



PRAISE FOR
REAP THE HARVEST

“This book is MUST reading for every pastor with even a distant interest in cell groups! I should know. For the past 23 years, I have spoken and consulted with hundreds of cell churches. In this single volume, Dr. Comiskey traces the biblical and historical basis of groups, explains prevalent types of group systems, and gives practical insights and principles for workable transition to become an effective cell church.”

KAREN HURSTON
Hurston Ministries

“*Reap the Harvest* contains valuable insights for anyone committed to building a balanced, healthy, cell-based church according to the New Testament pattern.”

LARRY KREIDER
International Director, DOVE Christian Fellowship International

“If you want to ‘convert pew-sitters into pastors,’ read this book. Joel Comiskey compares and defines the different small group-based models and presents the cell church as the champion of church-growth concepts around the world. He shows us how every member of the Body of Christ can ‘experience the true church in a dynamic way.’”

BILLY HORNSBY
National Director, Bethany Cell Church Network

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“Absolutely mandatory reading if you are serious about doing church as it is outlined in the New Testament.

Thanks, Joel, for this good work.”

BOB DAVIS

Senior Pastor, Long Reach Church of God

“I am really excited about *Reap the Harvest*. Joel Comiskey knows the proven principles of successful cell ministry. He traveled the world to discover them and then tested them in the crucible of his experience. This book offers the practical insights that turn the promise of cell ministry into a dynamic reality.”

JIM EGLI

Director of Training, TOUCH Outreach Ministries

“This on-target book will help you learn from some of the most successful small-group ministries in the world and give you a clear focus on the system that you need to develop in your church to be producing small groups and multiplying your ministry and outreach. Few people like Joel Comiskey understand the importance of putting in place a workable system for small-group ministry in order to get results that you are after. This book is a key to helping you put purpose into your small groups and get the results that you are after.”

DALE E. GALLOWAY

Dean, The Beeson International Center

“So many churches go for decades unable to break the “200 barrier” ... or fulfill their potential. One reason is that they lack infrastructure to grow. *Reap the Harvest* is an excellent ‘how-to-get-it-done’ guide for cell-group life with a purpose: the harvest. The chapter on change alone is worth the whole book! This is a practical, powerful,

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and useful tool that will save you from the common mistakes and guide you to healthy, vital quality and quantity growth.”

KENT R. HUNTER
The Church Doctor

“Most books on cell groups are narrowly focused. In many of them, the author’s purpose seems to be to convince the reader that their system is the best. This book is different! In it, Joel Comiskey gives us the broad picture in a concise and understandable way. You will be able to see clearly the strengths and weaknesses of many different approaches, and then decide which one might be the best for you.”

C. PETER WAGNER
Chancellor, Wagner Leadership Institute

“I would love to visit some of the fastest growing cell churches around the world. But, like most pastors, I do not have the money or time. Joel Comiskey has done the traveling and research and has written a resource for the rest of us. His combination of thorough research and practical application makes this resource a must-read for any pastor or team planting or transitioning to a cell church.”

MICHAEL MACK
The Small Group Network

“Once again, Dr. Joel Comiskey has written a most useful book for those interested in the use of small groups as a means of evangelism. I appreciate the balance of this book: with its focus on both growth in numbers and growth in depth. This is a mature reflection on the world-wide small group movement that builds on what others have discovered but then goes beyond this to fresh insights.”

RICHARD PEACE
Professor, Fuller Theological Seminary



REAP THE HARVEST



REAP THE HARVEST

HOW A SMALL-GROUP SYSTEM
CAN GROW YOUR CHURCH

JOEL COMISKEY



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To my wife CELYCE

My best friend and constant encouragement



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FOREWORD

Few things have affected the church worldwide as dramatically as cells. Throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and North and South America, there is a hunger for teaching about how to develop cell-based churches. When the Lord began to speak to me about transitioning Bethany into a cell church, I read extensively about cell models and then took my pastoral staff to successful churches around the world to study the cell models on site. In each place, we saw churches bursting at the seams with life and the joy of the Lord. Thousands upon thousands of people were being saved and carefully integrated into well-defined cell churches. What I saw confirmed what God was saying to me — prepare for the coming harvest.

