



# **How to Reach Your City with Cell (Home) Groups**

**By**

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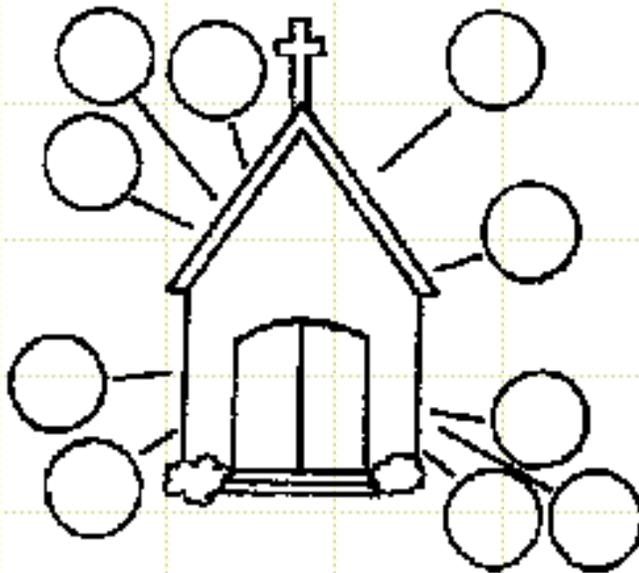
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# Introduction

During the last five years my wife, Karen, and I served in Madagascar, the Malagasy Baptist Church experienced extraordinary growth. While that growth predominated in the cities it also extended to the smaller towns and villages.

In Antananarivo, the capital and a city which today numbers over a million people, the first Baptist church was launched in 1932, a second in 1970, and a third in 1982. Between 1987 and 1991 five new congregations started, with more planted after 1991. We moved from Madagascar in 1991 but the rapid expansion of churches continued. Not only were new churches planted but the existing churches were experiencing significant growth. What happened? Why did this relatively old and somewhat stagnant church association suddenly have this growth spurt? Why did it extend beyond the city into rural areas? One reason is the cell group ministry.



I want us to take a look at both theoretical and practical aspects of a cell group ministry in the context of the Baptist churches in Antananarivo which have application beyond those geographical borders. In the **first section** I give a **short historical overview** of that ministry. This history, though short, is significant. This section will give the reader a 'feel' for what God did through the cell group ministry.

In the **second section** I emphasize **biblical foundations** on which we sought to build a cell group ministry. This section is necessary in the local context due to certain leaders who felt that such a ministry might be harmful to maintaining church purity and, worse yet, unbiblical. However, it is universally true that ministry methods as well as ministry goals should be built on a Scriptural foundation.

The **third section** concerns the **functions of cell groups**. I examine cell group theory in light of the situation in Madagascar. Definitions are discussed and models considered. This section explains how cell groups operate within the local context. I believe you will find helpful applications.

The **fourth section** considers **cell group objectives and their application**. What are the goals of the cell group ministry? Are these goals being reached? How are they being reached?

The **fifth section** describes a **methodology** which seeks to be both biblical and practical, especially in the local situation, but with wider application.

**Section six** is a study of **cell group leadership** which has been a weak link in the Malagasy situation. I seek to compare the efforts we have made in Madagascar with some of the relevant literature on small group leadership. Leadership is key to sustaining cell group growth.

I use two methods in the sixth section. First, I describe my own experience. Descriptive-experiential might be the proper label to give to the first method. Karen and I introduced the cell group concept to the Baptists in Madagascar. The second method is simply an examination of the pertinent literature concerning a cell group ministry. This chapter draws heavily on the wisdom of the people of God for insight and direction in the ministry.

The Spirit of God has begun an amazing work in spiritually renewing the Baptist churches in Madagascar. A church association that has been relatively stagnant for several decades has come to life. New growth, both spiritually and numerically, has resulted from this Spirit led work. Cell groups have been an important element God has used to bring about this change. My desire is that this study will have practical applications to improve existing cell group ministries and also to help others launch them.

While this manual describes how cell groups are used in a particular situation, I believe applications to other situations will become obvious to the reader. The advantage of this approach is that it seeks to be practical. While theory is discussed, it is always in a particular context. It is usually a short leap to apply the concepts to another situation.



# Historical Overview

The following three anecdotes help us understand two things about the ministry. First, they are true historical events that vividly portray something of the cell group ministry in Madagascar. Second, I hope they will give the reader a 'feel' for the exciting results of a cell group ministry. In other words these stories have both historical and motivational functions.

## **Anecdotes**

### *Liva*

She was just one of hundreds of young girls who come from the country villages to the city looking for work, education, and a better life. The conclusion of most of these incidents is not a happy one as dreams of a better life in the city soon crumble. However, while in the city Liva became acquainted with some Christians. These Christians invited her to attend their cell group. She came. The openness of the Christians, the love of Christ, and the power of the Word of God all had their effect on this young person. Soon she committed her life to Christ as her Lord and Savior. Because of the consistent Bible study in the cell group, she grew spiritually. At the same time she began attending church and sitting under the pastor's Bible teaching. She was baptized in due course.

Her efforts at finding work in the city were fruitless. She made many trips back to her home village where she began to witness of her new faith. Her parents, brothers, and other family members came to Christ over a period of time. The Christian witness began to spread in her village as well as in surrounding villages. As people came to Christ, they began to regularly meet together. Liva began to teach the Bible to the village children.

Today there is a local church in that village. Almost everyone in the church is new to faith in Christ. This church is a light set on a hill showing Christ's light and love to many people in that area. No, Liva did not find work in the city. Today she lives in her home village where there is a church, one result of a cell group.

The story does not stop there. There are small groups of people meeting in surrounding villages in house groups. One of these village house groups has in its turn become a local church. Also, a new cell has begun back in the capital city, the result of family networking from this village.

## Georges

The first time Georges came to the cell group he did not participate at all. Georges, a brilliant man with considerable responsibility in the Malagasy department of education, was a strong socialist. His wife had come to Christ during her university days but was still a young Christian. She invited us to start a cell group in their apartment along with a few other young professionals we knew in that part of town.

Georges attended but was ill at ease not participating at all during the first meeting. The informal Bible studies challenged Georges' mind, however, and within a few weeks he was actively involved in the cell group. He joined the Bible discussions, sang, and prayed with the other members in the cell group.

Georges is a natural leader. When he came to faith in Christ and as both he and his wife grew in Christ, his leadership skills became evident. One day when I knew I would be absent from the next week's cell group, I asked Georges if he would lead it. He agreed.

Later he told me the story about that time. He took his Bible to his office so when he had free time he might review the lesson. He had his Bible open looking through the lesson when one of his co-workers, also a confirmed Marxist, came by his desk. "Georges," he exclaimed horrified, "that is a Bible!"

"Yes," Georges answered calmly, "I know."

"But, Georges, a Bible?!"

Georges began a witness to his co-workers, who strongly opposed Christianity. He never wavered in his faith or witness as he remained a trusted and honored employee in his work place.

Georges and Jeanine became regular church attendees. After studying some months with the pastor, they were baptized. Georges and Jeanine led the cell group for several months until they moved to another part of the city. Several new people came into the cell group and grew in Christ under their leadership.

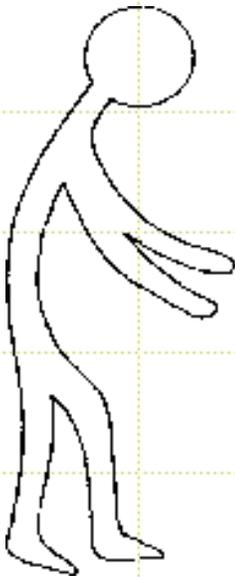
Also, they started two other cells involving unsaved people with the goal of bringing them to Christ and into the church. In that area of the city a new congregation was planted, one of the five mentioned above. One reason the church is growing today is because cell groups have ministered to people like Georges and Jeanine in a way that has enabled them, in turn, to use their gifts for the glory of God through His church. They, in turn, networked with family, friends, and colleagues to begin the new cell groups.

## Jocelyne

Jocelyne is a philosophy professor. A cell group member who lived in the same building with her invited her to attend. From the beginning Jocelyne was full of anger. She had been betrayed by her husband who left her. One of our lessons was about anger. She asked, "What if one's anger is so great it would cause that person to kill someone?"

In the informal setting of the cell group she was free to ask that question. No one condemned her. We looked at what the Bible says about anger. A few weeks later the cell group was studying the fruit of the Spirit. When the lesson finished, Jocelyne said she did not have the fruit of the Spirit but would like to. Further conversation made clear to her the way of salvation. With cell group gathered around her she committed her life, and her anger, to Jesus Christ that night.

The next week she told the cell group what a difference had taken place in her life. Her hatred was gone. She began to pray for her husband. She began to desire reconciliation with him. However, he went to court seeking a divorce. Much of his testimony in court was



less than honest. Also, he hired a lawyer which Jocelyne could not afford. Meanwhile Jocelyne prayed. She was often devastated by the long drawn out court case. Through it all her faith grew. The change in her life encouraged the entire cell group.

Because of her good cell group experience, when she moved to another part of town she sought another similar group with which to meet. Although she is divorced from her husband, her maturity and wisdom in the Lord continue to grow. She is a dynamic witness to her non-Christian and nominal Christian friends who are amazed at the 'new' Jocelyne.

### **Origins**

The cell group ministry in the Malagasy Baptist Church has its origins in 1984 and humanly speaking it happened quite by accident. It is clear to me that God led us to that ministry and that He alone has given the fruit from it.

As missionaries working in church planting and leadership training Karen and I were heavily involved in various ministries at that time. But having served in Madagascar for 16 years, we also felt the need for more spiritual refreshment. We were involved in church worship, teaching, witnessing, and various other things. However, we sensed a lack in our lives.

Finally, we invited two other Malagasy Christian couples to meet with us one evening a week for Bible study and prayer. We informally shared the Scripture each week and applied it to our lives. We spent considerable time in prayer during those meetings.

Some eight to ten months later one of the other men in the group suggested inviting a neighbor. Soon still another couple was added even though we were not really seeking numerical growth. Within a year, two more cells were started in other areas of the city. To that point in 1985, the cell group ministry was still something we did in our spare time because it gave us such joy.

We spent most of 1985 in the United States and during that time learned more about cell group ministries. We returned to Madagascar with a vision to make the expansion of cell groups our major ministry emphasis.

## **Growth**

We were convinced that for cell groups to have maximum effectiveness they needed to be tied directly into a local church. Early growth developed along two parallel but different lines. First, Karen and I were personally involved in cell groups. At any one time we participated in between three and six cell groups. New cell groups were sometimes formed directly out of these existing cell groups.

A second line of extension was directly through the three local Baptist churches that currently existed in Antananarivo.<sup>[1]</sup> Although growth in this area was slower, it would prove to be solid. The churches and their contacts offer far more growth possibilities than one missionary couple. Through meetings with the pastors and elders of the local churches there were two major accomplishments. First, the local churches acknowledged ownership of a cell group ministry in their churches. Because the local church had ownership, it encouraged people to participate in cell groups. Periodic reports were given to the elders and to the local church.

A second accomplishment was the appointment of a cell group coordinator from each local church to facilitate and oversee the ministry. In the largest church three people were appointed to this task. Much of my time was spent in working with the cell group coordinators.

Growth in the cell group ministry has been uneven in the churches. The Ankadivato Baptist Church has a strong organization and an aggressive outreach ministry through cell groups. The pastor has noted that over fifty percent of the baptisms came via the cell groups. The two other Baptist churches have many people involved in cell groups, but have not really promoted it like the main church. The Isotry Baptist Church appointed a cell group coordinator. The Ambatomainty Church has no official coordinator, though the pastor encourages cell groups.

By 1991, five years after starting the ministry in 1986 at least 80 cell groups were active in Antananarivo which were attached to one of the three churches. Five new congregations<sup>[2]</sup> came into being during that time as a direct result of the cell group ministry. After we left Madagascar in 1991, the cell group ministry continued under

competent lay leadership. One more new church started in Antananarivo soon after we left; the Ambohibao Baptist Church.

Due to the influence of cell groups, a change has taken place in the existing congregations that is difficult to quantify but is manifest by a greater desire to know Scripture, to pray, to witness, and to join with other Christians in worship. The net result of this change has been the growth in both number and maturity of those churches.

## ***Characteristics***

Although only a minority of the membership in any given local church in Antananarivo is involved in a cell group, the growth and life of the church are manifest through these people. Some people are involved in multiple cell groups. A given person may be a member of one group and the leader of another. A few people are involved in several groups although this is not encouraged.

