

Cells: In Search of Authenticity

When God began gathering Circle of Hope's first cells in 1995, we realized that many of us had the same question: "How does one live out a real life in Christ these days?" We were not content with the structures we knew. We were restless with the knowledge that God was doing another new thing in the world — a movement as deep and consistent as himself, but as fresh and alluring as the era in which we live. We wanted to be a part of what He is doing next. So we were people looking for a way to be the church that was good for now, good for the next century and that seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The paradigm we found connected us to a world-wide reformation in the church, which is often called the cell-church movement.

A cell church is a very simple organism. It is seriously trying to be the church just like the Bible describes it, as the body of Christ. Cells are the basic units of our body, called Circle of Hope. Individuals make up the elements of the cells, which are as fully the church as any large-group representation, and the cells combine to form the body.

For some people, this structure seems foreign. But we think it goes well with the Bible, and it seems ideal for what God wants to do to build his church today.

To start off this Dialogue about being a cell church, I want to list some of the basic perceptions and yearnings, deep and fresh at the same time, that motivate us to extend God's kingdom in this way:

Our vision of God. God, as trinity, demonstrates community in his own being. Jesus calls us to be like God, to live as His family. We need to be interconnected if we want to follow Christ. Being part of a cell helps us do that.

Our desire to know Jesus. The best way to get to know Jesus is to meet Him in the flesh, in his body, the church. The Holy Spirit lives in a body, not merely individuals. A cell is an "us."

Our weariness with individualism. Our age is so alone it hurts. We believe forming a new, sustainable, flexible community is crucial to everyone's happiness and health. A cell is the face-to-face basis for that community.

Our conviction to do something hard enough to require God. Taking the easy way seems deadly. We want to live in a system in which everyone is challenged to give their best. In a healthy cell everyone is given opportunity to be fully themselves in Christ.

Our desire to actualize God's dreams. We are patiently impatient to incarnate what God has in mind for our day. The cell church reformation is more than just a negative reaction to our culture and to church as it was. We are taking our kingdom instincts seriously.

We think the cell church approach gets us nearer the heart of God. We are finding out more and more that living out our lives together in cells allows us to be flexible, inclusive, and personal. It allows us to make friends across barriers. It honors the scripture's call to have a variety of leaders who are unleashed to exercise their gifts regardless of gender or age.

Does this approach solve all our problems? Further contributions to the *Dialogue* will answer that. But it probably won't surprise you to hear that the answer is "no." Cells require us to be real, to be patient and giving, to grow as Christians in practice, not just theory. They require devoted leaders who keep advancing their insight and skill. They require people who don't just sit, but who take their part in building an authentic church.

In some ways, cells cause problems. But they are the right problems to have. They take you to the edge of yourself where you can meet God and one another in Christ. They place you in the furnace of the body where Christ is generating a new humanity.

Rod White

The “Multiplying” Process

I have now been the leader of three cell groups at Circle of Hope. During this time, we have been trying to learn how, exactly this process of multiplying cells works. My first cell dissolved, forming a remnant which then re-formed as a new cell group. My second cell grew slowly and last March multiplied, forming two groups, both having added new members to those originally in the cell group. Having successfully lead a cell through the process of multiplication, I now look at the process and see that cells grow and mature in a predictable way.

“Our cell groups are not permanent arrangements. We expect that new friends will be added until there are enough people to form two circles of ten. We would like to see this multiplication continue until groups of cells all over Philadelphia become the basis for future churches in our network.” — a quote from *The Circle of Hope Cell Multiplication Plan*.

The plan for our cell groups hinges on the idea that they will give birth to new cells with further members moving into cell leadership. We never intended to form social cliques! As cells grow, they naturally form groups within themselves and become less manageable. Quieter members find it harder and harder to speak their piece.

I observed this happening with my first cell group, but as I broached the subject of multiplication, it was met with strong resistance. We decided we should wait until our cell members all felt comfortable with the idea before we actually began multiplication. This was a mistake: cell members will not all feel comfortable with the idea. There is a great deal of comfort in a cell group, with a predictable group of people and a predictable routine (Wednesday night is cell group night, I can plan my week around it.) Multiplication shakes that up fundamentally. It is hard to remember that groups multiply in their own ways naturally; no group will last forever.

Our cell group eventually outlasted its purpose and some of the very people who so passionately resisted multiplication disposed of the cell quite readily. There were some hard feelings over the “death” of the group.

When planning the multiplication of our last cell, I tried to add an accent on the opportunity that multiplication would give us. God has blessed the cell group with various knowledge, skills and experience and to fail to share these blessings with others would defeat the purpose of having cell groups (not to mention being a Christian)! We started planning multiplication over two months before the actual date so we could get used to the idea of who would be leading the new cells. Then we celebrated the cell group at our last meeting time with a potluck dinner to which we invited our friends. Cell multiplications are deliberate; they are not likely to succeed of their own accord. Rather the process of multiplication must be planned out and worked towards by the leaders and members of the cell group.