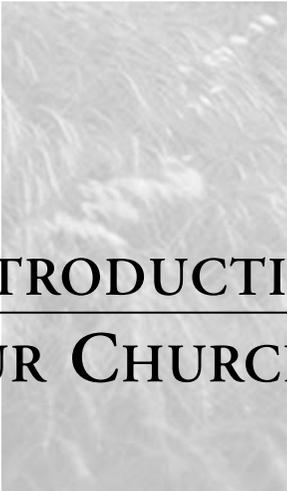
Perhaps that is why the title of Dr. Comiskey's book is intriguing to me: *Reap the Harvest*. I'm convinced that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the hearts of pastors and leaders around the world that a huge harvest of souls is coming and that we must be prepared. God is giving

us the opportunity to ready our “nets” for the final ingathering of souls. For the last six years, Bethany has been re-tooling and is now a “full-fledged” cell church. Without apology, we eat, drink, and breathe “cells,” and we are seeing the fruit of our efforts and the Holy Spirit’s leading. Through cell relationships, we are reaching into homes, businesses, schools, and governments as never before.

The principles Dr. Comiskey identifies in this book are essential to a church transitioning to a cell-based church and to those who want to do cells better. His statement that there is a world of difference between a “church with cells” and a “cell church” is undeniably true. Because we don’t want to get distracted, everything in our church is cell-related. When people are saved, immediately integrate them into a cell group. They don’t know any different; so, to them, cells are what the church should be. We evangelize through cells, pastor through cells, and raise up and train leaders through cells.

If you are a pastor or church leader who is prayerfully considering a change to a cell-based church, you may be afraid that cells will alter the identity and uniqueness of your church. Bethany has always focused on prayer, missions, and evangelism. I can honestly say that, as a result of cells, we are praying with greater fervor, we are evangelizing in new and innovative ways, and we are on the verge of a tremendous missions harvest. Cells have only enhanced our identity. If you study the principles of the cell church and let the Holy Spirit guide you in the transition process, your church will become a stronger, healthier church with a renewed sense of its identity. Get ready to *Reap the Harvest* in the fields around your church!

Larry Stockstill
Senior Pastor, Bethany World Prayer Center



INTRODUCTION

CAN YOUR CHURCH GROW?

More people have become Christians in the last 10 years than in all of the church's previous history. Each DAY, 140,000 people are coming to the Lord! That is 46 times the number who believed on the day of Pentecost. In China, a country officially closed to the Gospel, more than 20,000 a DAY are turning to the Lord.¹ The number of evangelicals has doubled in just over 10 years, making this group the fastest growing movement or religion in the world.²

But is the church in North America keeping pace with the exciting growth that the rest of the world is experiencing? Clearly, the answer is that the church in North America has stagnated. Church attendance in the United States is at an all-time low.³ More than 80 percent of the churches in the U.S. have plateaued or have declining Sunday morning attendance.⁴ One-third of U.S. churches never grow beyond 50 members; two-thirds never grow beyond 150 members; and only 5 percent grow beyond 350 members.⁵

North America used to lead the world in exporting Christianity. Now we hear about amazing growth only in other parts of the world. What is the remedy for the ills confronting the North American church?

I believe that God wants us to reap the harvest once again in North America. Many churches today feel the need to return to small groups as modeled for us in the New Testament. They are choosing to concentrate on meeting the needs of their people through cell and celebration. Many of these small-group churches are experiencing phenomenal growth. Churches are seeing the potential and power of cell-based ministry.

Christian A. Schwarz, in his recent book, *Natural Church Development*, examined church-growth factors in over 1,000 churches in 32 countries. He concludes by saying, “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important,’ then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups.”⁶

Cell churches are growing churches. This book will show you how to organize your church for growth around cell-group ministry. It will challenge you to rethink your church structure and prepare you to reach and receive a greater harvest.

YOU STARTED A SMALL-GROUP MINISTRY BUT ...