Because of the problem of transportation and the danger of being out late in the city, most cell group members live close to one another. When a new cell group starts as an extension of an existing cell group, it may well start in the same general locale through family or friendship networks.

Below are some specific cell group characteristics.

### *1. Network emphasis.*

Cell groups grow through family and friendship networks. In other words, small groups of people grow as the people involved bring in those people they are close to. Georges, mentioned above was part of a neighborhood network of young professionals. He and his wife know and were on friendly terms with the people who lived in their neighborhood.

North Americans are less in tune with their neighbors and often live in cities far away from family members. However, their networks run along lines of common interests or affinity groups. Terry and his wife were the parents of teenagers. They invited other parents of teenagers to meet in a small group with them. Many of those parents were not Christians but they had a common concern - their teenage children. The group was popular and grew quickly. One popular North American specialist has named over one hundred types of affinity groups.

## *2. High Level of Commonality.*

Cell groups tend to have a higher level of commonality among its participants than the larger body of the local church. This concept flows from the networking principle above. People network with people who are much the same as themselves. This 'sameness' or commonality may have to do with family or friendship or common interests.

At one time we attended two cell groups that met the same day, near to each other, but at different times. One group consisted of highly educated professionals while the other group had unemployed people with little education. When we tried to combine the two groups, the disparity in life experience was so great that we nearly killed both groups. Interests, understanding, and ability to communicate with one another were different to such a degree that we separated the groups as they originally existed.

In the church itself the many various networks join together for the glory of God. They can be vastly different in character and in specific focus but in corporate worship all hearts are united in praise to our Lord. The problem appears when one group sees its focus as more important than another. The two cell groups mentioned above, together with others, helped start a new church in their part of the city.

## *3. Responsible Church Membership.*

Cell groups promote responsible church membership. As we will see later, a number of things happen in a cell group that facilitate people becoming responsible church members. They are able to speak freely of their doubts and struggles and disciple one another in areas of mutual need.

Furthermore, spiritual gifts become evident and used. I have seen many people come to Christ, grow in maturity, and become leaders in the church through the cell group setting. Jose was one such case. A young engineer, who had recently returned from France, Jose lived in the neighborhood with several other young professionals who met in a cell group. He fit right in culturally but had little Bible knowledge as he was a new Christian. Through the mutual edification in a small group Jose grew in Bible knowledge. His gifts of wisdom and knowledge soon became evident to others in the group as he would deal with spiritual problems. He quit smoking, a habit that had held him for years, as the group prayed and encouraged him. He began to form and lead other groups leading some of his own family members to Christ. Today he is a leader in one of the new churches of Antananarivo.

#### *4. Increased Member Care*

Member care tends to increase in intensity over time in a given cell group. Obviously, the better we know people the better we can relate to them and they to us. As we grow in Christ, we become better care givers and better care receivers. We learn these skills over time with a small group of people as mutual trust increases. It takes time to build the confidence necessary for us to expose our problems. When we can share with a small group the serious issues of our lives, the group, or individuals in the group can help us.

Mariette was a single mom. Her husband had abandoned her and her two boys. He returned from time to time and she lived in fear that she would lose her children. As she built trust with the group, she shared her fears with others in the cell group who helped her deal with her fear. She also received legal advice from a judge who was a member of the cell group. Member care increases over time.

#### *5. Evangelistic Orientation.*

Cell groups tend to be more evangelistically oriented than the local churches. There are several reasons for this. First, a non-Christian will often come to a home meeting where he or she knows people than go to a church. The setting is also non-threatening where he or she can relate to friends and gain spiritual insight. When a small group of say 8 people brings one other person to the Lord, that is better growth than most churches can maintain. If all cell groups can maintain that growth level, numerical church growth will be rapid. While numbers are not everything, they indicate an aspect of church health.

A third reason for the evangelistic orientation of a small group is that the members of the group themselves are much more at ease. The evangelism comes out of genuine friendships and caring for people within personal networks. The story of Jocelyne mentioned in the first section is just such a story. She had need and when she felt the confidence to tell her story, the group had the freedom to lead her to Christ!

#### *6. Local Church Growth.*

Cell groups are important to local church growth. Church growth specialists note that fast growing churches are fueled by small groups. My experience in the nations and neighborhoods where I have ministered would support that idea. I believe that main reason for that rapid growth derives from two major factors. First, we see evangelistic outreach mentioned above. Second, people grow in Christian maturity in the small group setting.

I was talking to a friend of mine who is the discipleship pastor of a large California church. He has seen dozens of people come to Christ over the years. I asked what was the most effective way people were disciplined. He said the people who were brought to maturity through a small group tended to grow faster and deeper than people disciplined one on one or in larger group settings.

There is a balance in the small group between evangelism and nurture.

### *7. Cell Group Clusters.*

Cell groups tend to cluster along social networks. The cell group is like a node in a social network. Sometimes these clusters develop in geographically contiguous areas. However, they always develop along lines of common social ties such as family, friends, common interests, or work colleagues.

### *8. Planting New Congregations.*

New congregations are born out of cell group clusters. The new churches in Antananarivo, Madagascar all started because a significant number of cell groups were started in areas of the city with no evangelical church. In many European and North American cities, geographical factors will be less important than cell group networks. The cell group clusters contribute to a strong and viable new church plant.

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[1]The three Baptist Churches are: Ankadivato Baptist Church, the oldest and largest Baptist Church; Ambatomainty Baptist Church, Isotry Baptist Church.

[2]The five areas of the city where these new congregations have started are: Ankadifotsy-5 cell groups, Iavoloha-5 cell groups, Ivato-6 cell groups, Ambohimahitsy-2 cell groups, and Alasora-3 cell groups.



# Biblical Foundation

While we can demonstrate that cell groups have caused both qualitative and quantitative growth in the church, certain people have voiced criticism of the cell group program because they say it is not scriptural and in fact is doing more harm than good. Those believers who have so criticized the cell group ministry have done us a good service in calling us back to biblical roots. In our ministries, we must seek to be scriptural in all that we do. A self-perceived success in numbers or other attributes is really no success at all if the programs, their goals, implementation, and results are not thoroughly biblical.

In this section, I will first consider the ministry of Jesus in terms of small groups, and second, the place of small groups in the early church. The focus is primarily on biblical history, the Gospels and Acts. While I recognize that more could be said, I believe enough information is given to prove that cell groups are biblical, practical, and have an important place in church ministry today. Other writers have dealt extensively and competently with this issue

## ***The Ministry of Jesus and Small Groups***

Jesus taught in the home, ministering to smaller groups of people.

Much of His ministry was in the synagogue, as well as in the open air, but a significant part of His work and teaching was done in homes and with smaller groups of people.

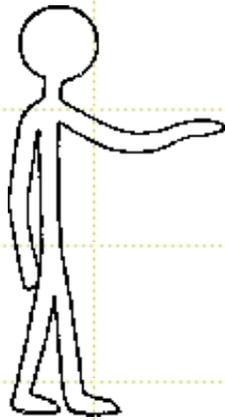
Jesus' explanation of the Kingdom parables was given to the smaller group of His disciples (Mt. 13:36). He was in Peter's home when He healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mt. 8:14). Jesus was in a home teaching when the paralytic whom Jesus healed was lowered through the roof (Mk. 2:1). The Gospels are full of accounts where Jesus ministered in homes. He visited people's homes to heal the sick (Mt. 8:14), raise the dead (Mk. 5:38-42), converse over a meal (Lk. 7:36), and advise those who began to follow Him. He entered homes to teach salvation (Zacchaeus, Lk. 19) and to disciple those who believed (Mary and Martha, Lk. 10:38-42).



When Jesus sent out the twelve (Mt. 10, Mk. 6) and later when He sent out the seventy-two (Lk. 10) to minister, He sent them to homes. They were sent out in pairs to minister in the context of the home group.

*When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house (Lk. 10:5-7).*

During the last part of His ministry, Jesus focused on the small band



of disciples. His teachings, the final Passover, and Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane were all done in the presence of this small group (Mk. 14). After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the small band of disciples who were gathered in a home (Jn. 20:19).

We can conclude that although Jesus ministered to the multitudes and in the synagogues, much of His teaching and ministry was concerned with the small group of disciples. Even there He had the special group of three (Peter, James and John) who were part of an inner group (cf. Mt. 17:1 and 26:37). His teachings were given in a much more complete form to this smaller group of twelve.

### ***Small Groups in the Early Church***

From the earliest days, the church met in homes. All the activities associated with the community of the redeemed took place in homes. They broke bread together, ate together, and praised God in home worship (Ac. 2:46-47). One effect of this home fellowship was on the unbelievers. These believers had the favor of all people and many people were saved. Evangelism took place as a result of the believers meeting in their homes.

Besides worshipping and breaking bread together, we see that both teaching and preaching took place in homes as well as in the temple courtyard (Ac. 5:42). Prayer was an important element in the early church's home meetings. A group was meeting in Mary's home praying for Peter's release when God answered in a miraculous way (Ac. 12:12-17). Also, the powerful prayer meeting described after

Peter's first imprisonment probably was in a home (Ac. 4:31).

Reporting about God's work was done in these home groups. Small groups meeting in homes are more conducive to intimate sharing of this kind. After Peter and John's release from prison they returned and shared with their companions what God had done (Ac. 4:23). In Acts 12:17 not only does Peter report to the home group but he tells the Christians to report the happenings to "James and the brethren" as well.

There are many other examples of home meetings in the New Testament. Paul was teaching in an upper room in Troas on the eve of his departure when Eutychus, who was asleep, fell to his death. Paul brought Eutychus back to life and continued the home meeting until daybreak when Paul departed (Ac. 20:7-12). Again at Ephesus when Paul was giving his farewell speech to the elders, he emphasized how he taught them publicly and from house to house (Ac. 20:20).

The early church was a home based movement. Although teaching and preaching were done publicly, in the temple courtyard, the synagogues, and open fields, the real life of the church centered in homes. The home of Aquila and Priscilla was the base for a church in Ephesus and later in Rome (1 Co. 16:19 and Rom. 16:3-5). The church in Laodicea met in Nympha's home (Co. 4:15) while the church in Colossae met in Philemon's home (Phl. 2).

One pattern that emerges from a study of the New Testament Church is the complimentary structures of the small group and the larger group. Howard Snyder states, "Large group worship and small group fellowship are basic, complimentary structures" (1977:146). Several of the above verses emphasize this small group-large group aspect of church life. "And day by day continuing with one mind in the **temple** and breaking bread from **house to house**. . ." (Ac. 2:46 also cf. Ac. 5:42). This pattern of large group-small group was effective for both witness and the community life of the church. An important result of this pattern was the astonishing growth of the early church.

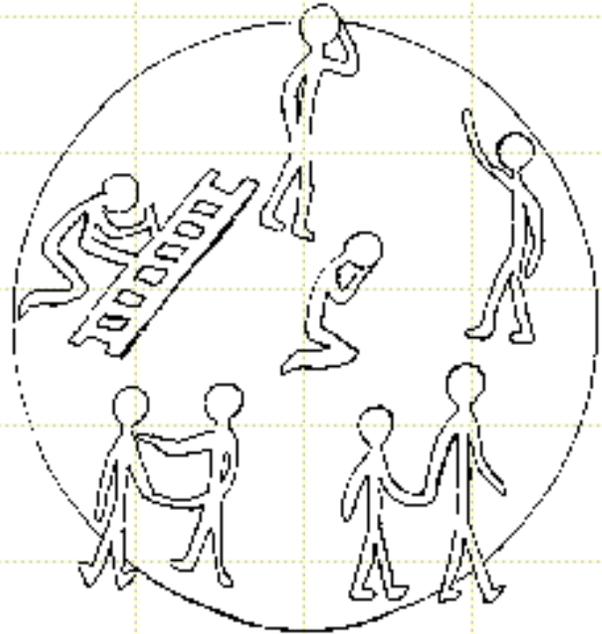
In the above discussion I have sought to show that the small group, which I call a cell group, has a biblical base. Our methods, styles, and modus operandi must come under scriptural guidance. Means that are biblically based can lead to biblical results.



# Function

Cell groups are usually defined in terms of either function (sociological aspects of small group dynamics) or objective (purposes of small groups within the its sociological dimension). I have chosen to put the discussion of definition here because objectives derive from the sociological function.

