

EXPLAINING CELL CHURCHES

'Cell Church' is the buzz word many people have heard describing a new way of being church. I prefer to speak of 'small group church,' because cell church is only one of a number of streams in this wider movement which includes Base Ecclesial Communities and Household Church or Home Churches.

Many observers of the national church scene have identified that home groups have become tired and stale. Robert Warren describes them as 'past their sell-by date.' Whilst leaders try to revitalise them with new ideas, Warren asks if the root problem is actually that nay group with an inflow but no outlet gets stagnant. He challenges small groups to become open and evangelistic to find new life and revitalise the church in mission. Certainly home groups came to this country some 35 years ago from other continents where they have always had an outreach dimension, being variously bases for evangelism, multiplication and social action. But we applied them in our pastorally-centred mode of church.

In his book *Natural Church Development*, Christian Schwartz reports the results of his international survey of 1000 churches to establish the factors determining quality and growth. Of 157 factors analysed, the single highest correlation between quality and growth was, *'Intentionally multiplying small groups.'* We should take note!

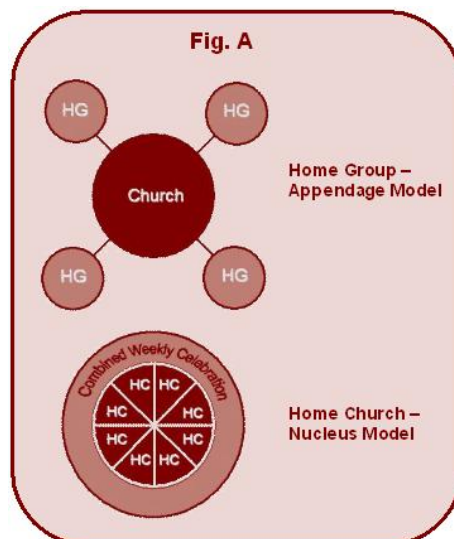
So what is cell church?

1. Core identity and difference

First an illustration. Fig. A is Ian Freestone's picture to contrast a church with house groups and a cell-based church or home church. The traditional way of being church is centred on the congregation and home groups are just one of many programmes usually supported by a proportion of the more committed members. Hence Freestone describes this as the appendage model of small groups. In contrast the cell-based church sees the home churches (cells) as the foundational building blocks of the church – the weekly Sunday service being a celebration of the lives of the constituent cells. Furthermore, the centre of gravity also shifts to the small groups because the ministry of the church is worked out in and through the cells. Any central programmes remaining should be to support the work of the cells. Pastoral care, discipleship, leadership development, evangelism, social action and mission, etc. all happen through small groups.

This pure expression of the cell church system is a very radical shift from our inherited model of church and the challenge and cost of such complete change must not be underestimated. Experience is showing that a full transition may take 5 to 10 years. However, several of the benefits can be obtained with adaptations involving partial implementation of selected principles.

Now let's develop the essence of cell church in more detail:



2. Three defining differences

Cell is fully church

Cells are not a partial expression or a programme of church, they are the church! As with Base Ecclesial Communities, the key understanding is that the small group is as authentically church as any other expression. Some would add to this that everything a church does, including the sacraments, must therefore happen in the small group. Others, including Catholics, argue that different activities are appropriate at different-sized gatherings but this doesn't make them any less church.

Outreach from a welcoming small group

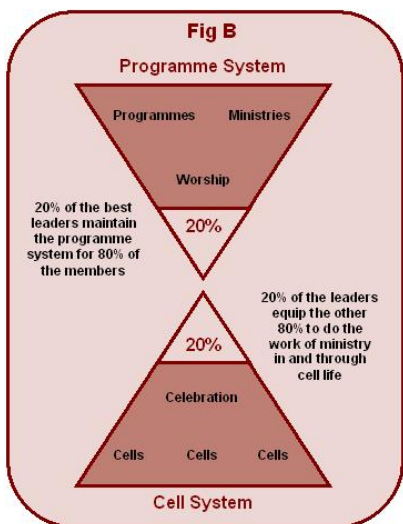
Secondly, small group church sees the cell as the main focus for mission and evangelism. Most traditional home groups lack this element and may tend to resent visitors/non-Christians as inhibiting deep bible-study or sharing. In physics the smaller the circle, the higher the proportion of its surface in contact with the area around – so it is argued that small groups are best to develop links and penetrate social settings. It may be true that when evangelism is only implemented at the congregational level it will a) always tend to degenerate into event centred 'missions' and b) involve only a few – the evangelists and the keenly evangelistic. Cell-based evangelism claims that mission and outreach naturally become a continuous way of life when it is part of cell identity and activity. It also involves everyone in evangelism.