But what about the failures? Many churches have tried cell groups and failed. Many claim that small groups caused church splits, pastors to leave, and the proliferation of incorrect teaching. “I’m here to let you know that we don’t believe in cell ministry. Small groups cause too many divisions.” With this statement, a prominent board member successfully stamped out our pastoral initiative to become a cell-based church. This board member remembered the failure of starting a small-group ministry several years earlier: Leaders were found; five groups were started; and they were then left to die a slow, painful

death. Such experiences have stirred opposition to cell-group ministry. Maybe your experience with small-group ministry has resulted in similar feelings. You are not alone.

Yet when you examine the churches that failed with small groups, the central problems have nothing to do with the cell group itself. Rather, the problems reside with the system behind the cell group. Therefore, this book is not about starting more small groups in your church. You've probably done that. And most likely you've seen them fade over the years.

The goal of this book is to help your church prepare for growth by developing a solid cell system. Why? So you can properly care for and feed your cells over the long haul. Strong cell systems produce effective cells. Churches that quickly launch cells often see them diminish over time. The difference lies in the system you develop, not in the cell model itself. This is why some cell churches succeed while others wither away.

SUCCESSFUL CELL-BASED CHURCHES

The largest churches in the world are structured to contain endless church growth. Their strategy places the cell group and the celebration at the center of their agenda. Cell churches care for their cells and also know how to gather the harvest into large celebration services.

You might be thinking, "But I know that celebration, congregation and cell are important. I've read about it for years." And yes, church-growth theorists have long written about the three C's. Yet, while acknowledging the importance of these three, churches still have started cells without establishing a strong cell system first. They've added cell groups without building the infrastructure common to all successful cell churches.

Many pastors and church leaders read about cell-group ministry and become hopeful for their church. They get excited about the prospect for success and begin to dream. So they start small groups.

But many fail to realize that they are erecting a house on the wrong foundation. The cell-group ministry was initiated without understanding what was necessary to make the cells work.

Some churches take another route. Before Bethany World Prayer Center transitioned to the cell system, the pastors were sent to the largest cell churches in the world. They took careful notes on the various cell systems they observed. With this information and a thorough knowledge of their own context, Bethany dug deeply and erected a cell infrastructure that models cell-church effectiveness to the rest of the world.

Perhaps you, like most people, are not able to visit the successful cell churches around the world. This book was written for you. I have been blessed with the opportunity to study them for you, and I believe the principles from these models can help you prepare your church to reap the harvest. These churches are located in eight different countries and four distinct cultures. They are:

Name of Church	Abbreviation	Country	Senior Pastor	No. of Cells	No. of Worshippers
Bethany World Prayer Center	BWPC	Baker, LA USA	Larry Stockstill	800	8,000
The Christian Center of Guayaquil	CCG	Guayaquil, Ecuador	Jerry Smith	2,000	7,000
Elim Church	EC	San Salvador, El Salvador	Mario Vega	6,000	35,000
Faith Community Baptist Church	FCBC	Singapore	Lawrence Khong	600	10,000
The International Charismatic Mission	ICM	Bogota, Colombia	César Castellanos	24,000	35,000 ⁷
Love Alive Church	LAC	Tegucigalpa, Honduras	René Peñalba	1,000	8,000
Living Water Church	LWC	Lima, Peru	Juan Captor	1,000	9,000
Yoido Full Gospel Church	YFGC	Seoul, Korea	David Cho	25,000	155,000 ⁸

I spent an average of eight days in each church. More than 700 cell leaders completed a questionnaire designed to discover why some leaders are able to multiply their groups and others are not.

The base of my study was expanded to include several churches using the Meta Model in the U.S., such as Willow Creek Community Church (South Barrington, Illinois), Saddleback Community Church (Saddleback, California), Cincinnati Vineyard (Cincinnati, Ohio), New Hope Community Church (Portland, Oregon), Fairhaven Alliance Church (Dayton, Ohio), and New Life Church (Colorado Springs, CO).

This book, then, investigates how and why churches built on a small-group foundation grow so rapidly and what we can learn and adapt from their systems. This book is for both pastors and lay leaders interested in fine-tuning their church for growth.