Besides definition, I will discuss how cell groups relate to the local church, to their own members, and to the world. These matters flow directly from the brief history and biblical basis in the previous sections.



## **Definitions Discussed**

If we take the terms home group and small group to be the equivalent of cell group, we find that Gibbs gives a good general definition.

*By a 'home group' I mean a small group, generally numbering between five and twenty persons, meeting in homes for the purpose of mutual encouragement, Bible study, discussion, prayer and sometimes including community service and evangelism (Gibbs 1981:235).*

This definition contains all that is usually associated with the small group. Malcolm and Hulda Knowles in an early book on group dynamics state some of those elements that are assumed in the above definition. They identify six elements that must be present if a collection of people is really a group instead of simply several individuals. A collection of people is a group when it consists of the following qualities:

1. *A definable membership—a collection of two or more people identifiable by name or type.*

2. *Group consciousness—the members think of themselves as a group, have a “collective perception of unity,” a conscious identification with each other.*
3. *A sense of shared purpose—the members have the same “object model” or goals or ideals.*
4. *Interdependence in satisfaction of needs—the members need to help one another to accomplish the purposes for which they joined the group.*
5. *Interaction—the members communicate with one another, influence one another, react to one another.*
6. *Ability to act in a unitary manner—the group behaves as a single organism. (Knowles 1959:39)*

There are two dimensions by which we can determine whether or not a cell group is functioning according to the above criteria: a structural dimension and an organic dimension. The above qualities can be applied to any group whether it be a church cell group, the church itself, or General Motors. Depending on the group we could describe it in more structural and less organic terms or, vice versa, in more organic and less structural terms.

The difference is not merely a function of size. We cannot say a cell group is more organic than a local church just because it is smaller. A cell group may be highly structured and still be small. Within large corporations there are often 'cells' that are the real productive units which are more organic than structural.

Cell groups have both structural and organic dimensions. Some structure is imposed on each group by the church through a church approved cell group leader. The 'what' of the cell groups tends to be more on the structured end of the continuum. The cell group activities, the lessons studied, and the overall objectives are all structured in that they find root in the local church and have an existence prior to the cell group.

The organic dimension deals with the 'how.' How a cell group interacts, accomplishes its objectives and builds community, all flow from the initiative of the group itself. The reasons that both structural and organic components exist in these groups are cultural and social.

Malagasy culture is hierarchical which evidences structure at every level of society. Traditional families for instance are structured as a result of the strong influence of ancestor worship. In a more positive light, local churches have a strong, structural component which gives it order, purpose, and direction.

On the other hand there is a need and a desire on the part of many Christians to have more intimacy in their spiritual pilgrimage. When the cell group functions properly this need is fulfilled. In that these functions flow from the group itself they are the more organic components. Cell groups modify the harsher tendencies of a hierarchical society as well as the strong structural components of a local church. They can also give some structure to those cultures and sub-cultures that have little.

I derive my definition from the previous data.

**A cell group consists of 5 to 15 people meeting together regularly, to fulfill the 'one-another' commands of Scripture, while being integrally related to a local church, and having an outward focus on the world, with the overarching purpose of glorifying God.**

This definition contains the following four components:

1. A biblical component. It is related to the local church, a biblical institution, and finds its group life on biblical grounds.
2. A sociological component. It fulfills the six criteria by which a group is defined.
3. A structural component. There is a definite link in the following areas: Cell group members to each other, the cell group to the local church, and the cell group with its focus on the world.
4. An organic component. The way in which the cell group fulfills its role and objectives will flow from the relationships of the cell group members.

## ***Cell Group Function in Relation to:***

### ***Cell Group Function in Relation to Local Churches***

One criterion for a cell is that it be integrally related to a local church. I do not mean that the cell group is a microcosm of the local church. Rather, the integral relationship of a cell group to the local church is demonstrated in two ways. First, the group is supported by the church. The church has approved its existence through normal channels. The church is praying for the cell group. The church will oversee it. Second, the cell group leader is a member in good standing of the local church. If the cell group grows into a church, it will normally be considered the offspring of the church where the cell group leader is a member.

An example of the "cell group—local church" relationship is seen in the Malagasy Baptist churches. First, The elders meet and decide that the church should be involved approving the ministry in general. The next step is the appointment of a cell group coordinator. This person may or may not be an elder in the church but has their confidence and approval. This person's status is dependent upon eldership approval.

Often several cell groups are functioning by the time it is officially sanctioned by the local church and a coordinator is appointed. Rather than an administrative problem, that development demonstrates the dynamic that exists in the cell group ministry.

Because of its intimate relationship to the local church, the cell group can function for the church in several ways. In this regard Gibbs makes the following point.

*Home groups enable the church to keep its ears to the ground. They are like detectors scattered around the area to pick up a variety of signals. Through the home groups the church can keep track on who is moving in or out, those who are sick or in trouble and those who have lapsed. They can alert the church to community concerns and can gauge how their image stands in the*

*neighborhood (1981:244).*

Rugged independence is not normally a virtue in non-western cultures. The fact that a cell group has an identity with a larger group (the local church) is a positive factor. In the Malagasy context, it protects the cell group against being typed a 'new' religion, something with very negative connotations in this ancestor venerating culture.

### *Cell Group Function in Relation to The World*

While the cell group is the eyes and ears of the local church from which it emanates, it is, at the same time, the church's representative in the local community where it exists. One purpose of the cell group is evangelistic. This purpose needs to be explicit due to the tendency of cell groups toward introversion over a period of time. The fellowship becomes so good in the cell group that people may hesitate to bring in new people lest the dynamic be changed. The people become ingrown causing the introversion problem. As Gibbs notes,

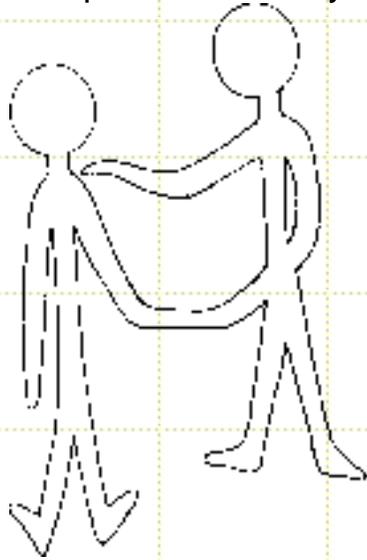
*Groups of people can quickly develop an intense relationship. They form a clique which regards others who try to join the group as intruders. This is especially the case if that person is of a different age bracket or economic class, or holds views which are strongly at variance with the other group members. The other people in the group are unlikely to repel him overtly, but a number of subtle innuendoes will signal to him that he does not really belong (1981:255).*

The cell group has the possibility of developing into a new local church when it is in a locale where no local church exists. One pastor told me that he thought every cell group should eventually become a local church. My enthusiasm does not carry me quite to that extreme but I certainly appreciate his vision.

Cell groups need not be intrusive for people to know they exist in a new area. If growth occurs both by increase in numbers and new groups starting in the area, a new

congregation may start. Because cell groups usually exist for a long period of time in one area the witness is continual. The relationships last long enough to be deep. If the cell group does not grow into a church, or if it terminates, no major problem ensues. In a society where loss of face can be a major problem, there is none when a cell group disappears.

Cell groups may focus on other locales for outreach. Group members may have network contacts (i.e. family,



co-workers, friends) in other areas. When members have a good cell group experience where they see the Holy Spirit at work in their lives, they are eager to share it with other people. Cell group members have often started new groups in different locales

because their cell group experience generated the desire to start a cell with another group of people they knew. It is not uncommon to have this kind of generational growth continue as each cell, in turn, starts another.

### *Cell Group Function in Relation to Its Members*

Community is the overarching rubric under which the members minister to each other. The members meet together to fulfill the “one-another” commands of Scripture. The commands to “help one another,” “bear one another's burdens,” “teach one another,” “counsel one another,” “pray for one another,” “rejoice with one another,” “sorrow with each other,” in a word, “love one another,” can all be fulfilled within the cell group.

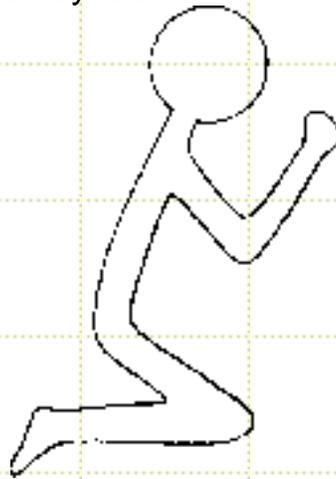
At the cell group level the intensity of personal relationships is high enough for people to minister to each other effectively in the biblical pattern mentioned above. The above reciprocal injunctions are rarely accomplished when the entire congregation gathers.

The usual program within a cell group results in the members being able to minister to one another. The program is intentionally simple and flexible. The basic elements of a cell group program are: Bible study, sharing, and prayer. I encourage the cell groups to spend about an equal amount of time on each of these three basic elements. The majority of any given cell group meeting may be given to one of those three areas, but over a period of time they should average out about equally.

Worship, including singing, is often a part of cell groups. Sometimes this is brief; sometimes, extended. In Madagascar food is almost never a part of the cell groups. It was not necessary to make food the central focus of fellowship.

I want to focus briefly on the prayer element. Prayer is often relegated to a minor role, even in cell groups. I mentioned above that prayer was the key factor in the first cell group we led in Madagascar. It was not

uncommon for us to pray together for an hour or more. Many cell groups still pray for at least a half hour, even though we encourage meetings to terminate within an hour. Prayer is key, the focus of a cell group. Why? John Taylor skillfully answers that question.



*The prayer of the first Christians was, therefore, simply a reflection of the living Christ in their midst. It was prayer 'in his name'; and by this we mean not that a formula was added at the end of every petition but that in all their prayer they joined themselves to the prayer of Christ himself, and knew that it was his spirit which prayed in them. The best worship they could offer was simply his self-oblation in them. Praying in that Spirit, the Christian's prayer is immersed in the ocean of the Son's communion with the Father: .... To live in prayer, therefore is to live in the Spirit; and to live in the Spirit is*

*to live in Christ (1973:226).*

Cell groups have fostered this kind of worship and prayer. When prayer at this level is a key element in the cell group, spiritual growth will result. As spiritual growth develops so does effective “ministering to one another.”

Because of the informal atmosphere in the cell group, individual member participation is encouraged. As people in the group minister to each other and serve one another, spiritual gifts will be manifest. One of the results of cell groups is the discovery of the members' spiritual gifts. They are discovered in a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere and are demonstrated on a small scale. As these gifts are identified and used in the small group, they will soon be used to edify the larger church body. The cell group therefore becomes a place where all the gifts of the body can be identified, developed, and used.

There is also the relationship of the cell groups to each other. That is especially true when they are relatively close geographically. Because clusters of cell groups develop along social networks, they are able to accomplish tasks together. New congregations have grown out of these networks.

Of course, the relationship among cell groups begins at the level of fellowship. Several cell groups may meet together for a picnic or some other outing. They may attend some important event together such as the wedding of one of the members or a death in a member's family. They have a relationship through networks at other levels such as the community or the church.

At least once all the cell groups in Antananarivo were invited to meet together for a special celebration. Although only a minority of the people attended it was a first attempt. Many people came who were new to the church and the cell group ministry.



# Growth Objectives

Objectives and goals flow from the cell group definition which was given in the previous section. The general objectives of cell groups are people's conversion to Christ and maturity in the Christian faith leading to responsible church membership. It has been demonstrated that cell groups can and do play a vital role in the growth and expansion of the church. The objectives listed below are all in terms of various types of growth.

I will not consider specific cell group goals here because they are individually set by each group according to the needs and aspirations of that group. In other words, the goals of a cell group are an organic function of that cell group. In this section I will discuss five general objectives for cell groups: Evangelistic Growth, Community Growth, Bible Knowledge Growth, Growth in Social Concern, and Leadership Growth.

## ***Evangelistic Growth***

One objective in cell groups concerns increase through evangelism. Because such groups are encouraged to have an outward focus we believe that new people will come into the group. People who join the group may or may not be Christians. Because evangelistic and nurture goals are not separated, a person's relationship with Christ is not the basis for entry into a cell group.

The number of members in a cell group will increase. Also, the number of cell groups will increase. I have found that cell groups do not easily split and become two separate groups. Most people covet the community they experience in a cell group and have little desire to leave it. An alternate to dividing is for an individual in the group to start another cell groups at a different time. The advantages are that the new cell group has the vital interest and prayers of the old, while the individual maintains the relationship with the original group. Eventually, there may be several people in a cell each leading another cell at a different time.

