

Fresh Insight

for holistic small group ministries

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The Roots of Our Movement

Remaining faithful to the vision to which we are called

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- by Dave Gibbons

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- by Joel Comiskey

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- *The Roots of Our Movement* by M.
Scott Boren

Events:

- *Cell Church Symposium*
June 23-25, 2009

I love books. I must confess that I like to read, research, learn from and collect books. My wife does not quite “get” my unusual passion for them. I am not sure either. As a child, I remember my father taking me to a used book store where I was treated to the purchase of one book. He told me I could have more, but I said one was enough. Later that night I remember being very sad that I did not take him up on his offer.

When you combine my passion for books and the fact that I have been working in the small group and cell group arena for almost 20 years, I have more than my fair share of dead trees pressed into white sheets covered with lots of black dots on my shelves.

Recently, there have been a few new books published on small groups that make some rather bold claims. They state how their small groups are virtually brand new and they imply that their ideas were totally developed by them. (I refuse to mention them because even poor reviews will lead some to go out and purchase them.)

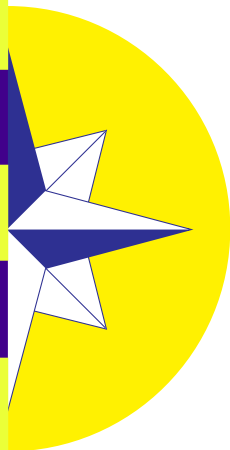
After closing the back cover and returning them to my shelves, I was a bit frustrated at the arrogance. So I picked up some old, out-of-print books written by what I call small-group prophets from the 1950s-1970s. I will mention some of these titles: *Call to Commitment* by Elizabeth O'Connor, *Seven Last Words of the Church* by Ralph Neighbour and *Company of the Committed* by Elton Trueblood. These and other writings like those of Thom Wolf (the predecessor and former mentor of Erwin McManus at Church on Brady in L.A., now called Mosaic) speak of prophetic test cases or creative experiments that are roots to our modern-day small group movement. Specifically, these authors and their written works have reminded me of two things which I would like to share.

Something Bigger

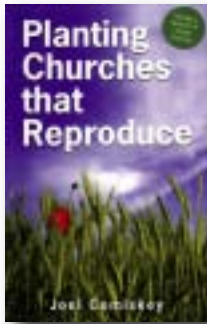
The development of small groups and their broadly accepted popularity today is something for which many have fought for, often sacrificing security, reputations, and success. They experimented in a day when they knew that they would see more failure than success, but also knew they had to grasp a new way of being God's people.

Today we stand on their shoulders. We are part of something that is much larger than what we experience at this point in history. God has been at work in the church and he continues to work, shaping a bride that will be prepared for his return.

In our need to accomplish goals, maintain busy schedules and



Featured Resource



This book clearly explains how to plant churches that are simple enough to keep on reproducing and even grow into a movement of churches. *Planting Churches that Reproduce* is the fruit of Joel Comiskey's extensive research and personal experience (three church plants in a wide variety of settings). Comiskey not only uses the latest North American church planting statistics but also extends the illustrations to include worldwide church planting.

More than anything else, the book will provide practical solutions for those planting churches today. Comiskey's book is a must-read for all those interested in starting Christ-honoring multiplying churches.

"Where has this book been? How different might the church be today if Comiskey's invaluable resource had been available even ten years ago? The book we've needed and been waiting for is here now."

- LEONARD SWEET Drew University,
George Fox Evangelical Seminary

"Joel's insights will encourage those engaged in church planting to rapidly expand through cell or house church networks."

- ED STETZER Author of *Lost and Found, Planting Missional Churches*

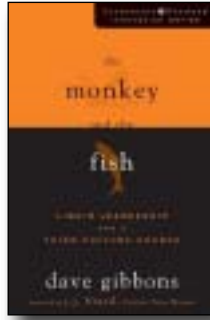
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In Review



The Monkey and the Fish

**Liquid
Leadership For
A Third-Culture
Church**

by Dave Gibbons
Zondervan, 220 pages

(Available through Amazon.com by clicking on the picture of the book)

Randall's Review: ◆◆◆◆
(4 stars out of 4)

There's a lot to like about this author, what he has to share, and the way he shares it. The reasons I gave this book a four-star rating (not something I do very often, by the way) are plentiful.