DESIGN YOUR CHURCH

FOR GROWTH



1

UNDERSTAND --- CHURCH GROWTH

The phrase “church growth” stirs a negative reaction in many. Some say church-growth proponents have sold out to worldliness in order to “attract” visitors. “Come to my church and hear all about what I’m doing” is often the theme of the latest church-growth seminar.

Have you attended any of these seminars? I have. As a new pastor, I made my rounds to many of them, hoping that something would click. I listened, got excited, tried to apply the latest technique, and eventually dropped it when a newer church-growth method caught my interest.

At that point in my life, I had not articulated my philosophy of ministry. I did not view God as desiring to draw to Himself the men and women He created. In fact, it almost seemed like God wasn’t interested in winning souls. My church was not growing as fast as I expected. I wanted people saved so I could be considered “successful;” so I twisted God’s arm to produce numerical growth.

The allure of North American success and the latest church-growth teachings plummet many sincere, godly pastors into an inner struggle. Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the U.S. Senate, said: “When faith began in Palestine, it began with a relationship with a person, it moved to Greece and became a philosophy, it moved to Rome and became an institution, it moved to Europe and became a culture, it moved to the U.S. and became an enterprise.”¹ He goes on to say, “The church is big business in the U.S. The entrepreneur is the pastor of the big church. ... Yet, 95 percent of the pastors are implicitly if not explicitly being told, ‘Brother, if you’re doing a good job, you’ll be at the top.’”²

But let’s not confuse the latest fad with the original principles of church growth delineated by Donald McGavran in his book *Understanding Church Growth*. Before reading this book, I was a fierce critic of church-growth philosophy. After pastoring a church for nearly five years, I wanted nothing to do with this movement. I even resisted taking a required course called “Church Growth.” I entered into a heated argument with a colleague about the merits of church growth only a few days before the course began.

My professor, C. Peter Wagner, surprised me by openly discussing common criticisms of church growth, and he required each student to read a book positioned AGAINST it. Wagner also required us to read *Understanding Church Growth*, which helped me realize that church growth is not a method designed to “make me successful” as a pastor. Rather, it focuses on evangelizing the lost so they do not spend eternity in hell. McGavran’s passion for evangelism permeates every page of that book.

As I weighed the pros and cons of church growth, I faced a decision. Would I accept McGavran’s simple point about winning the lost and discipling them through Christ’s church, or would I continue to reject this new philosophy? Despite the wide array of

criticism against it, the church-growth philosophy compelled me to accept it.

I later discovered that the late Donald McGavran encouraged Ralph Neighbour Jr. to research the cell-church movement, visit David Yonggi Cho's church, and discover how cell ministry had revolutionized that church.

GOD DESIRES YOUR CHURCH TO GROW

God desires that His church grow both in quality and quantity. This sentence sums up the driving force of the church-growth movement. God's will is that none should perish. The apostle Peter wrote: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9). Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:3-5). God desires to save ALL men.

As a missionary to India, McGavran noticed that some churches grew rapidly while others in the same city became hopelessly stagnated. Instead of examining the reasons behind this discrepancy, many Christian leaders simply attributed the difference to the will of God. They believed that God willed some churches to grow and others to languish; therefore they concluded that God's people were called to faithfulness and not to question the mysteries of God.

But McGavran wasn't satisfied with such answers. He concluded from the Bible that God desires His church everywhere to grow in both quality and quantity. McGavran wrote, "Among

other characteristics of mission, therefore, the chief and irreplaceable one must be this: that mission is a divine finding, vast and continuous. The chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth.”³

Today, it’s still all too common for pastors and leaders to relegate the growth rate of their churches to the “will of God.” Many believe that if God desires numerical and qualitative growth, He will grant it. In other words, if there is no growth, it must be God’s will. After all, leaders are called to faithfulness, not to success.

CHURCH GROWTH AND THE CELL CHURCH

I differ with those who diminish the importance of church growth in the cell-church movement, as if just knowing the methodology is sufficient. Although we can derive patterns and principles of cell ministry from the New Testament, if we’re honest, we’ll admit that the early church doesn’t give us the one and only NT model of the church. Supporters of the House Church Movement, in fact, point to the same NT evidence to justify their model.

