

Cell Based Strategy as a Viable Method for Church Growth

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term “cell” is used because it is a basic building block and part of the larger whole i.e. the local church. Thus, a cell group is part and parcel of the church congregation; however it is incomplete by itself. Cell groups are frequently intended to grow by way of members bringing along friends who may start attending regularly and become part of the group at some point (Cho, 1997). When the group has grown too large, it splits to form two separate and smaller groups. The reason for the small size is that it is designed to promote relationship and discussion.

The phenomenon of cell groups is based upon the perception that the New Testament church in the book of Acts did not meet in formal structures or buildings like the synagogues of the Jews but in houses or homes of its converts. For example, in his letter to the Corinthians (1Cor:16:19), St. Paul addresses the church in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, and also greets the church as a whole (1Cor:1:2). Acts: 2:46 states that from earliest times, the believers met both in homes and in the temple. Thus, the church benefited from the larger church and from the small groups where many new believers were added daily.

II. HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF SMALL GROUP MULTIPLICATION

Along with the Biblical evidence for the existence of cell groups in the Early Church, there is also a lot of archaeological evidence in support of the same. For example Tan (2011), gives analysis of archaeological discoveries in the city of Capernaum in Galilee which indicate that a cell group used to meet in what appeared to be the house of Peter the Apostle. Moreover, from the descriptions of Clement of Alexandria in Egypt, it appears that a cell group used to meet in the home of a wealthy member of the congregation (Tan, 2011).

During the first centuries of Christianity, the Early Church Fathers found a tremendous amount of strength in small community interaction. Chomsky (2008) writes “This was the common practice for centuries, the real strength and vitality of the church lay in the small groups of clergy gathered around a Cathedral and the Bishop or in the small group of monks gathered around a strong and influential leader”. Chomsky goes ahead and says that, during the Reformation period, there was a progression of spiritual awakening in which cell groups

became strong catalyst of revival or followed as nurturing environments to revival.

Looking at the historical background of the Small Group Movement in Early Methodism, Hagre (1993) concurs that it was because of cell groups that Methodism became exceedingly successful. He acknowledged that the success of John Wesley was due to his habit of establishing cell groups. His converts would meet regularly in groups of about a dozen people and if the group became too large, it would divide and could continue to divide. According to Mallison (2005), Wesley believed that cell groups were God’s instruments to implement growth and change.

The modern phenomenon of cell groups was pioneered by a Korean Christian minister known as David Yonggi Cho. He pastored in an old tent in a slum area of Seoul. As early as 1956, Cho is known to have divided his congregation into small groups which he called “cells” and began training leaders for each cell (Cho, 1997). Cell leaders were encouraged to invite non-Christian neighbors to attend cell group meetings and learn about Christianity. The success of this cell multiplication as expressed in a thesis entitled Cell Church Growth by Gorman (2002) was great and it surprised even the most optimistic church members. Cho attributed his church’s rapid growth to the cell group strategy.

The word then spread that Cho’s church and several other huge churches in Seoul had reached their massive size through cell groups and that the Cell Based Strategy could work anywhere (Cho 1997). Consequently, this became a movement where Pastors flocked to Korea to learn began. Thus, according to Hurston (1995), Cho’s system of Cell Based Strategy (CBS) has been replicated by many pastors and churches and its success is esteemed by all.

According to George (1991), nine other churches with over 30,000 church memberships in Korea experienced rapid growth by structuring their churches around the Cell Based Strategy. Hadaway (1997) reiterates that churches all over the world are beginning to adopt the CBS as an organizational tool for church growth.

In Africa, among the Catholic faithful, cell groups are popularly known as Small Christian Communities [SCC] (Healey, 2006). The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) cell groups are referred to as District Fellowships (DF) while Pentecostal churches refer to their cell groups as home cells, fellowship groups, growth groups, support groups

and home churches. Even though these names may vary, the core purpose of their existence as stated by Vandekker (1994) is largely the same. Healey (2006), reiterates that “this new moment of cell groups is a global moment, one that is true to the church at all point of compass”.

III. DYNAMISM OF THE TERM CHURCH GROWTH

The term growth according to Shenk, (2003) implies mobility and change and indicates a dynamic reality. Where there is growth, there is increase, expansion, development and multiplication or reproduction. Where there is no growth, there is stagnation, inertia, illness and potential decay (Shenk 2003). The church as a living organism is destined to growth which is part and parcel of her life. Growth takes place at various levels and dimensions through a variety of means and at different stages of her life. This was reiterated by Gorman (2002), who says “it is God’s will that churches grow”. Growth of a church can neither be abstracted from its context nor can it be studied in isolation. To appreciate its significance, one needs to analyze each level of its dimensions and take into account all its expressions.

