With the explosion of the first modern cell church during the 1970’s—the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea—a wave of church leaders traveled to Korea and returned with a vision to emulate Dr. Cho’s pattern. Some, like Dale Galloway and the New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, succeeded. Many others started home groups, but never saw the growth. Instead, they watched their groups become in-grown cliques. In other churches, the groups stalled out and church leaders shut them down.

In 1990, a new wave of cell group experiments burst forth. Much of this experimentation rose from the unexpected stir caused by Dr. Neighbour’s book _Where Do We Go From Here?_. In it, Dr. Neighbour recorded his insights that rose from his frustration with the American church. After twenty-one of the pastors he had helped develop cell groups were forced to resign, Dr. Neighbour stated that there was little hope for the traditional church to live out the values of cell groups. Instead of listening to Dr. Neighbour’s caution about the traditional church, many church leaders were incited and challenged by his negative assessment. One pastor wrote: “I was frankly outraged at how easily Dr. Neighbour disposed of the traditional American church and described a new paradigm of church structure called the ‘cell church.’” During the 1990’s, churches from every denomination—Baptist to Episcopal, Pentecostal to Presbyterian, Methodist to Church of God, Mennonite to Vineyard—have experimented with cell groups. These churches were like ships taking a voyage into uncharted territory. They ventured into places where most had not dared to go 20 years before. On these voyages, these ships encountered almost every imaginable navigational hazard.

As we listened to their stories, we kept hearing the same hazards being described. With the knowledge gained from the experiences of these churches, those churches that follow can avoid these hazards and sail more freely toward the destination of fruitful, dynamic, and growing cell groups.

HAZARD #1: MISUNDERSTANDING THE DESTINATION

When a ship captain prepares for a sea-going journey, he takes the time to plan well. He studies ocean charts, determines destinations, plots courses, consults weather reports, purchases and stores provisions. No sailor dares a sea venture without a proper knowledge of his destination and what it will take to arrive there.

Many times pastors fail to thoroughly consider the destination toward which they travel. They call us or visit our offices and ask for help in starting ten groups within three months. While they come with a desire for biblical community, they do not know what it really looks like. They often have only read one book or heard about a big church that is doing cell groups. They have not done enough research to understand where they are going or how they can really get there.

Too many pastors have experienced the hazardous nature of this approach to starting cell groups. Reading one book or attending one conference is not enough to attain a clear vision for cell groups. Most pastors spend years in seminary learning how to follow patterns of traditional church ministry. It might not take three years to learn how to run a cell group ministry, but it will take considerably more than reading one book.

We can state this fact with a great deal of confidence because the churches that have done the best job of “making cell groups work” have this in common: they do their homework, and they do it before they make plans to start groups or announce those plans to the church congregation. They also hear God’s call to cell ministry very clearly. They do not make the transition because it has made the church down the road grow large or because it seems like a good idea. They do it because they sense God calling their churches to do it. Stage 1: Envision by Discovery, will deepen your understanding of the cell group vision.
HAZARD #2: NOT IDENTIFYING THE STARTING POINT
It is not enough for a ship captain to know his destination point when determining the proper course to steer at sea. Two vessels may have the same destination, but vastly different starting points. The issues and challenges each ship will face will be unique because of its unique starting point.

The same is true for the church. Two churches embarking from two starting points will take different courses to arrive at the same location. The journey toward making cell groups work will be very different for a 100-year-old Baptist church in rural east Texas than it will be for a 5-year-old non-denominational church in metropolitan Cleveland. Or imagine the difference between the journey of a church who has had three pastors in the last 8 years and that of a church who has had the same pastor for the last 20 years.

This is the reason that copying the exact transition strategy of another church rarely works. For instance, Bethany World Prayer Center in Baker, Louisiana started 53 groups with 500 prayer warriors who had been meeting for prayer training and intercession every Saturday morning for two years. Within three years, the church had 310 groups. Another large church on the east coast used the same transition strategy and started 50 groups. At year three, they have 60 groups. This church assumed they had the same starting point as Bethany World Prayer Center. But this was not the case.