I find lots of NT evidence for the cell model, but, let’s face it, the excitement for cell ministry today comes from the fact that it works. Churches are growing. I don’t agree with those who tell you to “just hang in there” for long, long periods of time “even though you won’t see growth for years.” If your cell-church experiment doesn’t provide dynamic church growth, you have every right to ask why! Right now. Don’t base your excuse for the lack of growth on the New Testament church, because you won’t find any consolation there. The growth rate of the NT church puts us to shame!

Why do people flock to the International Charismatic Mission in Bogota, Colombia? Is it simply because it’s a cell church? Why do thousands of pastors attend the cell conferences at Bethany World Prayer Center? Is it simply because Bethany decided to do cell

ministry? No, they go because it works. Cell-church ministry is capturing and holding the imagination of pastors because it works.

If your church is not growing, regardless of whether or not it has cells, you need to ask some tough questions. God designed His church for growth, and if growth is not taking place, then the keys to unlocking it will be found in this book.

You might insist, “I practice the cell church because it’s THE biblical model.” I congratulate you, and I agree that the cell model is biblically based. But you shouldn’t practice cell ministry ONLY because of the biblical precedence. Practical concerns must fill your soul. Do you have a wide-open back door in your church?⁴ Nothing will close it like cell ministry. Has your evangelism program lost steam? Cell ministry will give you new life. What about your pastoral care? Are you trying to do it on your own? The cell church offers a pastoral-care structure second to none.

GROW BOTH IN QUALITY AND QUANTITY

What kind of growth does God will? The “quality vs. quantity” debate has raged through the church for years. “I’m more concerned with quality than quantity,” some say. “I don’t play the numbers game,” others assert. These arguments have their merits, because God is interested in the minute details of our lives, the very hairs on our head. Filling out statistical charts while overlooking the personhood of individuals is wrong.

But we must also be concerned for the multitude. Christ’s ministry on this earth was a flurry of visits to villages, towns and cities. We read in Matthew 9:35-37 that,

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the Good News of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds,

he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Jesus constantly told His disciples that He must labor in other villages and in other places. After giving of Himself unreservedly, He found compassion for the multitudes who were as sheep without a shepherd. The answer is clear. Our churches need both quality and quantity. The book of Acts teaches us the need for both.

NUMERICAL GROWTH IN THE BOOK OF ACTS	SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
<p>1:15 — 120 were meeting 2:41 — 3,000 were added 4:4 — 5,000 men were added 5:14 — A great number were added 6:1 — The number of disciples was increasing 6:7 — The disciples increased rapidly 8:5-24 — Revival in Samaria 9:32-42 — Those living in Lydda and Sharon were converted 11:21-26 — A great number of people turned to the Lord in Antioch 13:43,44 — Many followed Paul 14:20,21 — A large number of disciples 16:5 — Galatia—churches grew in number daily 17:4 — Large number 17:12 — Many believed</p>	<p>1:14 — They all joined together 2:1-4 — They were filled with the Holy Spirit 2:42 — They continued in the apostle’s doctrine 2:46 — They continued to meet together in the temple courts 4:24 — They lifted up their voice in one accord 4:32 — All the believers were in one heart and mind 12:24 — The Word of the Lord continued to increase and spread 13:49 — The Word of the Lord spread throughout the entire region 13:52 — The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit 16:5 — The churches were strengthened in the faith 17:11 — They examined the Scriptures every day 19:20 — The Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power</p>

“Is this ‘cell church’ concept simply a tool for church growth?” a recent visitor to my church asked. At first I didn’t have an answer, but then I realized that he was wondering whether we were using cells strictly as a tool for quantitative growth. I assured him that cell-church ministry helped us grow continually in numbers while maintaining quality. Before fully implementing the cell system, we gathered a building full of Sunday worshippers but had little to offer them during the week. That changed when we introduced the cell-church system.