Cell groups are a powerful base for evangelization. A group usually draws people with a high level of commonality. Consequently, it is well

placed to act as a beacon of spiritual light within a social network.

The existence of stronger community structures in many urban centers, especially in the two-thirds world, is an advantage for a neighborhood based cell group. Non-Christians and Christians often know each other and interact on various social levels. Non-Christians will often attend a cell group in a neighbor's home where they may not attend that neighbor's church. A home meeting does not involve the commitment that church attendance does. People can attend a cell group meeting in a home as inquirers or on the basis of friendship with the one who invited them.

We have found that when people make a commitment to Christ they often desire to affiliate with the church where others in the cell group attend. Teaching in the cell group about the local church will encourage people to be involved in the local church. Modeling has been an effective teaching method in this area. New Christians have followed the example of more mature Christians in their local church involvement.

As new cells open, new bases for neighborhood or network evangelism are established. A cell group member who moves to another area in the city becomes a contact for a possible new group. Once a person has participated in a cell group, he or she usually desires to continue cell group involvement.

Almost always, when a person becomes involved in a cell group, he or she thinks of someone else, a friend, a family member, or co-worker, who needs such a group. People are eager to share the reality of what they are experiencing. Some cell groups have at least half the members leading their own groups on different evenings. Others are already in a third generation cell group within one year.

## **Community Growth**

At the point of community the cell group is strong, almost unique. Hestenes has an extended, excellent discussion on community. She speaks of community being at the center of the Christian life.

*The Christian life is not a solitary journey. It is a pilgrimage made in the company of the committed. The "new commandment" which Jesus taught his disciples was to "love one another". It is not enough to love God. Love of God calls us to love one another. The letters of the early*

*Christian leaders were usually addressed to small groups of Christians, not to individuals. The groups were meeting in various places, often homes, throughout the far-flung cities of the Roman Empire. A recurrent theme in these early writings was the call to life together (1983:11).*

Fellowship and obedience of the “one another” commands are important aspects of community growth. Cell groups are the arena for serving one another. Gibbs (cf. 1981:240-244) speaks of five areas where cell groups are strategically effective. These five areas are intimacy, flexibility, community, mobility, and sensitivity. While the following discussion follows this five-point outline, the thoughts are my own.



# Importance of Cell Groups for Community Growth

The following characteristics of cell groups have caused them to be particularly effective in creating and fostering community growth.

## ***Intimacy***

Traditional societal and familial structures are breaking down in many of the world's urban areas. People are afraid. Every type of crime runs rampant. In Antananarivo, people will not leave their dwellings unattended at any time for fear their goods will be stolen. One result of these factors is a lack of intimacy. People often have no one in whom they can put their confidence, no one to trust.

Intimacy is a necessary ingredient to the creation of trust. Cell groups create an atmosphere in which mutual trust can be established. As people have become well acquainted with each other they have been able to share the deeper burdens and joys of their lives.

Mature Christians should be humbled when people trust them with their inner-most lives, burdens, frustrations, and pain. When this level of trust brings people to the cross of Jesus, it creates an intimate bond in Christ. At that point true mutual ministry can take place, each helping the other in pain and weakness. The cell group has been an ideal context for this level of ministry.

## ***Flexibility***

We have found that because of a cell group's small size and informality, it can be changed quickly and easily. When a cell group meeting place becomes unavailable another location, usually another home, is easily found. Because most participants in a given cell group live near to each other or have easy access to one another, communication is readily accomplished.

The urban area in all parts of the world brings people together from many different backgrounds. The social and cultural differences represented are vast. Flexibility is necessary for reaching the city. Cell

groups are easily started and easily disbanded when no longer needed. They can adapt to the various social and cultural differences in the urban setting.

## **Community**

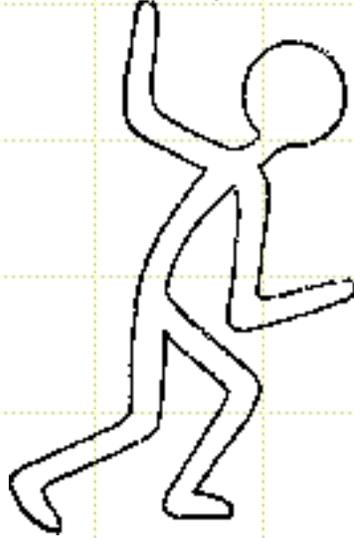
Traditional social structures tend to break down as people migrate to the urban areas. A sense of community may be difficult to find. However, the Bible gives us patterns for community, spiritual community. Cell groups are an effective response to the need for community.

I mentioned above something of the large group-small group dynamic. Within the small group itself there exists the concept of community. Christians who participate in a cell group are acknowledging their need for other Christians (1 Co. 12:14, 21). These Christians are seeking to build community even while urbanization may be destroying traditional community structures. In the cell groups in Antananarivo networking between the cell groups has further developed this community relationship. As community has been strengthened at the cell group level and networking between cells has increased, it has also increased the fellowship at the local church level.

People have been reached with the gospel because of a sense of community they found in the cell group. The story of Liva is only one such case. People separated from their traditional sociological setting, their natural community, have been more easily reached by bringing them into an alternate structure, the cell group.

## ***Mobility***

In the first three centuries of its history, the church grew rapidly. It was not bound by buildings and property and, consequently, was highly mobile. Today, in many places, like Madagascar, a religious group



without a building is highly suspect. For that reason groups are most effective when attached to a church that has a building. The church and its building give identity to cell groups.

On the other hand, cell groups give mobility to the church. The church building is not the church. It is a place for the larger congregation to gather for worship. Cell groups are the church in its scattered mode as they spread throughout the city. Cell groups in this sense are the church's legs as it travels to all parts of the city. The mobility of the early church can be maintained through cell groups.

## ***Sensitivity***

While cell groups are the church's legs, they are also the church's eyes and ears in the surrounding community. Through cell groups the church can learn what is happening in the community of the cell group. A church alerted to the events in a community can better minister there. A church that has contacts in several local communities in an urban area will be well prepared to serve that area. Such issues as where to evangelize, where to start new works or new cells, can better be decided with an existing structure of cell groups.

Cell groups have functioned as the pastor and elder's eyes and ears into their flock. Important events and issues have been related to these men by cell group participants. Without the cell group, someone who needed pastoral care might not have received it. Cell groups have been one way to network within the church body.



# Biblical Fellowship: Basis for Community Growth

All fellowship is not biblical fellowship; not even all Christian fellowship is biblical. A specific cell group objective is to facilitate biblical fellowship. Because cell groups are small, people come to know each other well over a period of time. Their mutual commitment seeks its outworking in biblical norms, making biblical fellowship feasible.

Some pastors and Christian leaders have expressed fear that people involved in cell groups will neglect local church participation. Again I refer to Hestenes' discussion of that problem for it is more a perceived problem than a real one. We have found that rather than hinder the local church commitment, cell group activity tends to enhance it.

*As we have seen from the example of the early Church, small groups can complement regular meetings of the whole congregation for worship and study. Both are necessary to the healthy functioning of a church. Each meets a need. The two sorts of gatherings should work together to build a strong community of Christian people (1983:11).*

## ***Intra-Cell Group Relations***

Intellectual assent to biblical truth is insufficient; that truth must be obeyed (Rom. 16:26). Christian life is not lived in isolation for Paul encourages us to, "serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13). While I believe it has been shown how the cell group is the ideal context to fulfill these commands, I will give some specific instances where that has been accomplished through cell groups.

When people in the group begin to go astray or are in positions that might encourage non-Christian behavior, others in the group can call them back to a biblical way (Gal. 6:1-2). People must love and know one another well to confront in Christian love. In the larger church context this kind of accountability is more difficult as people can be lost in the crowd.



In difficult as well as joyous times the cell group can effectively minister to its members. They can “rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). When a near relative dies, people in the cell group may stay with the bereaved just as family does, offering appropriate Christian comfort. Although comfort is the goal, the love of Christ is manifest to non-Christian relatives. In times of joy, too, such as the birth of a baby, the cell group can appropriately express joy and unity with the new parents through visits, practical help, and gifts which can also act as a witness to non-Christian family members.

On certain occasions, cell groups schedule special recreation times. Picnics, teas, and games are appropriate recreational activities in Madagascar. At these times adults and children alike meet simply to sing, play, and be together. In that cell groups are usually, but not always, geared to adults, it gives the children a chance to be a part of the group. These activities offer cell groups the opportunity to fellowship in a different dimension thus enhancing their unity as a group. Children can see Christian family life modeled.

### ***Inter-Cell Group Relations***

Another level of biblical fellowship which cell groups encourage is their cross-pollination. Cell groups encourage one another and in so doing increase fellowship in the local churches. We have discovered that inter-cell group relationships also enhance fellowship between local churches.

One area where this cross-pollination takes place is prayer. A prayer need in one group may be communicated to other cell groups. When that prayer is answered there is rejoicing in all the groups. We have experienced this phenomenon many times. One young man was sick to the point the doctors had given up hope. Several cell groups consistently prayed for him. Many people visited him. He came to faith in Christ and gave a powerful testimony in church of his faith. The people in the cell groups were full of praise to the Lord and had a greater sense of unity with each other. One year later this man died. Many people from cell groups loved and comforted his wife and children assisting them in practical ways.

People from one cell group may occasionally visit another one. This is good in that it helps bring ideas, methods, and news from group to group. News and prayer requests can be communicated. Cell groups

are the ideal place for praying for regional and national concerns. Evangelistic campaigns and new churches are supported by prayer in many cell groups.

Whenever pastors or Christians from outside the city are in town, they are encouraged to visit a cell group so they can share ministry reports and prayer requests. Cell groups have given prayer support and at times even financial help for needs that were communicated to them.

Biblical fellowship happens when people are so related to each other that they serve one another, hold one another accountable, rejoice and weep with one another, and in general fulfill the “one another passages” in Scripture. Fulfilling this ministry presumes a close relationship among people. Cell groups are ideally suited to this purpose.



# Complementary Pastoral Care: Expanding Community Growth

While several concepts already mentioned could be classified in this section, a few things should be emphasized here. In a small church, most of the pastoral care falls on the pastor. Hospital visits, comfort, death, marriage, and birth all involve pastoral visits. As a church grows it becomes increasingly difficult for a pastor to accomplish all the required pastoral care. At the same time, a group of elders or deacons competent to do some of this ministry should develop. However, there is a level of spiritual care that can be accomplished through cell groups.

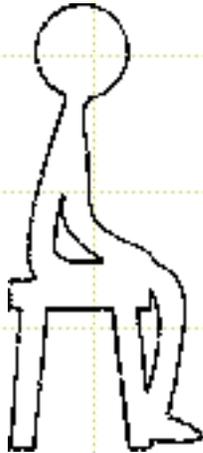
Usually, the pastor or an elder will visit for the very important events such as those mentioned above. However, the Christians in a cell group know quite well each other's spiritual progress. When one person begins to be spiritually cold or discouraged, others in the group will know and can minister to that person. On the positive side as well, the Christians in the cell group can encourage and rejoice with a member who has won a victory.

One cell group member was invited to give a lecture before the prestigious Malagasy Academy of Science. The cell group prayed for him; many even attended his lecture. Afterwards the cell group rejoiced with him.

Cell groups have helped people with emotional problems. People have quit smoking due to the prayer and support of the cell group. Marriage problems have been dealt with in cell groups. There is a breadth of pastoral care in cell groups that would be impossible for most pastors to accomplish individually. Rather than replacing necessary pastoral care in the church, the cell group ministry expands it.

## ***Bible Knowledge Growth***

In the development of cell groups in Madagascar, we have made the Bible the cornerstone of the ministry. While sharing, shepherding,



visiting, and praying are all important they have a scriptural basis. In this section I will examine two areas: Growth through informal Bible teaching and Growth through spiritual gift development.

### ***Growth through Informal Teaching***

Two things are important here: The Word of God must be the basis for teaching and teaching must be done informally. We have sought a balance between discussion which encourages people to voice their ideas, their doubts, and their problems, and developing increased Bible knowledge.