When churches fail to understand their starting points, they blindly steer into waters replete with hidden dangers and unseen hazards. Stage 2: Assess Your Church's Current Reality, will guide you in your quest to understanding your church's starting point so that you will be able to prepare your members and lead them in the God-directed steps toward the vision of cell ministry.

HAZARD #3: FAILING TO PRACTICE TEAM LEADERSHIP
Pastoral leaders cannot force cell groups to work through strength of will, knowledge, or diligent effort. Leading a cell group initiative will fail if it is a solo project. Cell groups work because people work together in relationships, which require the commitment of more than one person.

Shouldering the transitional burden alone seems to be a common hazard in many churches. The senior pastor goes to his study, reads all of the available literature on cell groups, attends conferences, and develops a plan, often using fancy charts and illustrations. Then he announces the plan to the leadership.

When one person announces his cell group strategy to a group of people as if it is a done deal, he is asking for trouble. People do not adopt new ideas blindly. They need understanding, time, and much discussion. This means the senior pastor will need help in disseminating the idea to other members of the church. Seminars and sermons will not work in the early stages.

To overcome this hazard, the senior pastor must gather a team of key people who will help him discover how God is calling the church to navigate the waters of change. Stage 3: Develop Vision and Strategy as a Team, will guide you through this process.

HAZARD #4: PUTTING OLD WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS
Many churches have embraced the new wineskin of cell groups, but the people of the church have not allowed their personal lives to be challenged, changed, and remade by the work of the Holy Spirit. Some have carried with them old patterns of ministry that stand in the way of what God is doing. Others have transported un biblical ideas of what the church is. Most people entering the cell group wineskin struggle with simple things like becoming transparent, relating to unsaved people, and mentoring future leaders.

I (Don) became friends with the pastor of a west coast denominational church who caught the vision for cell groups. He received training on cell group ministry, brought in experts for consultation, and hosted seminars for his church members. The church started groups and the level of excitement rose. The church began reaching nonbelievers, and new Christians not only came to the groups, but they also started attending the worship services. The church discipled these new believers and even began reaching their friends. Everything was working well until the old guard started looking across the isle of the church and realized that they were losing control. The deacons started questioning the cell group strategy (one which they had endorsed and approved two years before) and then they began to pull in the reins on the pastor, telling him that he needed to get back to pastoring and...
The church sought to change not only to skipping Stages 2, 3, and 4. They dive whether or not they can swim!

HAZARD #5: STARTING TOO ABRUPTLY
The average tenure of senior pastors in the United States is five years. Therefore, when pastors feel they have a God-given idea, they do not have much time to enact it and often encounter great resistance when doing so.

While pastors feel like they do not have a lot of time to do what God is calling them to do, cell groups begun too abruptly rarely work. Church after church over the last twenty years has tried to jump from Stage 1 to Stage 5, when pastors feel they have a God-given calling them to do, cell groups begun too quickly, they often find themselves picking up the pieces. Intentional start-ups are based on the realization that leaders must be prepared and the cell group members must be committed to the values that make cell groups work.

Without such a commitment, cell members will be distracted from the vision and purpose of the groups.

We imagine that some readers will struggle as they read this section. They might believe that their church is unique, that they can start more quickly than others, that they will not encounter the hazards and the struggles of a quick start-up.

Before your church decides to begin cell groups quickly, please consider the ramifications if you are wrong. Read through the information on the first five stages. These chapters will help you chart a course of action and determine how quickly you can begin.

As we have talked with pastors, we have discovered that the churches who loaded the front end of their start-up efforts with as much thought, preparation, and training as possible were more likely to launch effective start-up groups.

HAZARD #6: VIEWING CELL GROUPS AS A PROGRAM
Cell groups are not a panacea that will solve the ills of your church. The cell group strategy has a goalposted on the walls of his worship facility. It read: “2000 groups by 2000.”