Gibbons is a Southern Californian megachurch pastor who by human standards is a "success" as a pastor. Big church, big building, big budget, big razzle dazzle services, etcetera. Through a few life-changing overseas missions experiences, he came to realize, "What we idolize today, I think, is a form of church and ministry that revolves around bigness." Gibbons goes on to talk about the tunnels Vietnamese farmers dug to evade the napalm dropped by American troops and how small units led by women defeated the American military. Dave didn't come right out and mandate holistic small groups or cell groups, but I sure saw the similarities. He earned his first star right there.

Gibbons earned his second star when he wrote, "Now I find myself trying not to 'lead' the congregation but more importantly to support them and ascertain how I can fan the flames of their leadership. Our staff is

the support team. The members are the field team." Obviously, he's mobilized his church's members for ministry and successfully released them to do it. This is what healthy churches do and why cell groups are helpful to a truly missional church.

Gibbons earned a third star when he discussed the "Theology of Discomfort." He contends that the Western church is all about providing comfort to those who are in it and might come to it, which neutralizes the member's desire to be uncomfortable for the cause of Christ. There is little room or need for sacrifice in our churches, yet people want and need to follow Jesus, the Christ who sacrificed everything for us and asks us to do the same.

Finally, Gibbons earns his fourth star by urging readers to create a "third culture church," which means befriending people who are nothing like us and have totally different beliefs and backgrounds. Think about it, how many close friendships do your church members foster where the other person is a lesbian? A Muslim? An illegal migrant worker? The author mandates that we abandon our strategies to create homogeneous congregations of people. I could not agree more. We cannot show the world the love of Christ until we become a true friend.

This is not a cell church book, but it sure is a good book for the cell church to read. The book's content is not difficult or labored reading, and is appropriate for church leaders and members alike. I read it in a couple of hours and it kept my attention and motivated me to think differently about my friendships.

This book is available through Amazon.com. [Click here to open a browser window at Amazon.com.](#)

More info on some reviews can be found at: www.randallneighbour.com

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It's a free web site designed for small group pastors, leaders and group members.

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Continued from page 1

survive life as pastors, we often get caught up in the now and fail to see that we are a part of a larger historical move of God that has a history and a future. And while it is true that such reflection may not be that practical and it probably won't help you accomplish any huge goals for the next calendar year, it might very well help you and me actually see what God is doing instead of simply trying to produce and make group life happen successfully.

I often hear small group champions who are sold out on the necessity of community grow frustrated with their senior or executive pastors, who have jumped off the small group vision and moved to something else. These lead pastors feel that it is a fad or simply one of the strategies for church life. They want results and if the group strategy is not working then they move on to something else.

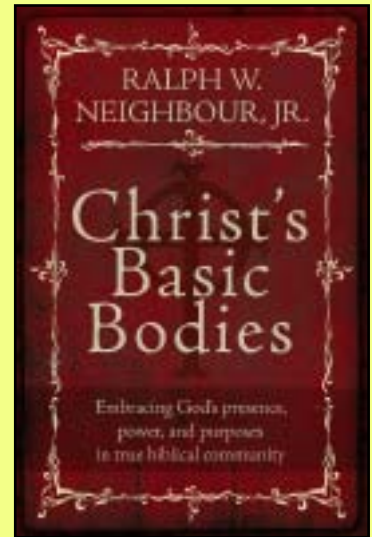
The reality is that it is truly not about church leaders or about how successful or unsuccessful groups are in this point in history. I am not against success, but sometimes we are so caught up in questions surrounding success that we fail to see how God is moving, what God has done, and where God is going. If we develop such a way of seeing things, then we might realize—like Abraham—that God's vision for the Kingdom of God is so radical and so huge that we are all on a big journey toward a city. Our little success stories are simply small steps toward a much larger vision, one worth our very lives.

