountability, and thereby flowing through a natural progression from stage two to stage three. However, particularly important here is engaging in God's mission together: working together at change or service or evangelism in some way.

It is this experience of praying and working together that will release energy for God's mission and grow the shared sense of purpose. A group that is already ongoing, but until now hasn't had a coherent mission vision, may need to spend time in this stage to discover its particular vocation and mission focus. The leader's role is that of guide and helper in this process.

Stage 4: mature Christian community/multiplication

A group which has discovered worship and prayer together, fellowship and support for one another and a common mission whilst staying connected to the wider life of the church is discovering what it is to be church together. This is a great gift and to be cherished.

Different events in the life cycle of the group may mean it is appropriate to draw to a close and for members to begin again or to grow and give birth to a new group.

The term 'cell church', comes from the idea of multiplication of cells in the body. Hence in a cell, the intention from the very outset of the group is that the group should grow in numbers in order to multiply/give birth to another group. If this is the intention of the group, it is very important to teach and value this process from the outset, both to encourage evangelism and also to mentally prepare the group members who will have become very close for giving away some of their members to start a new group.

Discipleship in Small Groups and Contemporary Culture

The following story, taken from Steven Croft, *Growing New Christians*, CPAS, 1993, illustrates the wrong way to go about adapting groups to culture. Read part one and try to spot the deliberate mistakes or the things which could have been done better.

Part one

Nigel and Rose are both teachers, recent college graduates and members of St. Whatnots church in a slightly rundown (but not desperate) area of town. Both are committed Christians and have joined the church fresh from their experience of college Christian Unions. The vicar, who is very pleased to have them, invites Nigel and Rose to run an evangelism–nurture group. He’s under pressure so there isn’t much time to plan and prepare. Nigel and Rose are left to choose their own material and are simply given a list of ‘likely’ people. The couple send typed invitations to the twenty people on the list inviting them to come to the first meeting at their flat at 8.00 pm in three weeks time. On the relevant evening they put out twenty chairs, provide a light supper for twenty and are a little bit embarrassed when only five people turn up. Nigel opens the group in prayer and asks people to go round and say who they are and why they have come. Rose plays the guitar and there is half–hearted attempt to sing. Then everyone is asked to turn to Luke 15.11–32 in their Bible and to read aloud, in turn, a few verses from the passage. Nigel throws in a few questions for the group to discuss. Some have painfully obvious answers (‘What did the younger son do when his money ran out?’). Some are a bit obscure (‘What does the famine in the land tell us about the economic climate today?’). Nigel and Rose smile a lot but there are some awkward silences. It was never like this at the college CU. Then they show part of the video with several famous Christian speakers who talk about the Christian life. Rose ends the meeting by leading a time of prayer in which Rose prays aloud; then Nigel; then Nigel again; then Rose. Coffee is served and people leave around ten. There is no contact with the group midweek. Only two people return the following Wednesday. Shortly afterwards the group dies.

Discuss – what could have been done better? _

Now read part two which describes the serious consequences when we get things wrong.

Part two

Dorothy, in her mid fifties, was quite pleased to receive an invitation to the new group. She was widowed recently and had started coming to church. It took her a while to work out what it was all about. She'd never heard of a 'Basics Group' and had no idea what it did. The only typed letters she normally received were from her bank manager. She was very lonely, though, and decided to give it a try. Perhaps this was the way to make friends. She asked the vicar for directions to the flat. He seemed pleased she was going and introduced her to Rose who was nice, but very young. Dorothy left home very early to walk to the group meeting, frightened of being late. She had a fifteen minute walk (it was still daylight, just). She arrived twenty minutes early and spent time looking in shop windows, resisting the temptation to bolt for home. Operating the entry phone to the flats was hard; so was knocking on Nigel and Rose`s front door. When Dorothy saw all the chairs it was a relief to know that a lot of people were coming. As the minutes ticked by the chairs become more and more of an embarrassment. There was some attempt at conversation but not much. Dorothy felt awkward and began to wish she hadn't come. The flat was the poshest she'd ever seen; full of paintings and lined with books. All these people here must be very clever.

Dorothy found it hard to make friends but had just begun to talk to a nice lady on her left when Nigel interrupted and said a prayer. They passed round a kind of hymn book next and the lady got out her guitar. 'That`s nice,' thought Dorothy 'She's going to sing... Oh my word, they want us all to join in.'

Worse was to follow. Everyone was asked to turn up Luke 15 in their Bibles. Dorothy had to own up to not having a Bible (she was given one). She had no idea where (or what) Luke's Gospel was and got in a flummox with the pages. Then everyone was asked to read aloud. Dorothy hadn't read anything aloud since her children were small. Her cheeks burned as she stammered out a few verses. She wished the ground could swallow her up when she made a small mistake. The rest of the evening didn't mean very much. All Dorothy wanted to do was to get home. They showed a telly programme with a few vicars on that she'd never seen before. They seemed a lot posher than the vicar at the church. She left around ten for her fifteen minute walk home in the dark. She arrived home trembling and upset, determined never to go to anything like that again. When she didn't appear at church over the next few weeks the vicar assumed that Nigel and Rose were in touch with her. They thought he would go. Neither had time to check and Dorothy was left alone in her bereavement....