I looked around his church and thought, “How?” They were doing cells according to the proper structure, but the groups had not developed any momentum. The pastor had heard a cell pioneer state that a vision should be an impossible vision. Well, this vision was so impossible that they did not even come within shouting distance of it!

Cell groups do not grow and multiply just because they are meeting together. Cell group growth is a result of momentum generated by Christ-centered and Christ-empowered relationships. Momentum must be developed through cell group wins in three areas: personal victories, new Christians, and new cell groups. When Christ moves through the cell group relationships in these three ways, it propels the cell system forward, creating more and more momentum.

HAZARD #7: NO SUPPORT SYSTEMS
One west coast pastor took me (Scott) out to lunch after a conference and told me about his church’s groups. They had 20 groups that had grown stagnant. I asked him how his cell group members were discipled. They were not. I asked him how he was coaching the cell group leaders. There were no coaches. I asked...
him how much energy he, as the cell group pastor, spent ministering to the groups and leaders. He told me about the other administrative responsibilities he had in the church and how he had no time to invest in the leaders.

Cell groups are not designed to work autonomously. When left alone, cell group leaders must do all of the work of setting direction, discipling members, training interns, and evangelizing the world. This leads to burnout and failed groups. Group members and group leaders need oversight, support, accountability, and direction. This is the biblical role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Stage 7: Establish the Vision by Supporting the Cells, will help your church provide the needed support that comes in the form of training, pastoral staff oversight, organization, teaching, evangelistic harvest events, children’s cell ministry, youth cell ministry, and much more.

Hazard #8: Failing to Maintain Focus and Expand the Ministry

We were asked recently by a church leadership team, “What percentage of our members should be participating in our cell groups? 70%? 80%? 100%?” We thought afterward, “This is not the right question.” The mission of the church is not about getting current Christians into cell groups. The mission of the church is to transform the world by the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through us. Cell group ministry can accomplish this mission.

But some churches have fallen to the temptation of shifting the focus of the church after 75% or more of the membership has joined a cell group. They assume that the job is done. There is nothing further from the truth! Groups are like roses in a garden. Weeds will invade and insects will destroy, leaving the rose bushes distorted or dying unless the gardener tends to the garden. Without the focus of church leadership, groups lose energy, people focus on other things, and Satan invades what is left unprotected.

In order to avoid this hazard, it is important for a pastor to understand that initiating change and then leaving the congregation for another ministry position is a recipe for cell group demise. Without the guidance of the leader who initiated the groups, the church members are pulled back toward the old ways of ministry. This is what they know, and without the leader, they will feel safer with the old style.

Cell groups do not work as a maintenance strategy. They only work when they exist to change the world. Cell groups are either growing or dying, just like a rose garden. Therefore the focus should lie on expanding the groups, starting new churches, training new pastors, and impacting the world. Churches that have a vision to impact their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) have exciting cell groups full of people who are called to minister and see the hand of God transforming society. Stage 8: Expand the Cell Groups and the Church, will provide practical ways to increase the impact of the cell groups to transform more than just your church and neighborhood.

Navigation is foundational to a successful sea-going voyage. Without a good navigator, a ship is likely to end up in trouble and perhaps even destroyed. Churches face a similar situation when trying to move God’s people from no cell groups to expanding cell groups. Haphazard navigation will almost always lead a church into a head-on collision with a debilitating hazard. The eight stages found in the pages of Making Cell Groups Work provide the necessary tools for navigating around these eight hazards. The journey to making cell groups work will look differently in every church. These eight stages will provide broad parameters for navigating that stage, while at the same time allowing room for God to sovereignly guide the church forward.

Prepare yourself for the adventure of a lifetime. Your ministry will never be the same as God leads you and your church into the new territory of making cell groups work.

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Making Cell Groups Work will be released on October 21st. Pre-order this title by calling 1-800-735-5865 or visit www.cellgrouppeople.com