

MentorNet # 21

Helping Church Leaders to Develop a Cellular Church Body — Part 1 of 2

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When you consult, mentor or coach leaders who help their congregations to transform into a church of small groups, give to them some clear guidelines and cautions. Prepare the way for them by explaining these action points:

1. **Let members discover the joy of meeting with a group small enough to practice the kind of edifying interaction that Jesus and His apostles want for us.**
 - **Let members join in the joyful trend of spiritual chiropractic.** A healthy trend is slowly gaining speed among Western churches, correcting some deeply-entrenched traditions that define what we must do when we gather. This trend embraces several New Testament practices, placing obedience to God's Word above conformity to human traditions.
 - **Let members practice the New Testament "one another" commands.** These include: "bear one another's burdens," "confess your faults to one another," and "admonish one another." There are over forty such '*one-anothers*' and many are repeated several times. As urban populations become more talented, literate and aware of non-Christian religions and political trends, they grow impatient, even bored, with the typical one-way, Sunday diet dispensed almost exclusively by a paid, professional staff, without regard to the New Testament's requirement of dynamic interaction between all members.
 - **Free your people to obey Christ.** "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2 Cor. 3:17) Many believers, especially among the younger generation, enjoy freedom from the routine of assembling once a week to sit facing a focal point, usually a pulpit or worship team, and watch singers and musicians perform, hear a lecture and sometimes an appeal for money. This form was adopted in the 18th-century, codified in the 19th century, elaborated in the 20th, and is dying in the 21st.
2. **Begin groups with an organizational structure and a curriculum that are entirely new and radically New Testament.**
 - **Start cells that are entirely new.** It almost never works to force change upon old structures or small groups that have not reproduced nor done evangelism. Pastors who simply add on small group ministry to their programs and preach the benefits of "body life" will usually experience disappointment and later become resistant to cellular ministry. This disappointment often leads to casting blame on the cell concept. We hear the complaint that small groups are effective only for poor, rural or Third World churches, that "House groups simply pool the ignorance and bitter attitudes of frustrated people," and that "Cells that try to act like little churches will split your congregation and shrink your budget." However, those are seldom the real roots of their failure.
 - **Build new cells around new believers.** Bring them into an existing cell only as a last resort. Try first to start a new cell in new believers' homes. Keep "mining the new vein of gold." As new believers, they still have many non-believing friends

and can often bring them easily into their homes. Let new believers host these meetings, as did Zacheus, Levi, Cornelius and Lydia. Sometimes cells begin simply because a new believer starts shepherding his family, while being mentored by an older believer. Aim always to keep the entire family together.

- **Keep groups small enough, that every participant has a chance to talk if they want.** Believers, especially of the younger generation, enjoy small groups, cell churches and even independent house fellowships where they can develop close, edifying relationships. They also seek to encounter Christ in a mystical way as the Holy Spirit uses the different spiritual gifts of the body to serve one another.

Aware of this trend, some traditional pastors experiment with forms of small group ministry that offer more than the home Bible study and prayer group of the 1960s. Most large-churches of which we are aware have incorporated small groups as an important part of their church life, and often talk about launching a church-planting movement like those they have read about in developing countries. Keep experimenting until you get it right!

- **Focus on current concerns in the cells.** Believers and seekers are increasingly seeking to enter into a mystical experience of Christ, along with genuine community, and to find timely help with the temptations and exigencies that they face daily. The only way leaders can know what their current concerns are, is to listen to them.

3. **Allow small groups to take to themselves many of the functions and privileges of traditional pastors.**

- **Admit, when you see it, that small groups often do a better job of shepherding.** Even professional counsellors have been writing on the power of small groups to provide the kind of personal and social growth that used to be provided by professional counsellors, although there is still a need for both types of counselling.
- **Risk the inevitable failures.** Dare to trust God to let you to reap the benefits of face-to-face groups, in spite of their problems. Some small groups have become self-centred, unsupportive of the congregational budget, and have ignored other programs. These pitfalls, however, should prove minimal, if you follow these guidelines.
- **Let new leaders make mistakes.** Older pastors, especially more educated ones, almost always expect too much of new leaders. They often refuse to let new believers lead a group of their own family and friends. Yet new believers are the ones that God uses most often to win others to Christ and give them their first instruction. They should be mentored behind the scenes, however, by a more experienced believer.
- **Let new believers lead temporary gathering groups.** Normally, new believers make the best leaders of temporary 'gathering groups' such as the group that Cornelius gathered in his house to listen to Peter's message (Acts 10). These 'gathering groups' are short-lived, because the non-believers who come at first either receive Christ and become (or join) a regular group, or reject Christ. These temporary gathering groups can meet on a playing field, in a coffee shop, on a commuter train, in a home, or anywhere convenient.

4. Start small groups as a means of discipling seekers and new believers, rather than simply as a way of causing numerical growth.

- **Let cells grow out of prayerful, aggressive evangelism.** If a church is not evangelistic, then simply to change the structure of its organization to incorporate small groups, will not cause evangelism to happen. Structure is not the important thing. Evangelism and a passion to disciple the new believers biblically are. These pastoral dynamics must be supported with fervent prayer. We have observed in several countries a strong relationship between small groups and numerical growth has been observed, leading to an erroneous conclusion that small groups automatically attract non-believers. Usually the opposite is true: where a church brings people to Christ, they are best incorporated into little churches (cells or small groups) that are integral parts of the bigger churches.
- **To conserve new believers more effectively, form small, face-to-face groups.** Build new cells around them. Let these small groups freely discuss their social and spiritual needs, and find answers from the Bible and from Christian testimonies.
- **Pray for grace simply to serve others.** Where pastors have a vision not merely of growing a bigger church, but also of serving their city and nation, where the continually seek ways to meet social and spiritual needs of their communities, people normally repent and come into their churches.

In *Part 2* of this MentorNet focus (MentorNet # 22), we shall explain how to...

5. Let small group participation be voluntary.
6. Small group shepherds can help older believers to grow in their practice of church body life, as they receive on-going guidance from church leaders.
7. Start small and reproduce the first group or groups.
8. Start with new believers, where there are any.
9. Allow rustic believers to take leadership from the start
10. Provide regular, patient coaching, in addition to training seminars.
11. Keep group leaders focussed on the commands of Jesus and the New Testament.
12. Form groups mainly from existing relationships.

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