If people meet only to discuss then they will not find solutions to their problems or answers to their questions. On the other hand if there is no discussion then problems and questions will not come to light. I have discovered that in discussing Bible content, people begin to apply biblical truth to life situations. \_

Although we encourage an informal atmosphere in the cell groups in Madagascar, we have a certain Bible study methodology that we have developed. The Bible studies are question and answer type studies based on biblical content. One purpose of the Bible studies we have written and used is to increase knowledge of Bible content in a way that is immediately applied. Much time is spent in seeking to apply the material to daily lives. The cell group lessons touch areas of concern. A few examples of existing lessons show the practicality of the lessons. There are lessons on worry, fear, anger, jealousy, five lessons about work, lessons on the use of money, speaking and listening, the fruit of the Spirit, and book studies on Haggai, Colossians and 1 Peter, to name a few. Some 230 lessons have been produced including biographies of Barnabas, Peter, Mark, and fifty-six women in the Bible.

Lest one think that Haggai is not practical, one young physician related to us several months after we had studied it together, "The book of Haggai changed my life!"

## ***Growth Through Spiritual Gift Development***

The cell group's small size and informal atmosphere encourage everyone's participation. As people discuss with each other, pray with each other, and serve one another, spiritual gifts become apparent. People with gifts of discernment and wisdom begin to use those gifts when others in the cell group share problems. Gifts of knowledge and teaching become evident during discussions about Bible truth. Other people have special concern for hurting people as they demonstrate gifts of mercy. Gifts of service and giving also appear as the group begins to function in service for one another. All gifts are encouraged in the cell group environment.

Larger groups by contrast, cannot usually encourage everyone to develop spiritual gifts. The large group tends to draw its leadership from a few people who have already demonstrated their gifts. There is little room for the beginner or the shy person to develop potential spiritual gifts. It is also difficult in the larger group for people to demonstrate the 'quieter' gifts such as serving or mercy. Churches often have many gifted people who have little encouragement and little structure to use their gifts. One result is that many people are unaware of their spiritual gifts.

As people identify and use their gifts in the small groups, they usually go on to use them to edify the larger church body. The cell group therefore, becomes a place where all the gifts of the body can be identified, developed, and used. It is equally a place where Christians who have not been active in their faith can come spiritually alive.

## ***Growth in Social Concern***

Because a cell group usually involves people from a more limited area in the city than a local church, there is a heightened sensitivity to local events. Cell groups have prayed for the local needs. Cell group members often personally know the needs and people involved at this local, community level. They are often directly and personally affected by these community needs.

The cell group has the potential of helping with community problems. Physicians we know in cell groups have freely offered their services to needy people in the community. On the other hand, poorer people have given free time to help with house or yard tasks. The cell group is attuned to local needs and positioned to respond in a practical way.

Although this level of growth has not developed as much as we would like, it is certainly an important area and flows from the cell group definition given above. The “focus on the world” aspect of a cell group is normally engaged at the community level. Seldom does a single cell group have resources to extend beyond that. However, they do pray for issues quite beyond the local level.

Cell groups facilitate a ministry of social concern as an extension of the church in the world.

### ***Leadership Growth***

Leadership growth is a key area for the cell group ministry's expansion. Leadership growth has two dimensions. The first is internal growth which involves a given group leader's increase in ability and skills enabling him or her to better function in the leadership capacity. The second is external growth which concerns the increase in the number of cell group leaders.

In the larger local church context it is difficult for emerging leaders to develop their skills. Seldom is there any area where leadership skills can be discovered, let alone developed. The cell group structure offers an appropriate model for developing leaders on a small scale. People in the cell groups have opportunity to discover and practice their gifts. Cell groups are both a source of leaders and present a continuing need for leaders. Gibbs has noted that, *“Multiplicity of cells provides both the need for leadership and the training ground for the leaders not only of today but of tomorrow”* (1981:249).

When people desire to start a new cell group we first encourage them to attend an existing cell group for three to six months. We try to put them in a cell group which will model appropriate cell group leadership. Modeling is a major recourse in leadership training to date.

A second method used in training cell group leaders is to form the leaders themselves into a cell group. This group meets regularly (monthly or bimonthly) and conducts the meeting as a cell group. Rather than study the normal cell group Bible lessons, this group shares their cell group experiences. In so doing members encourage one another with positive events from their cell groups and help one another with advice in dealing with the problems. These meetings

have allowed the leaders to gain many helpful insights. They teach one another so they are building their confidence that they can perform this ministry.

Other benefits of these meetings include bonding and prayer. The cell group leaders increase their own community and commitment to each other. Networks are formed that will contribute to the overall ministry. Sometimes they are even able to encourage people they know who live in another leader's locale to attend his/her cell group. Finally, the leaders pray for each other and worship together.

A final benefit of the leaders' 'cell' meeting is that they develop a greater ownership of the ministry. As they work together at the leaders' level they sense that God has called them to minister in the cell group context. The egalitarian structure of the group and especially of the leaders' meetings helps reinforce their ownership of the ministry. These people have not been coerced or forced into their positions. They are there through their choice as they respond to God's call for that ministry.



# Methodology

In this section I will consider some of the methodology we have used in the cell group program in Madagascar and to a lesser extent in other nations both in the developing world and the United States. While much of this material is given in terms of what someone can do who desires to start such a program, it is primarily patterned after what has been done in the ministry in the city of Antananarivo in Madagascar.

## ***Beginning a Cell Group***

It is assumed here that cell groups begin with local churches. I realize that cell groups can be started without the presence of local churches, as a church planting tool. In many cities, as in those in Madagascar, existing churches form the basis for new cells. Many people in urban areas have some connection with a local church which is the ideal place to begin.

If the cell group concept is new to the church, it may be wise to begin slowly. The person who will lead the program might approach a few people in the church who live nearby for the purpose of starting a pilot-project cell group. As I mentioned in the historical overview, we did just that with our first cell group and later with two others. Beginning a cell group with three couples is adequate.

This pilot group should meet together for several months, three at least, before expanding. One reason for this waiting is due to the time it takes for the members to develop mutually beneficial in-depth relationships. Once the relationships are established, the cell group members will show their enthusiasm in the church contributing to cell group expansion.

Expanding slowly allows people to get used to the cell group concept. It also allows mistakes to be made with as few people as possible. Finally, people in the pilot program may become the first cell group leaders. The best training for cell group leaders happens in cell groups. More will be said on leadership development in the next section.

A second way of starting a cell group is to start with all unsaved people. A Christian leader may have extended family members who are unsaved. An evangelistic cell group is an effective way to reach them. Neighbors and co-workers are other people with whom an evangelistic Bible study might be started.

One reason for having all non-Christians is that a non-Christian may feel overwhelmed among a group of Christians while that person may be at ease among other non-Christians. Also, Christians have developed a language which non-Christians do not always understand. Even the different levels of Bible knowledge may cause problems. For example, how might a cell group member feel if he or she is the only person who cannot find the book of Hebrews?

We have started cell groups with unsaved people with a time-limit stipulation. We developed a series of four lessons that clearly explain the way of salvation. We often suggest that the cell group meet four times. At this point it is not really functioning as a cell group. However, as people study the Bible they normally become enthused and desire the group to continue. Many people have come to Christ in these kinds of situations. The cell group allows the Christian to clearly present the gospel without trying to force a conversion. At the end of the fourth session the participants are asked if they would like to continue. Most often they are eager to do so. If the leader or the participants feel the cell group should cease, it can be terminated without any embarrassment.

A third group of people for potential cell groups comes from various para-church groups. Christian student groups, worker's groups, Bible correspondence students, and Scripture Union are all sources of people for cell groups. Many people have been converted through the ministries of these groups but have never been integrated into a local church. The cell group can be a bridge of friendship bringing these people into the local church fellowship.

The biggest problem in starting is starting. Whoever you start with is far less important than starting. The important thing is to choose a few people, select a place to meet, and begin.

## ***Cell Group Activities***

What happens in a cell group meeting? We have found that three main activities, Bible study, sharing, and prayer are foundational. These three activities exist in more or less equal parts. Some sessions may be nearly all Bible study; others, nearly all sharing, and still others, mostly prayer. But over the months those three activities are balanced. They are usually balanced in any given cell group meeting.

### *Bible Study*

In the section on Bible knowledge growth I have already discussed how cell groups facilitate growth through informal Bible study and spiritual gift development. Here I will briefly consider how cell groups are usually conducted.

The cell group's leader is a facilitator for the group, as participants move through a lesson. The leader's task is to encourage participants to express their ideas about what Scripture says. When a person has said something obviously wrong the leader usually does not need to directly correct the person but may ask others for their ideas. Scripture is not obscure. Through such questioning, the plain meaning will be discerned by most people.

Using the questionnaires we have developed, one person reads the question and the verses indicated. Then that person answers the question on the basis of the verses read. After the question has been answered, anyone can comment. In most cell groups each person in turn takes a question, reading and answering it. While it sounds rather mechanical it does involve everyone and gives movement to the meeting.

The discussion often brings personal application to light. It tends to be the later questions in a Bible study that evoke more discussion than the first few questions as they are more informational. Also, it takes the first few questions for people to comprehend the basic ideas in the Bible study.

Discussion in a Bible study may be less in the first few weeks of a cell group's existence. People must get used to each other and get to know and trust each other fairly well before they will be ready to give their opinions on the Bible. However, once a cell group has meshed people are willing, even eager, to discuss Bible topics, especially as they relate to daily living.

### *Sharing*

Sharing normally comes out of the Bible study discussion. People begin to share personal burdens as the Word of God is applied to their lives. Again this process takes time as trust must be built among the participants.

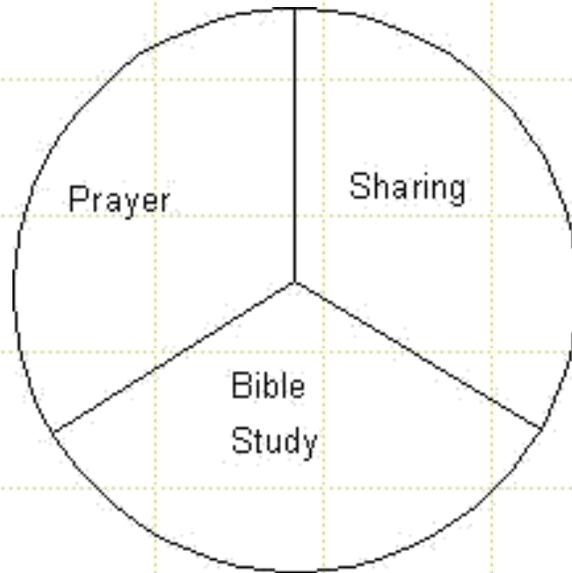
It is interesting, and at times humorous, to watch the progress of personal sharing. In the first few weeks of a cell group people may not be at ease with one another. The prayer requests and personal sharing may consist of physical health needs only. But as people develop mutual trust they begin to share their deeper needs. Often, we go around the group asking each person to share a prayer or praise item with the group.

Praise is an important part of this time. The people in the cell group need to be reminded of God's answers to prayer. They can offer praise and thanksgiving to Him. People praising God together for His work in their lives are people growing in grace.

Occasionally, one complete cell group session will be given to sharing. These times can help build community. During such times people are free to share how they have seen or experienced God working in their lives or special burdens they may have. Any person in the cell group may suggest that a particular meeting be given over to sharing or to prayer. If there is a consensus, the cell group leader will allow for this change.

However, a word of caution should be voiced. These sharing times can be done regularly but not too often. I

would recommend about once every two or three months. Some reasons for this caution include the danger of sharing turning inward. People become preoccupied with their problems. The focus turns in on the problem and away from the Word of God. Furthermore, sharing is built into each session. In each session sharing is shorter, more precise and tends to relate directly to the Scriptural application taught during that session.



### *Prayer*

Prayer, an essential part of the cell group, comes out of the Bible based sharing time. We encourage specific prayer for specific needs. Prayer is the necessary completion of the cell group. It shows that we look to God for help with problems and praise Him for all we have, including the answer to our needs. Lessons on how to pray are appropriate early in the life of a cell group. In this way people can see what biblical prayer is and its importance in the Christian's life.

We also encourage everyone in a cell group to pray. No one is forced but we usually go around the room and each person prays. In a very large group we ask everyone to pray short prayers asking God for one request and offering one praise. Sometimes each person prays for the one on the right (or left). In this way each person's request is remembered. Be sure that when

someone vulnerable enough to share a need that the need is verbalized in prayer. When time is short, or the leader perceives it might be awkward to ask everyone to pray, the leader can ask a limited number of people to pray.