Churches are increasingly cognizant that they don’t have to sacrifice quality for quantity. Healthy cell churches are growing churches. It’s part of their genetic make-up. Yet, the built-in closeness of cells breathes New Testament life and ministry into these churches. Cells are small groups, rarely more than 12 people, and everyone feels important in this atmosphere. Personal care and ministry flourishes in this setting.

I was brought up in a church well known for its excellent youth and children’s ministries. The church drew many adults (parents) and grew numerically because of these programs for children. Yet, because of the lack of adult ministry opportunities, most adults attended only the Sunday morning service. The youth pastor once commented that the Sunday morning numerical growth was superficial because adults could not experience the full meaning of “church” without contact with each other during the week.

I’ve wrestled with these questions: If someone attends only the Sunday morning worship service, has that person experienced the church of Jesus Christ? Is it possible just to sit passively, shake a few hands, sing a few songs, and consider that participation in the church? Isn’t the true church of Jesus a living organism? Doesn’t it demand interaction and participation? If someone does not experience fellowship and community in the church, has that person experienced the heartbeat of Christianity?

Those who attend an evangelical church normally receive a biblically sound and relevant message. This is good and right, and each person is given the chance to leave with new, applicable insight. Still, if a church member receives correct theological teaching without the very life of God pulsating from within, a serious imbalance results.

Most pastors determine who is “in their church” by Sunday worship attendance. For the most part, this is the accepted standard for determining whether a church is growing numerically. God wants His church to grow. I, too, desire to see as many new faces as possible on Sunday morning (primarily unchurched faces!). Like myself, most pastors diligently labor to fill their Sunday worship services as a sign that their church is growing, and that they are doing God’s will.

Yet, if a church is content with the Sunday morning worship attendance as the key sign of success, is that church fulfilling the call of Jesus Christ? Could a church that is a model of “church-growth success” be rebuked by the Lord, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1)? Could it be that many do not know how to provide Christian community to their members? Perhaps there is a lack of knowledge concerning how to lead the congregation to a deeper sense of Christian fellowship. C. Kirk Hadaway touches this raw nerve by saying,

However, as churches have grown larger and larger in the wake of rapid Christian advancement in recent times, churches, like society itself, have become more and more impersonal. They have come to reflect, understandably, the bureaucratic model, which increasingly has influenced all organizational forms in society, religious as well as secular. It is not enough to hear it from the pulpit, read it in the Bible, or see it in individuals. It has to be experienced in community.⁵

Cells are not just a church-growth technique; they are the key vehicle for the church of Jesus Christ to experience the true church in a living, dynamic way. The cell model depends on the success of both cell and celebration. One without the other doesn't suffice. Remember, we're talking about the cell church, not the CELL church or the cell CHURCH. We're promoting the CELL CHURCH. Celebration and cell make the motor work.

GOD HAS CHOSEN YOUR CHURCH TO REAP THE HARVEST

The church is the means by which God disciplines a lost world. Unless a convert becomes a responsible member of a local church, evangelism is not complete. It's not enough to sow the seed. What pleases God most is harvesting. How does one know when there's a harvest? When the "seed sowing" and the decisions to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior result in increased church membership. Church-growth proponents teach that proclaiming the Gospel is not sufficient, that we must not be content until those people who receive Christ are gathered in His church. Church growth, plain and simple, is winning the lost and gathering them into the local church for the purpose of discipleship. Peter Wagner writes,

How, then, is a disciple to be recognized? Obviously, it is a person who has turned from an old way of life and acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Savior. But just a verbal affirmation of faith is not enough. ... There are many fruits that are borne in the life of a true Christian through the Holy Spirit. However, the fruit that the Church Growth Movement has selected as the validating criterion for discipleship is responsible church membership.⁶

The cell church believes that responsible church membership requires participation both in Sunday celebration and weekly cell. While some cell churches I studied number into the hundreds of thousands of members, the membership does not feel lost. These gigantic churches are made up of thousands of small groups of five to 15 people who meet weekly for worship, ministry, outreach and fellowship.