Learning from our roots

In reading the aforementioned books, I have learned something else: in our modern questions about success, group growth, ways to “close the back door,” and strategies to survive through the ups and downs of overseeing small groups, most modern talk and writing about small groups has overlooked key things that were central to the prophets of the movement. We still need the strategies that are currently being developed but we also need to listen to what they were doing and (I think) heed their counsel. Let me simply list five things that I have picked up:

1. Their primary concern was not on church growth, number of groups, or what percentage of the church was in groups. They realized that group participation was not the end goal, but a means for accomplishing God's greater mission. They had a vision for the redemption of creation and for empowering people to have a role in this redemption. Groups helped them do this and groups would often grow as a result. But there is little talk about how many groups, how people join groups or other technical questions.
2. They had a keen focus on the quality of life within the groups. They were looking for the kind of life that reflected the Kingdom of God as represented by Jesus. These were not simply study groups that met once a week or twice a month. They were groups that knew that they had a call to be salt and light in the midst of the world. It was a radical call, one where Vice Presidents of large corporations were challenged to put feet to their faith. One story recounts a V.P. of an oil corporation participating in a group that helped people “dry out” from chemical abuse. Everyone served others regardless of position or stature in society.

Continued on page 5



“A penetrating, theological look at the true origin of the church.”

Dr. Neighbour's most recent release examines why so many churches struggle to transition and create genuine Biblical communities.

“In this book, Ralph challenges us to go beyond structure, formula, and success in cell ministry and to remember what the cell is all about: Christ living through each group member. God challenged me through this book to remember that cell ministry is not a man-made enterprise (or means to church growth). It's all about Christ! I'm sure that God will challenge and change you as you read Ralph's insights in to the nature of the church.”

—Joel Comiskey

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3. These prophets were not afraid to “draw a line in the sand” and be ready to let go of those who were not going to enter this radical call. They did not water down the vision in order to keep people. They let other churches take care of them.
4. They trained. And then they trained again. And then they trained some more. They realized that such vision for the church was radically different than the common experience in the American church. They knew that if it was to be practiced that training was crucial. They did not “lower the bar” to get people through classes. Instead they raised the expectations and then mentored people in the practical means of putting this training into practice.
5. They experimented. They did not write about the need to find a structure or model for the next church, one that could be packaged and sold to others. They imply that the church should not go from one static form to the next static form called “small groups.” They were using small groups to experiment with different ideas of being God’s people out in front of a watching world.

While I was writing my book, *The Relational Way* (I have to get a book plug in here somewhere!) a friend and small groups champion in San Diego reviewed it. His response was, “I am not sure that many pastors will feel that they can do what you are talking about in this book.” My response to him was, “Well, if we only write about what we feel that we can do, then what is the point?”

My only hope is that what I say and write and live is faithful to the radical vision that God gave these prophets. While we need practical strategies that will help us do groups better today, we also must have a radical vision calling us forth that most of us alive today will not see come to fruition. My prayer is that what I contribute today will advance it a few steps for the sake of my children and their generation. And to those prophets who are still alive, I want to say thank you for having a dream and opening up a path for the rest of us to follow.



M. SCOTT BOREN is the author of *numerous resources* on cell leader training, transitioning, and the nature of the church. He currently serves as the Community Pastor at Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is married with four incredible boys. Watch for his new book from Baker Books entitled, *Missional Small Groups* this fall.



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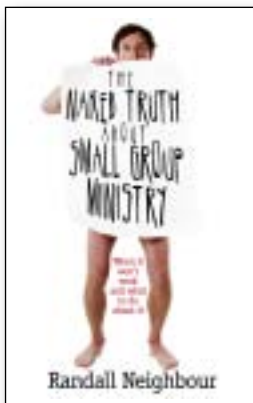
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