Costas (1993), states that church growth is a complex phenomenon. As a life process, church growth needs to be seen as a corporate action. Her growth takes place at various levels and dimensions. He enumerated four dimensions of church growth which in his opinion were major. These were numerical, organic, conceptual and diaconal. These dimensions were consistent with the four dimensions (Numerical, Maturational, Organic, Incarnational) propagated by Mead’s church growth model, Mead (1996). Thus, both were in agreement regarding the dynamism of church growth.

Numerical growth according to Costas (1993) and Mead (1996) is the increment of membership experienced by the church through the proclamation of the gospel and the incorporation of those who respond to the fellowship of a local congregation. In describing the numerical growth of a church, Mead stated that a church that did not grow in numbers would die. While he cautioned that numbers were not everything, he equally stated that a congregation that did not seek its own way to bring the good news to those who did not know it violated a clear directive of our Lord Mead, (1996). Thus, numerical growth is a must achieve for every church. In his system theory of church growth Mead (1996) stated that in order to sustain growth, congregations must be understood as a living social system whose structures kept changing. Congregations are complex organisms with many different parts but processes in order as a single organism out of that complexity. Members interacted with one another receiving resources and giving contributions within a particular environment.

This complexity of members was supported by Glock’s (1962) theory of religious experience. His theory propagated a five dimensional scheme of the nature of religious commitments. These dimensions were belief, knowledge,

experience, practice and consequences. Glock’s theory was supported and expanded by other theorists like Cunningham and Pitcher (1986) who identified six dimensions of religion and consented that these dimensions were correlated. Similar sentiments were expressed by King, (1967) and were supported by Lensk’s devotionalism dimensions. According to Lensk, (1961), religious beliefs, attitudes and behavior were a complex phenomenon and could not be reduced to a single variable. Any attempt to understand and analyze such complex processes entailed a multi-dimensional approach to religion because religion is a multi-faceted social reality and psychological experience.

The above as well was reiterated by Jang (2009), who said that, church congregation did not grow in the same ways because they were brought up from different denominational backgrounds, theological tendencies and had different environmental elements. This was further supported by Guire’s theory of multi-dimension of religion when he submitted that, one’s position towards a supernatural being involved attitudes, beliefs, emotions, experiences and the feeling of belongingness. These dimensions were best experienced at Cell Based Strategy since individuals were more relaxed and hence capable of displaying their best.

Mead (1996), and Costas (1993), agreed on the incarnational and conceptual dimensions of church growth when they said it was what gave the church intellectual firmness to face internal and external assaults on the faith through false doctrines and deceitful theories. Conceptual dimension matches well with Mead’s incarnational dimension of church growth and emphasized on the congregation being able to en flesh the community, show their faith by practicing it and be able to influence the society. The two were supported by the findings of researchers of fourteen theories (on-line source) of church growth who upheld principles of friendliness and closeness to new members as a way of maintaining church growth. Thus, church growth must always be considered quantitatively and qualitatively. The ultimate objective of church growth as Smith (2011), puts it was to make disciples of all nations and to expand God’s kingdom by spreading the gospel effectively in word and deed. Warren (2002) reiterates that churches grew warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship and larger through evangelism. All these dimensions of growth were well catered in Cell Based Strategy. Thus, even though church growth is a dynamic phenomenon, Cell Based Strategy contribution could not be underestimated.

IV. POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION OF CELL BASED STRATEGY TO CHURCH GROWTH

The church according to Chomsky (2009) benefits greatly from small meetings like CBS in pastoral care, deeper fellowship and discussion as well as from larger meeting. Talking about lessons from church growth in Indonesia, Chomsky (2009) observed that the Indonesian churches had quite large church services on Sunday but mid-week bible

teachings were traditionally conducted through small house groups.

The pattern for these small meetings was to move to a different home cell each week, thus allowing a wide range of people to invite their neighbors. Because of these house meetings and the close links between Christians, it was possible for the church elders to know exactly who was present or absent at Sunday services. This contributed to both numerical and spiritual growth.

According to Chomsky's article, (2011) on home cells and church growth, other than Cho's church, there were nine other churches in Korea with more than 30,000 members. All of them had experienced rapid growth by structuring their churches around the cell group ministry.