The two cells which have resulted from the multiplication of the one have now focused in different directions and both have added new members who were not affiliated with any cell before multiplication. This is why we multiply cells: to give more people access to what God is growing in our lives and our communities. Though our old cell has ended, we now have the opportunity to expand our relationships by growing new cells and to refocus these new cells to being the church in ever new and growing ways.

Scott Clinton

A Living Church

When I think about cell groups I am consumed with a predictable passion. I want to define the elements that come together to constitute an authentic church. Let’s get real, “Who are we as the body of Christ?” That’s the question any Cell Leader would ask, right?

My experience leads me to believe that a true church is not a mere set of ideals that perpetuate some grandiose system which is consumed with the evangelization of the universe. It is more real than that. A cell church is first concerned with living out the true embodiment of Christ.

I think cell groups work when people learn to live together, give together and, finally, love together. I hate to say it, but such a thing was nearly impossible in the church I was raised in. In that system, everything in life is so compartmentalized and specialized that human beings have depleted their sense of groupness. This is disastrous, because we are created by God to survive within a group. In general, I think the modern church's understanding of togetherness is a twisted substitute for the original plan.

So I proposed a "garden cell." What we have become so far has not achieved a miraculous differentiation from what I'm complaining about. However, I believe the effort has begun that may strike a match to the fire that could possibly approach a pattern that looks more like what God has in mind. I figure that by attempting to grow plants in an abandoned lot deemed "unsuitable" for growth, we are putting ourselves in a worthwhile predicament that takes constant attention. As newcomers in a neighborhood, we leave ourselves vulnerable to possible relationships within the existing community. If a few people catch the vision, perhaps they will commit to the cause of working the garden and engaging the whole community in something that lifts everyone up.

These are two elements that must exist to make a cell work: 1) the commitment to togetherness in a common cause, 2) the willingness to encounter the "outside" world. These two elements emerge from that underlying current of God's determination to bring things together. They are made possible by the miraculous love of Christ that is always willing to encounter us all.

Being together in a cause and being willing to encounter what's outside one's group can exist without the miracle. But it is the presence of Christ incarnate in His body that really transforms those involved in the cause and those engaged by them. I can't get too excited by yet another cause in light of some huge challenge. But I can get motivated by Jesus. I like to be around when He shows up. Things happen.

Can we learn to love each other enough to work with him? Can we overcome this world that breeds separation and preaches individual survival? I hope so, because I don't think what God wants for us will work another way. I can give and give and give, and I'll try to love and love and love, but without the collective representation of Christ in action, I am left dying in a desert without water. We need each other. That is what a cell must provide: the collective, strengthening, healing, providing, giving, and eventually loving.

Anthony Gibilisco

The Threat Factor

I think we all know what a good thing cells are supposed to be. After all, if we drift in the direction our culture and natural inclinations send us, we can find ourselves stranded and isolated in an individualism that isn't all it's hyped up to be. Cells are a redemptive way to combat that creeping alienation with the community of Christ. But truthfully... at times isolation can seem plenty appealing.

Community often includes people who we don't like very much, and intimacy is embarrassing and threatening. We've all sat through cell meetings that were agonizingly disturbing or awkward. Intimacy is a blessing that sometimes comes dressed as a punishment. On the one hand, it allows us to be known, warts and pimples and everything, and still be loved. But on the other hand, before we can get to the part about being loved anyway, we have to get through the part about really being known. This is painful, humbling, and often just plain embarrassing.

It is so much easier and more comfortable to project an image of a person than to be a real person. The threat of intimacy is something we long for, and push away at the same time. It reminds me of the time in C.S. Lewis' book The Voyage of the Dawn Treader when Eustace allows Aslan, the Christ-like lion, to free him from a scaly dragonish hide with a terrible lion's claw. Oh, how it hurt when that sharpness dug into Eustace. And oh, how amazing it felt when the false exterior was pulled off to reveal the person who was underneath, even though that person was small and silly and a little ridiculous. If being in a cell sometimes makes you feel like people are pulling at your scabs and leaving you raw and red and vulnerable, take heart. We are

all pretty scabby and raw. Once we can admit to that, and even show it to others, then we are also ready to let ourselves begin to be healed.

Anna Kunnecke- VanBeers

One Anothering

A new command I give you: Love **one another**. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love **one another**.”
John 13:34-5

Live in harmony with **one another**. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position *Romans 12.16*

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct **one another**. *Romans 15:14*

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against **one another**. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. *Colossians 3:13*

Therefore encourage **one another** and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. *1 Thess. 5:11*

And let us consider how we may spur **one another** on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage **one another** --and all the more as you see the Day approaching. *Hebrews 10:24-5*