GATHER THE HARVEST IN LIKE-MINDED GROUPS

When Donald McGavran made his famous statement, “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers,” a flood of criticism followed.⁷ McGavran taught that evangelism is more effective among people of the same race, language and class. This is the “homogeneous unit” principle within church-growth thought. Thomas Rainer writes,

When Donald McGavran began to advocate that principle as a tenet of church growth, an avalanche of criticism and debate ensued. Cries of ‘racism,’ ‘narrow-mindedness,’ ‘exclusiveness,’ and ‘psychological manipulation’ were voiced as a reaction to the much-debated principle.⁸

A homogeneous unit is a sufficiently large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive they have a common affinity for one another. One only has to look at the cultural landscape to see the vast grouping of like cultures in our world today. People of similar cultures naturally draw together, so why is there so much conflict in this area? Partly because many believe that church-growth advocates are promoting a subtle type of racism or that they’re watering down the Gospel. However, the very heart of this principle is summed up by Rainer,

First, rapid evangelization takes place best when people of a culture share their faith in Jesus Christ with others within their own culture. Second, Christians must not insist that a person abandon his or her culture in order to become a Christian. Such is the essence of the homogeneous unit principle.⁹

Therefore, the homogeneous unit can be a helpful evangelistic tool but is never the goal of the Christian life. Cell groups take full advantage of this principle. Cells evangelize best when they function as homogeneous units. Individual cells forge natural ties built upon friendship, gender, class, occupation, neighborhood, or age grouping.

My wife, Celyce, has proven this principle true. She has a special concern for young mothers. As a mother of three small girls, she understands the joys and difficulties of motherhood. The cells in our church were not attracting this group of women. God stirred my wife to start a home cell group for this homogeneous group. Getting the women to share is not a problem in this cell. If anything, the difficulty is making sure everyone has a chance to share. These young mothers feel comfortable with those who face similar concerns and struggles.

Within eight months, Celyce's one cell group multiplied to five groups. Celyce knew from the beginning that she needed to start new groups to maintain the small, intimate atmosphere while reaching more mothers for Christ. One of the main reasons for this group's success is the intense interest among the young mothers to invite their friends and family members who are in the same stage of life. Like attracts like.

Bethany World Prayer Center reaches entire communities for Jesus Christ through its homogeneous cell groups. This church has discovered that people are more willing to invite their non-Christian friends to a homogeneous group than to a mixed group, and that

those same friends are more resolved to attend such a group. Bethany added 300 homogeneous cell groups in just 18 months. Cell groups of this type naturally grow faster and are soon ready to give birth to daughter groups.

Yet, cell churches are by no means exclusive churches. They welcome all of God's rich creation. The homogeneous cells that meet during the week come together for a weekly Sunday celebration. In these festive moments, those from every tribe, language, and people celebrate together. Celebration in a cell church echoes the apostle John's words, "And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9,10).

INVESTIGATE GROWING CHURCHES

Study of the human body was strictly forbidden in the Middle Ages. "After all," the church reasoned, "our bodies are the temple of God and should be held in great mystery." The lack of scientific investigation of the human body allowed diseases and other infirmities to abound. But that changed during the Enlightenment, when doctors put away their religious inhibitions and scientifically studied the human body. The results, of course, were incredible advances in medicine and discovery of new treatments.

Similarly, some people react negatively to investigating the church of Christ. "The church is a great mystery," they say, "and must be left that way." In contrast, McGavran proposed that God wanted His children to examine the reasons for growth and non-growth. After determining those factors (based on scientifically founded research) and looking carefully at each individual context, principles could be

transferred to help God's church worldwide. Much of church growth will remain a mystery, but we can benefit from those principles common to growing churches.

I've studied the fastest-growing cell churches in the world to unlock the secrets of their growth. These churches demonstrate that growing rapidly in number while maintaining intimacy among the members is possible, and that both quality and quantity are essential. God desires both. Also, the key to successful cell ministry is not held by one culture alone. The principles work in a wide variety of cultures. Christian Schwarz, after studying 1,000 churches in 32 countries, concludes: "Our research in growing and declining churches all over the world has shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle."¹⁰ These principles apply to your church also.