John Finney's research not only showed that relationship with a Christian friend was the most effective aid to a person's journey of faith – it emphasised that even more effective was a group of Christian friends. Hence the evangelistic power of an open small group. Yet another benefit of the cell as the place for evangelism is that it enables evangelism to flow into nurture without the convert having to move into an unfamiliar group. If more arguments were needed, the effectiveness of Alpha confirms the place of the small group in evangelism and a cell-based church addresses the occasional problem of fall-out post-Alpha.

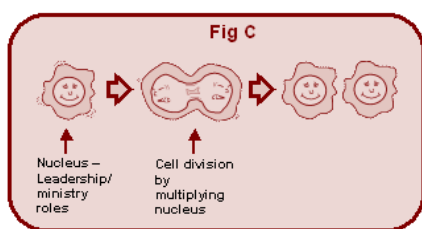


All ministry is through cells

Thirdly, whereas congregation-centred church organises all the ministry at the congregational level with a range of programmes (pastoral team, women’s group, prayer group, evangelism team, etc) cell church organises all the ministry out of the cells. Hence as with evangelism, the small group is the focus for a whole range of church goals, which it is claimed are better achieved in cells. They include the discipleship and transformation of each believer; the identification and growth of their gifts for service at home, work, society and church; and pastoral care and development of leaders through apprenticeship.



Cell church proponents claim that the organising of all church programmes at the congregational level is very inefficient needing a disproportionate share of resources. They contrast the two systems of being church as illustrated in Fig. B. This highlights the fact that there is still central church leadership and some central programmes, but they now serve the ministry in and through the cells. It all underlines the claim that cell church shifts from the common pattern where 20% of the members do the work for the other 80% to almost full involvement of everyone. This underlines that it is a missionary model of church rather than Christendom-mode.



3. Other common characteristics

Table 1 gives a list of common elements of cell church will include:

- ❖ Being active centres for evangelism, the natural goal of cells is to multiply and plant new cells. All multiplication is the result of the internal process of multiplying converts, disciples, and leaders from the activities of the cells. New leaders are grown by apprenticeship in cells.
- ❖ Because small groups are the heart of the church the highest priority is given to the support and equipping of the small group for every 3 to 5 cells. The minister will meet with supervisors, cell-leaders and apprentices very regularly (maybe monthly).
- ❖ Whereas Home Groups may see larger numbers as success, cell principles consider ‘small is best’, claiming full involvement of every member and best group dynamics happen between 6 and 12. Above this a group will sub-divide for part of the meeting to maintain quality, prepare for multiplication and train apprentices.
- ❖ Rather than being based on a host home, cells often move from house to house to facilitate friendship evangelism by focusing on the neighbours and contacts of each member in turn.

Table 1 Other Cell Characteristics

- ❖ Small groups aim to multiply
- ❖ Cell leader support and equipping
- ❖ Small is good
- ❖ Move house to house
- ❖ New leaders by apprenticeship
- ❖ Lifestyle discipleship
- ❖ Small groups seek real community

4. A different ‘system’ of church

This leads us to the underlying issue that cell church, applied in its pure form, is a different church ‘system.’ Most of us are not used to thinking systems and take our inherited congregation-centred church system for granted.

An analogy can help; until the 1950’s all watches worked on a ‘system’ of springs, movements, winders, balance wheels, etc. When the quartz ‘system’ was invented, Swiss watch makers said

it wouldn’t sell because it wasn’t a watch at all since it lacked those elements. History proved them wrong: it not only sold, it extended the use of watches to everyone including children!

Cell church claims that a similar radical paradigm shift is involved in their more biblical system. Table 2 is how they contrast the two systems and Fig.B has already illustrated this.

Table 2 Programme and cell ‘systems’ contrasted

❖ A gathering of adherents which meet on a Sunday	❖ Disciple making by activity and accountability
❖ In a special building for worship	❖ In small group communities
❖ And is led by a professional (+ team)	❖ Which cluster to celebrate the experiences of Jesus
❖ Who organises programmes with them and their resources	❖ They grow and multiply through relational evangelism
❖ To meet their needs and express their mission	❖ And organise leadership and resources for their equipping and support

5. Cell church values – the basis for implementation

The heart of cell church is expressed in its core values. These are listed in Table 3 and are what shape this way of being church. The success of implementing or making the transition to any form of cell system is dependent on how well these values are communicated and owned by the widest possible number within the church.

Ownership of the vision and changing the values of members must precede changing structures or disaster is likely. Leaders are advised to avoid cell jargon and structural talk which may baffle, and concentrate on sharing the vision and potential of cell principles. Members respond to the benefits they will experience, such as better pastoral care and much more support and significance for small group leaders.

