

**A REVIEW OF CELL/CLASS GROUPS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CHURCH
GROWTH
(Case Study: The Assembly of God, St.Thomas, U.S.V.I)**

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In his journal for May 9, 1739, John Wesley noted that “we took possession of a piece of ground near St. James’ Churchyard in the Horsefair where it was designed to build a large room enough to contain both the societies of Nicholas and Baldwin Street...And on Saturday 12, the first stone was laid, with a voice of praise and thanksgiving.” To pay for the construction, Wesley appointed eleven trustees. This act was criticized severely by George Whitefield and his brother Charles Wesley on the ground that the trustees would have controlling interests which could be detrimental to the mission. Wesley agreed. The dilemma he faced was how to pay for the work, especially since the contributions of the two societies amounted to less than a quarter of the 150 pounds needed. The answer came from Mr. Foy who suggested that members of the society should be divided into groups of eleven under a leader, whose task would be to collect a penny a week from each of the eleven members. Wesley with his keen insight accepted the suggestion and broadened its scope to include meeting for conversation, fellowship, prayer, visitation of the sick, among other activities. But before we investigate the impact of the class meeting, it is necessary to provide a historical and theological perspective to the emergence of the class/cell groups in the New Testament and in the history of the Church.

The group, cell or class meeting derives its meaning from the relationship between the leader and those who follow. Firstly, there is a difference between power wielders and authentic leadership. Power wielders exercise influence by mobilizing their own power to establish direct physical control over others’ behavior. Conversely, moral or transformational leadership is exercised when individuals with certain motives mobilize to satisfy the needs of followers and himself. Such leadership ‘raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and the led,’ and thus it has a transforming effect on both. This kind of leadership was exercised by Jesus of Nazareth, Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King.

Jesus as a transformational leader called into being a group or community of followers, beginning with the call of the first disciples. The call was direct, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people” (Matt.4.19 NRSV). This was a purpose-driven community which was welded together by their loyalty to Jesus and to each other and motivated by a vision and purpose. Thus, not even the death of their leader could destroy the group’s solidarity. We recall that after the resurrection, the Risen Christ found them locked behind closed doors. Following their Master’s directive, the disciples gathered together in the Upper Room to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Those who assembled in the Upper Room were physically and spiritually bound together. Physically, they were in the same place where they ate together, conversed and planned. That separateness from the rest of the community heightened the sense of brotherhood

and loyalty to each other. Spiritually, they held on to the teaching of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount as the guide for daily living. 'The individual wills, inclinations and differences were dissolved in the common exaltation and purpose which bound them together.' This is what the writer of the Acts of the Apostles intended to be understood when he stated that all were "of one heart and of one soul and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts.4.33 NRSV). That sense of purpose was further exemplified by 'worship in the temple, breaking bread from house to house and taking their meals together' (Acts 2.46). The gathering together from house to house, was the earliest model of the New Testament Church. That pattern of meeting in homes, or what came to be known as 'house churches', existed well into the third century of the Christian era.

The Reformation led by Martin Luther in Germany in 1516ff, ushered in a spontaneous movement of small groups for prayer, study of the Bible and fellowship. The Puritans in reaction to the formalism of the Anglican Church, with their emphasis on purity of life and doctrine, developed cell groups. The Quakers, disenchanted with mainstream Puritanism, sought to restore the Church to primitive Christianity, evolved cell groups which met in homes for prayer and Bible Study. The movement was led by George Fox (1624-1691).

Prior to the suggestion of Captain Foy, John Wesley's understanding of the class or cell groups was influenced by the Holy Club and the Moravians at Hernhuth. First, we note the impact of the Holy Club. In 1720, John Wesley was recalled by Oxford University to lecture in Greek, philosophy and logic. Before he returned, his brother Charles had gone to Christ Church. Charles had gathered together a group of men who were also deeply religious. They met in their rooms and dedicated themselves to Bible Study. On Wesley's return, the leadership of the group was thrust upon him. He expanded the activities to include visiting the poor in the city, caring for the sick, organizing classes for poor children, visiting the prisons and standing by criminals when they were hanged. (Among the members was George Whitefield). They were wedded together in the deepening of their spiritual lives and outreach to those who needed the most. The undergraduates of the University scorned this pietism of the group and called them in a derisive manner, the "Holy Club".

This transformational model was also evident at the Hernhuth. Under their revered leader Zinzendorf, three kinds of small groups emerged. The first cell group to be organized was called "Bands" in 1727. These groups consisted of two or three persons. Later the numbers grew to between five and nine members. "Band" members met weekly outdoors or in homes. Members were of the same sex and marital status. Meetings for prayer, fellowship and Bible Study were usually for one to three hours. John Wesley on his visit in 1738, described the activity of the bands in these words: "...to confess faults to one another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed." As a matter of interest we should also add that, there were other groupings existing at Hernhuth, namely, "Choirs" and the "Diaspora Society." A single "Choir" consisted of twenty six members. Entrance into the group was about the age of nineteen. The "Choirs" worshipped together and worked together. The "Choirs" also had a missional dimension, as they sought to win

members to their group. The “Diaspora Society” was essentially missionary groups from a congregation. They aimed at bringing together groups of believers for fellowship and unity. The denominational groups were linked together in a broad ecumenical network. Wesley must have known of these groups as well. The foregoing leads us to examine the emergence of the “Class” in Methodism.