One way to keep track of prayer requests and answers is to have someone in the group keep a notebook with requests listed. The secretary can read the previous sessions' prayer requests to the group. Those requests that have been answered become praise items; those that have not, can be prayed about again. The cell group then has a clear written record of God's working in their midst.

### *Summary of Activities*

Worship and singing is an important part of most cell groups. They often begin and end with singing and may include other aspects of worship such as meditation, testimony, joint Bible reading, and communion. Many of the groups follow the pattern below for a one to one and one-half hour cell group which meets weekly.

1. **Worship (including singing).**
2. **Opening prayer.**
3. **Bible study. Each person answering questions in rotation.**
4. **Sharing. Each person given opportunity to participate.**
5. **Prayer. Each person participating.**
6. **Singing, as time allows.**

Much of a cell group's life takes place in activities outside the actual meeting as cell group members minister to one another, visit one another, and encourage one another.



# Materials for Cell Groups

While many fine materials appropriate for cell groups are available in English and other major languages, we had nothing available in Malagasy. We developed the 230 lessons that exist in Malagasy. One advantage of writing one's own materials is that they will be more appropriate to the local situation and the felt needs of cell group members. Many of the lessons we developed came out of questions discussed in cell groups.

A second advantage of developing one's own materials is that it encourages local Christians to create their own materials rather than depending on foreign materials that may not always be appropriate. Several people will eventually be part of this process.

We found that cell group materials should be chosen or developed using the following criteria.

## ***Biblically Based***

Materials should be such that they depend on the Bible alone. Because Bible knowledge growth is one cell objective, the Bible study materials should reflect that objective. We used questionnaires that have a direct relationship to a biblical text. The question can be easily answered from the Bible text which follows it.

## ***Simple***

The questionnaires are easy enough for non-theologically trained people to use. This is important in light of the fact that most cell group leaders are lay people, many with no formal theological training. The reason for the questionnaires, or Bible study materials, is to help people understand the plain meaning of Scripture and not to involve theological controversy. They need to understand it in a way that allows application to their daily concerns.

## ***Self-Teaching***

The Bible study materials should also be self-teaching or auto-didactic. Cell group leaders should be able to study the material themselves with thorough understanding, in preparation for the cell group. I emphasize once again that the cell group ministry operates at the lay level and appropriate materials will do much to facilitate the multiplication of that ministry.

## ***Transferable***

The materials must be such that other people can grasp the content as the cell group leader guides the group through the material. It is not intended that the leader teach in the traditional monologue manner. Leaders are to guide the cell group members through the material by allowing the members to discover biblical truth. We have found that people do discover biblical truth with minimal input from the cell group leader when the materials are easily transferable.

## ***Local Church Approved***

The Bible study materials that the cell group uses must be approved by the sponsoring local church. For that reason the existence of the curriculum mentioned in the section on Bible knowledge growth is necessary. There are at least three advantages. First, it encourages non-professional teachers to lead a cell group. The potential cell group leader can prepare lessons using existing material. Second, the sponsoring church knows the content of material and method of teaching. Third, having this material gives a strong identity with an existing church. The cell group is not a floating entity divorced from any larger institution. I mentioned earlier that cell groups should be sponsored by local churches. I feel that this sponsorship includes approving both the leaders and the material used. The cell group is considered a part of the larger local church body which is important from both biblical and sociological aspects.



# Expansion of Cell Groups

Cell groups are dynamic entities. They are ever-changing as they grow, fluctuate, decrease, and even pass out of existence. Whenever a cell group disbands it is often reborn in the scattering of its members who start new or join existing cell groups. While there are many ways cell groups grow, I will discuss the three principle ways we have seen them grow.

## ***Expansion by Adding New Members***

Family members, neighbors, and friends are drawn to the cell group as its members demonstrate their enthusiasm for the Word of God and living in the Spirit. Also, people who recently moved into the cell group area or into the social network have been receptive to an invitation to attend. Adding new members comes through the logical development of existing cell group network systems. Enthusiastic cell group participants, both Christian and non-Christian, are often eager to bring their friends and family to the cell group.

## ***Expansion through Multiplication***

When a cell group grows beyond the fifteen or twenty members considered maximum for an effective cell group it should multiply or birth a second group. An assistant leader can take part of the group creating a new cell group. It is a good theory. My experience has been that the theory is better than the practice. Most people do not want to leave once the group has been together for several months.

Once a cell group becomes large, over fifteen members, something must happen. It can create a new cell group or it can become a local church nucleus. If nothing happens to encourage further growth, it will probably drop back to fewer people. People who are involved in a primary group, five to fifteen people, sense the importance of their presence. When the group becomes large, some people will feel less inclined to attend as their presence seems less important.

Cell group multiplication is better than a regressive attendance. In Antananarivo, cell group multiplication was slow but five new churches were started.

### ***Expansion through Budding***

Perhaps the most sensible way for cell groups to expand is through budding. After the trust level has grown in a group and people are connecting at profound levels they do not want to leave their friends to begin another group. One solution is what we call budding. Rather than closing down a cell group and restart with new people the cell maintains its integrity but two or three people open a new cell group on a different evening with a different group of people. These people continue membership in the original cell group, at least for several weeks.

This process has the advantage of reaching people who are even further removed from the church. A second advantage is the original group guides and prays for the new cell group. If the new cell group is to continue as a part of the same local church ministry the leader of this group should have local church approval. The budding process can continue along social networks as new cells are created. Periodically, all the cell groups within a network may meet together for an outing or a specially celebration.



# 5 Assumptions About Cell Group Leadership

Developing ongoing leadership is essential to a growing cell group ministry. The earlier section on leadership growth serves as an introduction to this section. I will explore small group leadership here with a goal to discovering how training small group leaders might be achieved. The description in the above section should help us look forward to developing a coherent, appropriate, leadership training model.

In this section I will discuss five assumptions which are basic to the development of small group leadership. Although they are my assumptions, they are based, I believe, on solid biblical and small group theory foundations. The list could be expanded as these five assumptions are more suggestive than exhaustive.

## ***Cell Group Leadership Finds its Basis in Scripture.***

The cell group concept is not new, but is evident in the Scriptures. Elsewhere the biblical rationale for cell groups has been discussed. If cell groups are a biblical concept, leadership must be based on biblical principles. The biblical concept of leadership is really one of “servantship.” Jesus said,

*You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42b-45).*

Jesus is the model for biblical leadership. Many leadership models today, even in the church, follow a more managerial model. This model emphasizes either the position or the task. Jesus' model emphasizes the good of those being led, not the leader, nor an outside task.

Michael Youssef has written a book called The Leadership Style of Jesus, in which he gives many leadership principles based on the model of Jesus' life and teaching. Character is valued more than skills. Human needs are considered ahead of human customs. The Pharisees represented the best of that societies skills and customs (the law). Jesus rejected their leadership and its style.

Paul's qualifications for church leadership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are overwhelmingly heavy concerning character. Skills are hardly mentioned in the area of leadership. "Able to teach" and "Manage his own family well" are the only two 'skills' listed for leaders.

All leadership principles should be based on the Bible. Cell group leadership is no exception. Besides the life and teachings of Jesus we would do well to study the historical portions of the Old Testament and the books of Acts for models, both positive and negative, of principles for cell group (servant) leadership.

### ***Cell Group Leadership Has Both Organic and Structural Components.***

This principle grows out of the sub-section entitled 'Cell Group Function in Relation to Local Churches.' In that section the emphasis was put on the structural component of cell group leadership, especially as it relates to the local church. Here the structural is balanced with discussion about the organic aspects of cell group leadership.

Organic leadership recognizes that God has gifted all His people in some capacity. A person will become a leader at the point of his or her giftedness. In some areas leadership will be manifest almost exclusively through modeling while in other areas leadership will be more directive. This more organic leadership seeks a return to the biblical pattern.

People with special gifts in the areas of faith, hope, or love, will model those qualities, leading by example. They may not even be perceived as leaders. People who organize the meeting or lead the discussions are usually perceived as the leaders while those with the gifts of service or mercy will give leadership in those areas. Although people with each of these gifts lead, they do so differently.

The principle shows that when we see leadership in terms of using gifts to serve, the leadership emerges in a more organic way. In a D. Min. dissertation, Clifford S. Stewart emphasized this concept.

*Leadership is a critical element of a healthy group. Shared leadership is of great importance. Each member needs to eventually assume some function of leadership in the group. This fosters mutual interdependence that is healthy (1983:65).*

The concept of organic leadership is integrally related to the next assumption, that of shared leadership.

### ***Cell Group Leadership Is Plural in Practice.***

Because cell group leadership is organic in nature, leadership will be interdependent. Even in group dynamic theory this principle has long been recognized.

*The third dimension consists of training for all group members, not just the designated leaders, in the skills of group participation. It recognizes that leadership within a group often shifts as situations change and that in many respects the most effective training is done with the group as a whole in terms of its continuous experience (Knowles: 1959:64).*

A rightly functioning cell group will demonstrate this combination of organic-plural leadership. Every person in the cell group will at some point exercise leadership. Only one or perhaps two people will be responsible to the sponsoring congregation for the cell group. However, that person will not lead at every point. The designated leader becomes a follower as situations change.

Because leadership is organic and plural in the cell group, we can see why the concept of servanthood is so important. Humility is one overarching quality needed by cell group participants. Each member becomes, at various times, both leader and follower.

### ***Cell Group Leadership Concerns Function Rather Than Position.***

At the level of ministering in the cell group, the designated leader must seek to play down his role as cell group leader. The emphasis in the cell group is to build people. The implication is that cell group leadership must operate at the functional level to help build people.

This concept flows out of the previous two.

In a discussion on styles of leadership Gibbs mentions relational and casual styles. In his comments he emphasizes how these styles of leadership will compensate for the more goal oriented (and possibly autocratic) style and will emphasize the people building rather than program building aspects of ministry.

*These two leadership styles to be considered are not in themselves achiever models.... Their purpose is to compensate for the goal oriented thrust of the other models. They are of particular importance within a Christian community because the church leader's primary concern is to build people rather than to develop programmes and achieve objectives (1987:106).*

In the Malagasy context, a more hierarchical culture, the leadership at the local church level and above tends toward the structured, managerial, and possibly, autocratic. Therefore, the need for the more functional, organic aspect of leadership is all the more necessary at the cell group level.

### ***Cell Group Leadership Is Informal in Style.***

This point has already been implied. It is impossible for leadership to be organic and plural without being to some degree, informal.

We have seen that when leadership is organic, it grows out of the needs of the group and the members' ability to respond to those needs by using their spiritual gifts. The gifts of each member are employed as he/she exercises gifts and in so doing becomes, for that time, the leader. If one quiet member speaks up to suggest the group should now pray about an issue that person is, at that point, the leader.

Cell groups should function with a minimum of structure. Because there are few people in a cell group that is possible. When the structure is minimal the leadership will be informal. It might equally well be stated in the opposite way. When the leadership is informal there will be little structure. Once again Gibbs gives appropriate insight.

*The relational emphasis is vital both to ensure creative interaction and to encourage mutual appreciation. It underscores the fact that the purpose of the Church is to build people. It is concerned with being as well as doing (1987:107).*

In a culture that tends toward a hierarchical social order in most situations, the cell group is one place that tendency can be resisted. The goal of the cell group ministry is to build people as mentioned at the beginning of the section concerning function. That goal will be manifest in many ways. The more hierarchical approach of the local church is part of building people. So is the informal contribution of cell group leadership.



# Requirements for Cell Group Leaders

In speaking of requirements for cell group leaders we must return to those leaders designated by the local church to be the leader of a given cell group. This concept in no way negates the organic model. Rather it is the complementary, not contradictory, administrative aspect we consider. The designated cell group leader has considerable responsibility, especially in societies that have overbearing social or political constraints. The designated leader is responsible to the local church, who in turn is responsible to the government for its members and activities. In some nations, one seldom considers this aspect of ministry, but it looms very important in many areas of the world.

The first consideration for the designated cell group leaders is their relationship to the local church and their Christian commitment. It has been stated elsewhere that the cell group leaders should be active members of a local church. It has been suggested that the cell group leaders be consecrated for their service as cell group leaders.

Christian commitment is extremely important. In general terms, by Christian commitment, we speak of a person who is growing in the Christian walk rather than one with much knowledge and experience. The two are not mutually exclusive of course. However, there are people with knowledge and experience who are not growing in their Christian walk. Hestenes gives some good general thoughts on choosing leaders.