Other broader guidelines for successful implementation involve the insights common to all successful change management (Administrative offer publications and training on this subject – ring 01727 856 370 for details).

6. The shape of cell meetings

We have highlighted the place of values, and cell church follows the dictum that ‘we do what we value and value what we do.’ Hence the activities of the small group meeting are designed to ensure that the values are worked out

in practice every week. Central are the 'Four W's' whose order can vary.

Welcome: This opening to the meeting includes all sorts of activities to get to know one another better. Hence they serve to welcome non-Christians and newcomers on a level playing field with existing members since no Christian jargon or bible knowledge is involved. However, this section also opens up members to one another so they can really get to know each other, their history, likes and dislikes and all that makes them tick. Exercises such as 'Icebreakers' and 'Quaker Questions' are used. But beware; these are much more profound than at first glance. Just one or two have led Christians who have been in home groups for over 20 years to admit they didn't really know one another and have suddenly found compassion for the person they found most difficult.

Worship: So often home groups either have no worship, or try a thin imitation of congregational singing. Singing can be helpful in a small cell but the goldmine is in releasing those with gifts of creativity and imagination who can help a small group discover worship together in ways impossible in larger groups. They may bring objects which express their worship, write their own psalms, etc.

Word: Here is another major shift from the tendency of home groups just to copy the congregational model and deliver the mini-sermon-style bible study with some discussion. Typically most home groups study the bible to gain more insight and understanding of it. In radical contrast, cell principles say that the unique role of the small group is to apply the truth of the bible to life. So the bible becomes the 'action manual' and the question not "what does this mean?" but "how do I need to change to live this?" Add accountability to this approach and this is why cell church claim their model is the only way to produce Christians with significantly different lifestyles from prevailing culture and social norms. To live counter-culture involves costly sacrifice and can only be achieved by living alongside others in this way.

Witness: If small groups are to be evangelistic, time must be given to this priority at meetings. This will include: (i) planning how the Christians intend to get out of their 'ghetto' and make non-Christian friends – at the badminton club, pub, Weightwatchers, neighbourhood association, etc; (ii) praying for one another's non-Christian friends and contacts; (iii) planning and

holding periodic social events to invite them to. Don't misunderstand this concept: non-Christians are not invited to all cell meetings and on occasions when they come, they may find they know half the group!

Alongside these *four W's*, some have applied a fifth, 'Wind,' referring to the need to be open to the Holy Spirit throughout. Mike Breen simply puts these activities in the three directions of *UP (to God), IN (to one another) and OUT (to others in mission and evangelism)*.

Table 3 Cell/small group values

- ❖ Jesus at the centre
- ❖ Cells are communities of sacrificial love with open and honest relationships
- ❖ Every member uses their gifts
- ❖ Every member is maturing in Christ
- ❖ Everyone is involved in friendship evangelism

Developments and 'health warnings'

Although cell church ideas have only been widely promoted in the UK for 6 years, many churches and even whole church streams such as New Frontiers have already adopted them. Significant encouragements are reported by many but some, disillusioned, have already abandoned the process. What lessons must we learn to see healthy implementation and avoid failed expectations and burn-out?

Firstly, Steve Croft (an early pioneer in Halifax) warns that structures don't produce life and growth; only the Holy Spirit does. Cell structures can helpfully channel life where others may hinder it.

Secondly, cell church, like Willow Creek, church planting, etc can be treated as a fad or fashion. Our consumer culture encourages this and it is reinforced by church decline which pressures leaders to grab at a 'quick fix' approach.

To become a healthy missionary church, leaders need to focus on underlying principles not the external packages. To quote Wagner, we need to be adapters not adopters and this material aims to help you identify core principles and embark on a process of adaptation to your context.

Cell church is a more radical change than most new insights and must not be under-estimated. If it is, you will fail to carry people with the change and will either give up part way or worse, press on and risk a major split. Translating Asian or African experience of cell church also already seems to need reducing expectations, such as the rate of multiplication and span of care of cell supervisors.

Other lessons coming from early UK applications include the insight that the evangelistic fruitfulness of the model may be the hardest to realise and takes longest to come through. However, planting a cell-based church from scratch looks like offering an easier path with quicker mission effectiveness than other models.




Sociology and history

The church growth movement analysed world trends and identified three broad sizes of social expression of church. Small = Cell; medium = Congregation; and large = Celebration. Table 4 is the way Bible Society seminars over the past 25 years presented these 3 social sizes and linked them to home, parish church and cathedral. This may reflect our pastoral-centred church in that **none** of the 3 levels is described as having a primary mission function!

Cell church proponents claim that at Constantine, and the birth of Christendom, the church in the home which had extended and sustained the church for the first 3 centuries was lost. They describe the Christendom church as 'one winged' with *Celebration* only and no Cell-sized social units and therefore unable to 'fly.'