Aspects of Contemporary Culture	Missional Small-Group Church Responses	Perceptions of Traditional Parish/Congregation Model
24-7 activity, less weekend availability, "liquid" lives	Time of group meetings arranged round needs of group members. Small is more flexible.	Church gathering is normally a Sunday activity
Decrease in social capital, fragmentation of families and traditional support structures. Sense of need for close community.	Close community is created, involving sacrificial love both for members and looks to the wider needs of their contacts	Church is often seen as a matter of attendance at worship rather than close community. Larger numbers make it more difficult to form close community.
Valuing of authenticity and applied truth more than propositional truth	In belonging to a small group before believing, people can see at close quarters the degree of authenticity with which others live out their faith. Discussion-based learning leads to more applied truth.	Main method of learning is through listening to sermons – tends to involve more propositional truth and less opportunity to test out the authenticity of the life of the speaker.
Friendships formed through networks more than neighbourhoods. In general society, people are not often accustomed to close community relationships with people very different from themselves.	Small groups may grow through the networks to which their members belong. Some groups may be relatively homogenous eg. youth cells – providing a place which feels safer for people, while providing a dimension of catholicity by relationship with other different small groups within the church	Congregations are in theory mixed, containing people from all backgrounds in a particular neighbourhood. However, in practice one or two social groups will dominate (eg, over 50s, middle class) and this may make those whose peers are underrepresented feel less that at home.
Little knowledge of basic Christian teachings and values in the general population	Because of their size, small groups are frequently able to adapt their approach to the level of knowledge and understanding of individual members	Majority of each congregation will have a higher level of understanding than the general population. Difficult to speak to all levels at once in a sermon/Sunday service
Consumerist, "must fit me" approach to religion	Because of their size, small groups can adapt to people's initial preferences. However, where close community is developed consumerism is confronted at the deepest level by the challenge of discipleship and the need for sacrificial love.	Greater resources of larger groups can mean some congregations can meet some people "where they are". They may find it more difficult to help people to move beyond the "must fit me" approach to Sunday worship.

The table indicates some ways in which the small group may be seen as able to be more responsive to some aspects of contemporary culture than congregational models of church. Do you agree? Are there other aspects of contemporary culture to which you feel small groups may respond particularly well? Are there others where you feel a congregation is more culturally appropriate as the first expression of church rather than a small group?

Part three: the importance of multiplication

Growing one missional small group is challenging - but not enough. Our goal needs to be networks of small groups which together form the church. For this to happen there needs to be a process of multiplication

Leadership

In cell church one of the most beneficial consequences of developing these networks is that it produces a forum for continually growing and supporting leaders. What has been learned is that to do this, extended training is not the way forward - the best way to learn how to lead a group is by being apprenticed to an existing leader. This is also true in BECs, though it is more a network of group facilitators that is developed. But because the groups are led from within, it is really the ongoing growth of people's gifts that becomes the main benefit of new leaders.

Multiplication should be led by vision more than numbers

In cells this would be described as keeping mission, and not convenience, as the deciding factor. In BECs, they might describe it more as prioritising people, and not structures.

Those who lead/facilitate the groups must be well supported

No set pattern for how this is done, but the key issues to address are:

- ensuring leaders/facilitators are encouraged;
- maintaining the vision of the group;
- being held accountable;
- being stretched to develop gifts and skills;
- watching for signs of burnout.

This may be done in the form of gathered support meetings but also essential will be people who can support and mentor leaders/facilitators of small groups in the life of the church. This is a demanding role and itself needs careful support. Cell churches have used titles such as leader coaches or zone pastors for this concept of growing and developing the leaders in order to enable the whole community to grow and multiply.

Community can be maintained

Multiplication should be something to celebrate, as we see such physical evidence of the extension of God's kingdom, but for many it is marked with the relationships that are lost as the group splits. Developing a sense of continued community is therefore important - not only to guard against this but also to increase the awareness of not being alone in the endeavour - sharing in the movement of God's mission and people. This can be done in many ways, be it groups continuing to meet together from time to time, or creating a forum for sharing testimony. Several large churches are now experimenting with what is called the Cluster model of combining small groups to form several congregations each with a particular focus or mission. There is more on this in the book by Mike Breen and Bob Hopkins in the recommended reading list.

Recommended reading

- 📖 Neil Cole, *Organic Church*, Jossey Bass, 2005.
- 📖 Steven Croft, *Transforming Communities*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002.
- 📖 Joseph G Healey, Jeanne Hinton, *Small Christian Communities Today*, Orbis Books, 2005.
- 📖 Jeanne Hinton and Peter B Price, *Changing Communities*, CTBI, 2003.
- 📖 Michael and Maggie Kindred, *Once Upon a Group*, 4M Publications, 1998.
- 📖 Phil Potter, *The Challenge of Cell Church*, BRF and CPAS, 2001.
- 📖 Laurence Singlehurst, *Loving the Lost*, Kingsway, 2001 & other publications from Cell UK, www.celluk.org.uk
- 📖 *Encounters on the Edge* series, Sheffield Centre, encountersontheedge.org.uk (esp. issues 3, 20 and 28).
- 📖 Sara Savage, Eolene Boyd-MacMillan, *The Human Face of Church*, Canterbury Press, 2007, especially chapters 1-5.