*Sometimes people hesitate to lead because of their lack of experience or background. Many people, however, who have very little formal training make good group leaders.*

*In addition to Christian faith, the most important requirement for being a good group leaders is a willingness to be a responsible servant of the group in order to help it accomplish its goals (1983:36).*

The second consideration for the qualifications of a cell group leader is in terms of specific qualities. Although Christian commitment is basic there are still some basic Christian qualities necessary for an effective cell group leader.

Much of the following discussion follows the ideas of Andrew T. Le Peau in his book, Paths of Leadership. In successive chapters Le Peau speaks of leadership in terms of 'Serving,' 'Following,' 'Facilitating,' 'Teaching,' 'Modeling,' and 'Envisioning.' While teaching, modeling, and envisioning may speak more specifically of skills, serving and following are qualities that are the necessary basis for those skills in a Christian leader.

- ✚ **Serving.**
- ✚ **Following.**
- ✚ **Facilitating.**
- ✚ **Teaching.**
- ✚ **Modeling.**
- ✚ **Envisioning.**

I have pointed out that Jesus came to serve giving us the model for the leader to follow. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) emphasized the role of serving in being a good neighbor. Jesus in washing the disciples' feet (John 13) again modeled the position of a leader as a servant. Paul picked up that theme in many places but one of his "one another" commands speaks of serving.

*"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).*

'Following' is the next quality. Identifying with people enables us to be followers. A cell group leader should be sensitive to the other members' needs. Note the description of Jesus, our great high priest. *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15).*

Jesus in coming to earth, identified with humankind. An effective cell group leader will follow Him by identifying with the cell group members. There are three aspects to following: Listening, suffering loss, and aggressively submitting.

Listening means hearing the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd (John 10). The idea of listening is that upon hearing, the hearer is poised to obey. James 1:19a tells us, *"Everyone should be quick to listen."* Listening is the important but difficult aspect of leadership most often neglected. Training in listening becomes necessary where people are quick to speak.

Suffering loss speaks of giving all. Luke 9:57-62 tells of three people who are called to discipleship and are not willing to pay the price. A follower is one who totally follows the leader. Jesus followed the will of God and paid the staggering price. *"Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb.*

5:8). We follow Christ who has paid the ultimate price. He does not ask us to do what He has not already done.

Aggressively submitting means that we obey one another. Paul commands us to, “*Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ*” (Eph. 5:21). The cell group is an ideal place to carry out this practice. Leaders must be included in the mutual submission enjoined in this command. Here we see the organic genius of the cell group at work.

The third consideration for cell group leaders is in terms of skills. Teaching, modeling, facilitating, and enabling might better be termed skills rather than qualities. Skills can usually be acquired through training while qualities are developed through modeling. If people have the right spirit as mentioned above these skills can and will be developed in the effective cell group leader.

Although Powers follows a more traditional approach to leadership, he gives us some good insights as to how that leadership should be manifest. He recognizes that the task of leaders is to build people which necessitates change.

*The life-giving leader is in the business of initiating change. He is continually seeking to elicit in others the commitments and actions that lead toward Christian maturity and ministry” (Powers 1978:36).*

Most of his book deals with methods for accomplishing these commitments and actions. The word he often uses to describe the leadership task at this level is enabling.

*Rather than being committed to organizing people in support of a personal cause, the leader focuses on enabling people to identify and pursue causes to which they are committed (1978:70).*

Other writers use different terms to communicate the same or similar ideas. Dibbert and Wichern in an excellent work entitled Growth Groups speak of the facilitator. They give five characteristics of a facilitator. Summarized below they are:

1. A facilitator is a servant-leader: Serves by modeling and helping rather than verbalizing.
2. A facilitator is committed to helping others grow.
3. A facilitator stimulates growth in others by helping them to develop their own skills and resources.

4. A facilitator is process oriented. Growth involves change over time and a facilitator is committed to that process.
5. A facilitator knows that the Holy Spirit is the change agent in the lives of the group members.

*In order to accomplish the purposes of a growth group, a good leader needs to facilitate the exchange of information and gifts. For that reason, growth group leaders need to be facilitators. Their styles are not so important as their skills in bringing the group interaction to the point of mutual growth and maturity (Dibbert 1985: 53).*

The basic skills a designated cell group leader needs to be effective, concern the leader's ability to involve people in the mutual process of spiritual growth. This skill flows from the definition of the cell group in terms of its function.

Some people exhibit this facilitating skill naturally. Many, if not most of our first cell groups were led by people who accomplished this task with great skill and their cell groups flourished. Others, who are weak in that skill, can be taught. When we speak of training cell group leaders, that skill must be high on the list of relevant topics to be taught.

One more skill necessary for cell group leaders is the ability to identify and encourage new leaders. Mature Christians will not be threatened by people more capable than they are. Mature cell group leaders will only enhance their effectiveness for the Lord by identifying members in the group who have gifts of leadership and enabling them to use their gifts. Part of this enabling process involves stepping aside at appropriate times and allowing potential leaders to use their gifts.



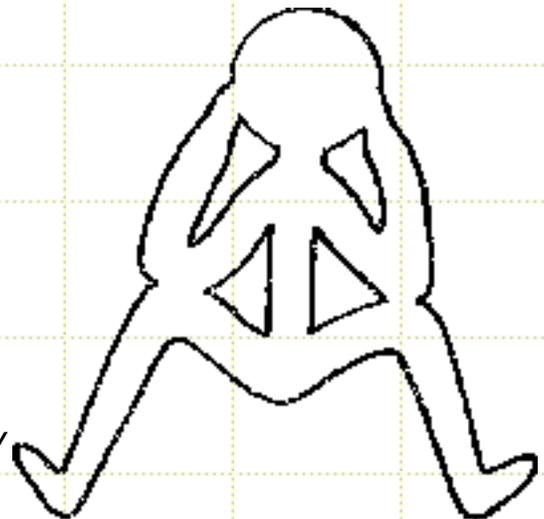
# Identifying Cell Group Leaders

We have discussed the characteristics of cell group leaders and seen the continual need for these leaders. Now we need to consider the source of these leaders. It is important that leaders at all levels be looking for new leaders at the level where they operate. Clinton, who has written extensively on leadership, makes that point.

*A major function of all leadership is that of selection of rising leadership. Leaders must continually be aware of God's processing of younger leaders and work with that processing (1988:201).*

That selection grows out of the leader's own development of a ministry philosophy that is biblical, relevant, and growing and will be attuned to new leadership potential. Once again Clinton speaks to that issue.

*Leaders must develop a ministry philosophy that simultaneously honors biblical leadership values, embraces the challenge of the times in which they live, and fits their unique gifts and personal development if they expect to be productive over a whole lifetime (1988:203).*



In seeking leaders for the ever expanding cell group needs, the primary source should be the local church. The advantage of the local church as source is that the potential leaders are tied into a functioning body of believers. Also, Christian commitment requires a local church involvement.

Another advantage of the local church as the cell group leader source is the built-in networking system. This system operates at two levels. First, there are potential cell group contacts within the church, and beyond it through the various church members. Each church member is a potential cell group member and the contact person for several other potential cell group members who are not in the church.

The support system that the local church brings to the new cell group leader becomes the second level networking system. This support system, discussed in

the section on organizational structure, which is manifest through prayer, encouragement, training, and supervision, cannot be over emphasized.

The main disadvantage to drawing new cell group leaders from the local church may be their exposure to inadequate models for cell groups. If cell groups are not part of the local church structure potential leaders may not have the skills to enable a new cell group to have a positive and spiritually growing experience. The solution to that problem comes partially in leadership training which is discussed in the following section under training cell group leaders.

Those people already in cell groups are another source for potential leaders. These potential leaders are normally in two different categories. Some potential leaders are new in the faith and have little or no local church experience. However, they may be excellent cell group leaders. The second group consists of those people who have some local church experience and whose leadership skills are being developed through the cell group.

A problem soon develops concerning potential leaders who may have the gifts and attitude to lead their own cell groups but have little relationship to the local church. If such leaders are allowed to manifest their gifts and lead other cell groups, these cell groups may begin to drift away from the church. Although this may not appear a great problem to many, it could have negative effects for the cause of Christ. The advantages of the local church relationship are nullified in such a situation.

If new leaders are not allowed to use their skills then they may unconsciously assert their power and cause tension within the cell group. This could be disastrous for the cell group and the spiritual development of everyone concerned, especially the leaders and potential leaders.

There is a middle way. Servanthood and humility are earmarks of mature leadership. While allowing new leaders to guide the cell group they attend, these people should be encouraged to become active in the local church as well. Time must be allowed, perhaps several months, for potential cell group leaders to integrate into a local church. They may not find the local church as ready to accept them as the cell group did. The designated leader must exercise humility and servanthood also. Youssef gives five principles that touch on a similar situation.

1. *No one is indispensable in the work of God's kingdom.*
2. *People may not recognize their own leadership abilities until someone discovers them and gives them opportunities.*

3. *Leadership emerges when people receive opportunities to develop themselves.*

4. *People emerge into leadership positions when they know they are wanted.*

5. *Most leaders learn on the job. (1986:156).*

The advantage of selecting leaders from the cell group context is that they will reproduce the model they have experienced. If they have had a good experience, they will most likely succeed in communicating that positive cell group experience to people they may lead in a new cell group.

It has been our policy to view each member in a given group as a potential designated leader. That does not mean they all become leaders but in our minds they are potential leaders. That gives these people opportunity to develop their gifts whatever they may be. People who do have leadership abilities will be allowed to develop them.



# Training Cell Group Leaders

The content necessary for training cell group leaders flows from the requirements given in a previous section. This section will discuss two issues: First, the training methods of cell group leaders, and second, curriculum suggestions for a training program.

The key element in training the leaders is modeling both method and behavior. I mentioned earlier that when people desire to begin new cell groups we encourage them to be involved in an existing cell group for several months previous to starting their own.

Modeling is one of the key avenues for teaching in Scripture. Christ spent much time with His disciples always modeling and sometimes verbally teaching them. The very word disciple carries strong modeling connotations. Disciples were those who followed the pattern of their masters in all areas of their lives. Modeling does not only speak of cognitive input but of affective and behavioral areas as well.

**Modeling, teaching by demonstration and doing, is a time proven method of leadership training and is especially good for the cell group.**

Barnabas spent much time with Paul. They worked closely for a year at Antioch, and took their first missionary voyage together. During most of that time Paul was the disciple, though they no doubt learned from each other. Teaching one another is also part of the leadership development process. Later Paul modeled for Timothy, Titus, and a host of others. As he had been taught in his Christian experience so he taught his disciples.

Modeling, teaching by demonstration and doing, is a time proven method of leadership training and is especially good for the cell group. Of course, this assumes the model is a good one. If the model is inadequate those inadequacies will be copied and carried to the new experience. At the same time, no model is perfect. We must continue in prayer and the power of the Spirit, knowing that God is faithful to use our efforts for His glory.

A second important method for teaching cell group leaders is through individual discussion times. The designated leader will meet with potential leaders on an

individual basis to further disciple them. The cell group leader is exercising his or her gift as leader in selecting and developing new leaders. The discipleship method at this level is normally informal, discussing common concerns, helping in areas of need, and praying together.

We have found that the one on one method of leadership development, used sparingly, can be effective for personal concerns, encouragement, and discipline. Content oriented teaching is usually better done in a larger group.

The mainstay of a cell group leaders' training program is the regular meeting of the cell group leaders, mentioned in detail above. Much can be accomplished in these meetings. Different sessions can be run at different times to allow all cell group leaders the privilege of a session when they will be available to attend. In that most cell group leaders are working people, creativity needs to be exercised in finding times to meet. Monthly meetings are usually adequate. More often than that would be too great a burden on people who are already involved with their job, family, and church.

A major emphasis in these leaders' meetings is feedback and evaluation. Leaders will have time to share the joys and sorrows of their own groups with one another. Where problems exist, the others can give advice and appropriate assistance. It should be emphasized that this principle of sharing for the purpose of mutual edification can well be transferred back to the cell groups.

Another important exercise in the leaders' cell is the time of evaluation and feedback concerning the actual meeting itself. There should be a time reserved when the leaders will critique the meeting. The evaluation must be done in terms of actual meeting accomplishments over against the goals and aspirations for the meeting. Besides attaining a greater understanding of just what was and what was not accomplished in the meeting, the leaders learn how to critique and evaluate their own groups.