However, my assessment would be that for 1600 years Christendom survived precisely because the function of church (for disciplining nations in obedience to Jesus' model) continued in the new forms of extended Christian family and

Table 4 Groups for Growth

	Cell 3-12 people Main function personal intimacy
	Congregation 25-175 people Main function social fellowship
	Celebration 175 + The bigger the better Main function worship

later in the Christian schools where children were disciplined in the faith in small classes just as synagogues did in biblical times. Church (the people of God) functioned with both 'wings' even though one wing didn't bear the name Church!

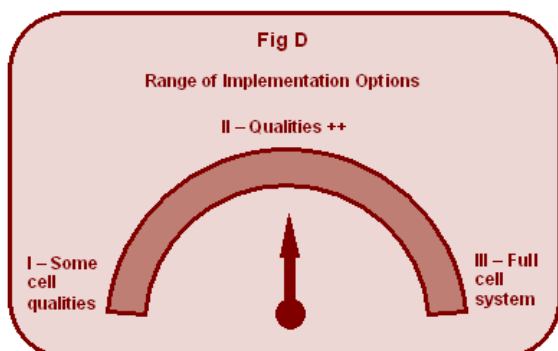
Table 5 Further significance

- ❖ Avoids growth barriers with a single multipliable unit
- ❖ Breaks the deadlock of decline in pastoral care when increasing members
- ❖ An adaptable social unit to incarnate church in different cultures
- ❖ Discipleship which produces counter-culture lifestyles
- ❖ Vital new model of leadership development
- ❖ Breaks minister/lay divide
- ❖ Re-builds community

Our context and cell significance

Our missionary crisis today in the West is that Christendom is passing; the extended family has gone; Christian nuclear family as a place of prayer, bible story and discipling values is going and Christian schools have largely gone. Add to this the breakdown of neighbourhood and community and the paramount importance of therecovery of a small missionary discipling faith community – cell, base community or household church – seems overwhelming. For centuries the main job of church has been performed outside the structure/building we called church. Now these have gone we have to recreate them with full missionary vigour.

Table 5 gives other reasons for the significance of small group church.



The Way Forward

This Mini-Guide can't give you all you need to reach a decision as to whether these ideas are for you, let alone all the

details of implementation. Table 6 outlines some steps to explore further.

If you pursue cell church ideas for your existing church rather than planting a cell church, it is vital to realise that amongst a range of adaptations there are three main routes available. Fig D illustrates these points on a continuum:-

I You just want to gain some of the improved qualities of cell life from implementing the 4 W's (see no.6, *The shape of cell meetings*).

II As well as enhanced quality of small groups, here you **add** (a) dispersed pastoral care and (b) significant evangelism from cells. The former **requires** re-prioritising leaders' time to support cell leaders and the latter **requires** some elimination of central programmes which compete with cells and take members' time from relationships with non-Christians.

III At this third point the aim is to become a fully cell-based church with the inevitable cost of completely changing the system and structures of the church.

Under option III of moving to 'pure' cell church, there is the process of preparing to close all old home groups and latter re-launch all as cells; the 'big bang' approach. Alternatively a 'prototype' process starts with one cell made up of the overall leaders and only when the quality is satisfactory spreading by multiplication through the church. The keys to success of these two approaches are obviously quite different.

Factors which will influence the appropriate choice between all these options include:

- ❖ Leadership style
- ❖ Church spirituality
- ❖ Number of home groups
- ❖ History and quality of existing home groups
- ❖ Church experience of change
- ❖ Church relationship to locality/neighbourhood

Beyond this, don't forget that cell church is part of the wider small-group church movement. Cell church is largely Protestant in origin from Asia

Table 6 Next steps and resources

- ❖ Attend a cell church conference
- ❖ Read some of the books available
- ❖ Obtain resources/topic papers
- ❖ Subscribe to Cell UK magazine
- ❖ Explore Cell UK website and others
- ❖ Visit a church in transition to cell church
- ❖ Get a facilitator from YWAM, ACPI, etc

and Africa. Base Ecclesial Communities come from Catholic roots in Latin America and Household Church comes from China, India and closed-mission fields. A full understanding of each of these and their quite different relationships to traditional church structures will help understand underlying principles and make the best foundation for selecting and leading the change process. More details of these different models and implementation are available from Anglican Church Planting Initiatives (ACPI), Philadelphia Campus, 6 Gilpin Street, Sheffield, S6 3BL. Tel: 0114 278 9378.

This mini-guide is by Bob Hopkins, leader of Anglican Church Planting Initiatives. Text © 1999 Bob Hopkins; Design © 2008 ACPI.



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