In his research entitled Cell Based Ministry in Latin America, (1997) Chomsky quoted a pastor known as Dion Robert who started a Baptist church in Ivory Coast in 1975. By 1983, it had grown to 683 members. He decided to restructure his church around cell groups. In eight years, the church grew to 23,000 members. This shows how CBS can contribute to church growth.

Writing about churches in Latin America, Dee (2009), gave highlights of a church known as Ehim in El Salvador which had a membership of 120,000 mainly because of its cell based structure. This was reiterated by Kim (2008), in his work entitled "The role of preaching in church growth" presented at Liberty Theological Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia. He gave an example of evangelism as a core function of cell groups which translates to church growth when done effectively. He stated that the functions that CBS had were evangelism towards unbelievers, fellowship of love between believers and caring for each other.

Along with evangelism, CBS focuses on the fellowship characterized by love between believers (i.e. Koinonia). They consider the fellowship of love as an important function in that Koinonia; meant the stage as a spiritual community where the existence and presence of Jesus Christ are experienced. Within the CBS, members achieved spiritual growth by experiencing the very presence of Jesus Christ which appeared through their true family community.

Adding further to evangelism as a core function of CBS and as a genuine cause of church growth as opposed to church transfer, Kwon (2010) in his work "A study of the Yaido Full Gospel Church in Korea says that there is a clear relationship between evangelism and church growth; thee according to him were brought about by CBS. Conversion growth came from sharing the gospel with un-churched people in the neighborhood or with the relatives who were invited to attend CBS.

A study carried out by Park (2011), while writing his thesis on "Individualism and Small Groups in North America; he observed that over 40% of adult population in the United States claimed to be involved in small groups that met

regularly and provided care and support for one another. A high percentage (82%) of those involved in small groups said that the groups made them feel they were not alone while 72% reported that the group gave them encouragement when feeling down.

On the other hand, majority of those not involved in the small groups said they already had more naturally occurring settings of small groups such as informal circles of friends. According to Park's (2011) survey, there was clear indication that nearly everyone in the society wanted to be able to share their deepest feelings, be in an accepting environment and have loyal friends that one could count on. This was a clear indication of human needs that were best met in a small setting like CBS.

Articles about Cell Based Community by Dee (2009), explained how churches had adopted or are considering adopting the Cell Based Strategy which according to them was based on members meeting in holistic small groups on weekly basis to praise and worship together. The articles further stated that the cell group component enabled the presence of Christ to be manifested in relationships of caring Christians. In this environment, people were edified and equipped to minister, unbelievers were saved and discipled and leadership was raised and mentored. Indeed, the positive contribution of CBS to church growth could not be over-emphasized.

Closer home, in Africa, a study done by Gorman (2002), on Initiatives of a younger Pentecostal Generation" using a sample of just one cell group with the main purpose of establishing the benefits of cell groups to individual Christians. He acknowledged the initiatives of love, accountability and friendship as among what was being found among cell members. He stated that while cell members endeavored to maintain ties with the church congregation, their primary goal was to provide teaching and encouragement on issues that the cell members were facing.

A research carried out by Graham (2007), in Nairobi Kenya on Pentecostal churches in informal settlements in Nairobi, did not mention anything to do with CBS or church growth. Instead what was observed was rich preaching concept of well finically oiled Pastors.

Writing about CBS, Cho (1997) did not hesitate to show how they were necessary for church growth. He said cell groups were necessary because many people had no real home environments since they came from dysfunctional homes; others were homeless while others lived away from home and were very lonesome. Such people could find the love, care and unity they needed in home cells.

Vandenakker (1994), and Halloran (2002), reiterated Cho's sentiments on how CBS functioned effectively in the field of discipleship which was an integral part of church growth. They provided follow-up to the new believers already recruited in the cell meeting. Such small group meetings in

homes became the church's building blocks for personal discipleship. Those that were newly converted got help in their spiritual growth by the older group members.

Mallison (2005:48), who dedicated over 20 years of his life to small group ministry, says "Where churches in many countries are growing in quality of Christian life and witness and in members in almost every instance, small group is the heartbeat of that new life".

CBS therefore, as Chomsky (2012), puts it are indeed the building blocks for the wider church. They are the leaven that permeates into the entire dough (church) and bring revival and spiritual awakening (growth). They are the oasis for intimacy, accountability, stimulation and encouragement among church members.

V. CONCLUSION

The as a living organism must be nurtured in all manner for her to be able to grow and bear fruit.

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