I have not discussed goal setting and evaluation but these important issues should be developed in the leaders' cell meeting. Vision setting and communication begin in the leader's meeting. Through mutual discussion of the goal setting and evaluation process, the leaders will develop ownership of these concepts.

A major part of the leader's meeting is prayer. The Holy Spirit is the One who changes people's lives. Change must begin in the lives of the leaders. As they pray for one another, they are doing no more than obeying the command of Christ. In this prayer time together, when the group draws close to Christ, they draw close to each other. It is an experience they will transfer to their own cell groups. Praying for one another is a key element in continuing leadership development. Clinton

emphasizes the need for leaders to continually development.

*When Christ calls leaders to Christian ministry He intends to develop them to their full potential. Each of us in leadership is responsible to continue developing in accordance with God's processing for our life (Clinton 1988:199).*



# Curriculum Suggestions

Below are suggestions for possible areas for development of the cell group leaders' curriculum. The type of leaders' meeting was discussed above but the actual meeting content was not considered. I do not intend to give a full blown curriculum but to point to what we have discovered to be profitable areas of study for cell group leaders.

Although this section primarily considers those people designated as cell group leaders, it is always good to keep in mind that each cell group consists of several potential leaders. Materials taught to leaders could be taught in the groups as well. The methodology can also be transferred. Rotating leadership in the leaders' group can easily be transferred to the cell groups as can the in-depth sharing and praying. The leaders are responsible to God to enable the members to develop their gifts. Gifts will be better developed in the members who are having a good cell group experience.

The first item suggested for the curriculum is the biblical basis for cell groups. Cell group functions and objectives should be based on Scripture, necessitating teaching on the biblical foundations for cell groups. Bible studies on the use of cell groups could easily be developed and used with leaders. They in turn could use them in their cell groups.

Not only the fact that cell groups are used in Scripture needs to be studied, but their purpose as well. We receive our motivation and method from a scriptural base. The scriptural basis and purposes for cell groups would be primary in a curriculum agenda.

Flowing from the first item on the curriculum is the second, small group theory. Although the concepts in this area have been learned through sociological models, they are not foreign to Scripture. A series of Bible studies that adequately communicate the basics of group dynamics and small group theory could be developed. In places where there might be sociological principles that could not be taught through biblical models, I would be highly suspicious of sociology. The Scripture, God's revealed truth, is the basis of ministry, as helpful as the other disciplines may be.

A third and rather lengthy area of instruction for cell group leaders is in the area of communication. Here we would consider dynamic communication models which are based on scriptural models. The prophets are particularly rich here.

Areas to consider in the communication rubric would be 'involvement', 'the source of meaning in the receptor,' 'feedback,' 'message content,' and 'sources of noise.' These principles, illustrated from Scripture are applied to the cell groups. Other items that are usually covered in communication theory include 'goal setting,' 'evaluation methods,' and 'transfer of innovations.' It has been my experience that cell group leaders who are non-clergy often have a natural understanding of communication theory although they cannot always articulate it. Communication theory and practice studies have proven effective where they have been tried.

Biblical leadership styles is a fourth area for such a curriculum. The leadership styles of Jesus would be primary here. However, leadership styles of many Bible leaders could be studied with great profit. Abraham, Moses, Miriam, Caleb and Joshua, David, Solomon, Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah are some Old Testament possibilities. Barnabas, Mark, Paul, Peter, and the apostles are some New Testament possibilities. I find that biographical studies of the lesser known characters often have important lessons to teach us.

A fifth area for curriculum development should be specifically in the areas of modeling and mentoring. Although these areas would no doubt surface in the sections on communication and biographical sketches, a section devoted to just those subjects would be profitable.

Cell group leaders must continually be aware that they are to enable, facilitate, encourage, and develop the people in their cell groups. Two ways this is done is through modeling and mentoring. Modeling is that process where the person with certain gifts, in using those gifts, demonstrates to others how they are used. People usually model to people with similar gifts. Much, if not most, modeling is unconsciously done.

Mentoring consists of consciously helping people develop in areas where the mentoree has expressed need. The mentor may help mentorees to develop their gifts. Sometimes they may need to look to others for help. Mentors point their mentorees to people who can help them develop their gifts. Mentoring requires a person who is psychologically secure and truly humble. Both modeling and mentoring are important skills for leaders to demonstrate, especially in cell groups. These skills can be developed in most people.

**Mentors may point their mentorees to other people who can help them develop their gifts.**

A sixth area that needs to be built into a curriculum concerns what can and cannot be accomplished in a cell group. There are times in a cell group when a situation calls for an outside specialist. At such times the cell group leaders should be aware of a system of referral. Psychological difficulties, marital problems, family problems, and demon possession may be problems that will require outside specialists, if dealing with those problems is outside the capacity of the cell group leader and members.

Much can be done in the cell group. Usually we try to focus on the positive. Cell groups have grown quickly in a short period of time in Madagascar as well as in many other places. However, in the spirit of servanthood and humility, we should realize that one cell is not the entire body of Christ. There are other people beyond the cell group who can minister to the cell group. The close contact with the local church is essential for developing this broad based ministry network.



# Application Questions



The following questions are given for the purpose of helping you think through application of what you have read to your local situation. There are eight principle questions. Each principle question is followed by a series of questions that seek to clarify various aspects of the principle question. While the text of this paper has been set in a particular context (Antananarivo, Madagascar) the principles can be applied on a broader scale. These questions should aid the reader in doing that.

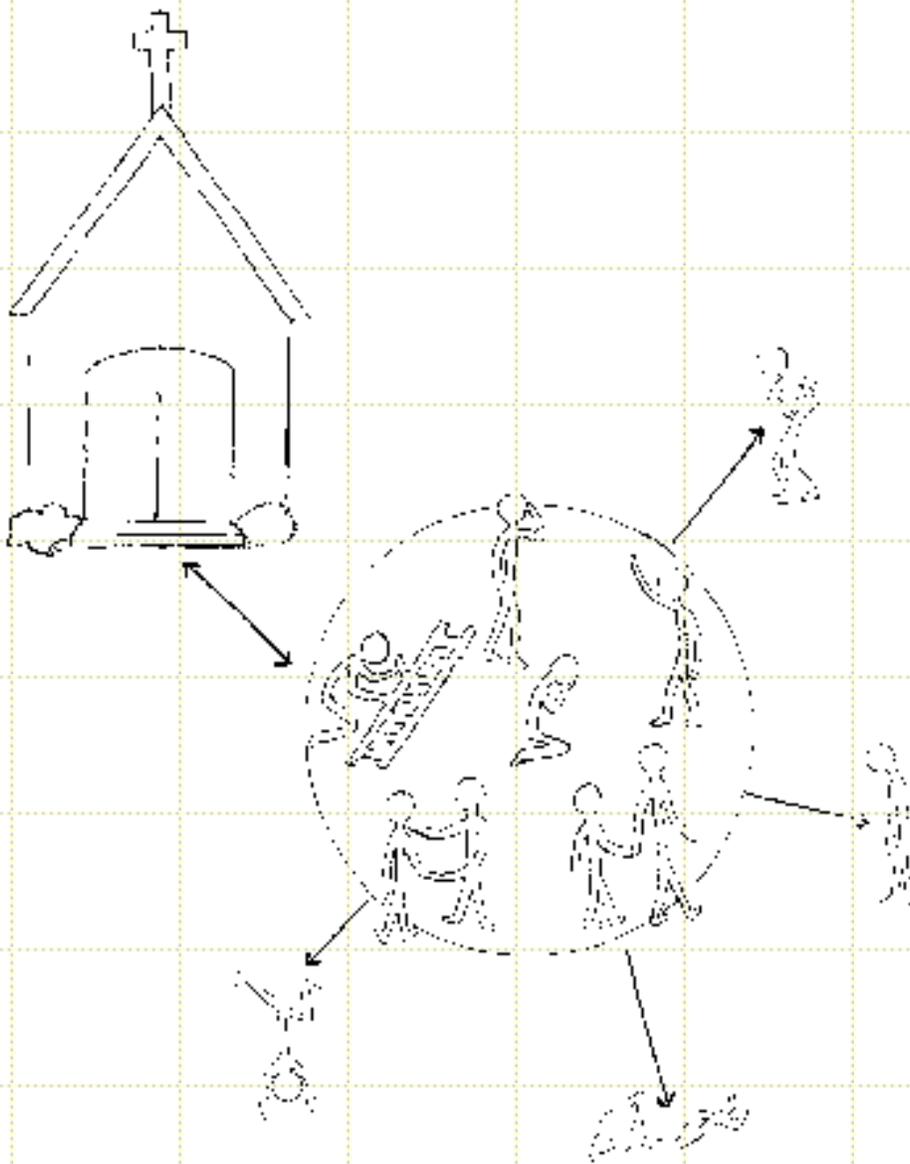
1. What are your goals for a cell group ministry? Over a given period of time what would you like to see happen in terms of cell groups? What is your vision? How do you anticipate communicating the vision to the cell group ministry leaders?
2. What activities do you consider important in a cell group meeting? Why? Prayer? Share (one another commands)? Bible study? Singing? Worship? Other? Occasional activities?
3. How do you personally fit into the cell group ministry? What skills do you need to develop? How are you helping other people in your cell group develop appropriate skills and spiritual gifts? How do you relate to other cell group leaders? How does the cell group coordinator relate to you, to cell group leaders, and to the local church?
4. How do you envision your cell group relating to your local church? To other cell groups? How does your cell group relate to the local church? Is the church supportive of a cell group ministry? How does the church support it? How does your cell group relate with other cell groups? How often do cell group leaders meet together? What happens in those meetings?

5. How does your cell group affect the surrounding community? What efforts are being made to reach non-Christians with the gospel? What kind of relationships do cell group participants have with non-Christians that might draw them to the group? How are cell group members serving the community and helping one another?
6. What part are cell groups having in starting new churches? What objectives are necessary for cell groups to be used in church planting? How do you envision the process of cell groups developing into local churches?
7. How would you develop a core of cell group lessons? What subjects should be top priority? What style should be used? Who will decide on topics? How are lessons made available to cell groups?
8. What are your goals for training cell group leaders? How would you train cell group leaders? Do you have materials written to help in this training? What part does modeling play in this process? What are some important skills necessary for cell group leaders?



# Summary

Madagascar is only one place where cell groups have had an important part in revitalizing the churches. It is my belief that the principles learned in the Malagasy context have application in many parts of the Body of Christ in the world today. Wherever there is stagnation, structures of revitalization are needed. Cell groups are one such structure. Wherever there is a desire for growth, cell groups can be a factor in realizing growth.



The historical overview was presented to give some idea of the context out of which the cell group structure developed. The section on function spoke of definition and how the cell group ministry functioned in relation to the church and the world. In objectives, I looked at a few overall objectives resulting from the cell group definition in part two. The fourth and major section discussed leadership

for cell groups. Leadership development was based on the cell group philosophy discussed in the previous sections. Finally, I suggested some application

questions to help the reader apply the material to his or her local situation.

I hope that the Word of God will become better known to an ever greater number of people through an ever increasing number of cell groups, *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).*

**A cell group consists of 5 to 15 people meeting together regularly to fulfill the ‘one-another’ commands of Scripture while being integrally related to a local church and having an outward focus on the world with the overarching purpose of glorifying God.**

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Dr. Mikel Neumann is Associate Professor of Missiology in the Division of Intercultural Studies at [Western Seminary](#), Portland, Oregon. Dr. Neumann has been teaching at Western since 1992.

Prior to his time at Western Seminary, Dr. Neumann and his wife, Karen, served in Madagascar for 23 years with [CBInternational](#). During that time, their focus was church planting in urban areas by developing churches through small-group ministry. Together they wrote over 200 Bible Studies for small groups. Karen also developed biblically-based visual aid Christian material for use in teaching children and women. Karen's passion is teaching mission to children. She gives seminars to help teachers effectively teach mission to children and develops materials.

The Neumanns have led seminars relevant to small group ministries, church planting, and teaching and presenting the gospel to children in countries such as Brazil, Honduras, Latvia, Kenya, Uganda, India, Indonesia, and more.

Since 1992, the Neumanns, based at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, have served as International Resource Consultants with [CBInternational](#).

During 1995-96 Dr. Neumann served as the tenth Missionary Scholar in Residence at the Billy Graham Center on the campus of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. During this time, he conducted research around the world on the principles of effective cell (home) groups. His efforts culminated in the book "[Home Groups for Urban Cultures](#)" published by William Carey Library.



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