We already mentioned in the opening paragraph, the situation which led to the emergence of the Class meeting. Other factors need to be noted. The enthusiasm which Methodists displayed at worship in the Anglican Churches, offended the sensitivities of many Anglicans and Priests. Increasingly, Methodists found that chapels were closed to them and pulpits as well to Clergy who embraced Methodism. Wesley gathered the members into Societies for the proclamation of the Word and Christian nurture. As Societies grew, Wesley began to recognize the difficulties in administering and nurturing them spiritually and attending to disciplinary and social concerns. Classes were the answer.

What did the Class meeting achieve in Methodism? Firstly, a group of twelve provided intimate knowledge of each other, and led by dedicated and spiritually mature leadership new converts from the Evangelical Revival were nurtured and mentored. The nurturing and mentoring involved fellowship, prayer, Bible Study, and examination. Secondly, the class meeting sought to address the socio-economic needs of the membership. Thirdly, a missional aspect evolved. The experience of the ‘warmed heart,’ or conversion, nurtured in the fellowship of the church, gave the class a passion for the lost. The class, then, became an instrument of outreach, thereby furthering the growth of the Evangelical Revival and later Methodism.

The pattern of growth and stability which the class meeting brought to Methodism in the United Kingdom, was also experienced in the Americas, Asia and Africa. The Caribbean experience began with the conversion of Nathaniel Gilbert, planter, attorney, owner of slaves from the island of Antigua in the West Indies. As he was recuperating from a recent illness, he asked his daughter, Mary, for reading material. She brought him the document sent to him by his brother Dr. Francis Gilbert. It was entitled, “An appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.” He read it with much skepticism, but in the end the seed of faith was sown. He traveled to England with his family and three servants, to meet John Wesley and hear him preach. Gilbert received the confirmation of faith which he sought. He returned to Antigua in 1760 as a “Planter Redeemed!” and preached the universal Gospel that ‘all are sinners, and Christ died to save.’ This non-discriminatory message was an affront to the class structure. Converts were made, and from Antigua a stream of Lay Apostles took the Gospel to the plantations and the neighboring islands. Where classes were formed the converts were strengthened and the work consolidated. After Coke’s arrival in 1786 and his subsequent visits to the region, the Missionaries, the local leaders and himself, made the class meeting the pivot around which the Methodist work and witness was organized.

THE IMPACT OF CELL GROUPS INTERNATIONALLY

Over the past forty years, there has been a proliferation of cell groups in the Church. Most of the numerically strong Churches have adopted the cell movement. As of December 2000, the membership of some of the largest Churches in the world had the following breakdown: The Yoida Full Gospel, Korea – a membership of 250, 000, and 25,000 cell groups. Grace and Truth, Korea, with a membership of 105, 000, and 1,000 cell groups; The International Charismatic Mission, Columbia, with a membership of 50,000, and over 20,000 cell group; Kum Ran Methodist, Korea, with a membership of 50,000, and 2,700 cell groups; Elim Christian, El Salvador, with a membership of 40,000, and 11,000 cell groups.

The cell groups at ICM (International Charismatic Mission) penetrate the entire city and ‘like a giant net, eventually gather those attending the cells into the celebration services.’ Thus, the pattern is worship, mission and then celebrating what God had done through their various cell groups is central.

In Brazil, there are about 2,000 Brazilian Churches exploding with cell groups. Denominations such as the Assemblies of God are transitioning themselves to the cell ministry. In Cuba, where new Church construction is forbidden, the Assemblies of God have grown from 9,000 to over 100,000 members, and in ten years have more than 2,000 house churches, with the cell being the central feature.

What are some of the commonalities of these growing and dynamic Churches? The following are to be observed. First, prayer is central to their ministry. Many Church members and cells, spend much time in prayer as they agonize over the lost. Like the New Testament Church, they experience ‘signs and wonders.’ Second, they have a clearly defined purpose. They meet to glorify God and program to reach others for the Kingdom of God. Third, leadership is not defined as hierarchical and static. It is dynamic and diffused. As converts are made, the leader encourages them to take on the task of leadership and engage in winning new converts for Christ. Fourth, there is a ‘restorative’ dimension to ministry; that is, they believe that the Church should be restored on the basis of the New Testament Church. Fifth, there is a passion to reform the Church.

Cell groups are of various kinds ranging from Home Groups, Family Ministry Luncheons, Bible Fellowships, Zip Code Cells, Ladies’ Cells, Business Cells, Young Singles’ Cells, Married Couples Cells, Healing Cells, Nursing Home Cells, Prayer Fellowship Cells, Outreach Youth Cells, et al. What do these cells have in common? They aim at strengthening the individual’s faith and encouraging solidarity among the believers as they witness where they serve.

CASE HISTORY OF THE CELL GROUP MINISTRY IN THE ST. THOMAS ASSEMBLY OF GOD IN ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

As I researched the development of cell groups in Korea, South America and Cuba, I attended a dinner honoring Pastors serving congregations on the island in the month of

May. In the profile of the Pastor of the St. Thomas Assembly of God, Dr. George Phillips, mention was made of the cell ministry which he launched in 2002. I interviewed the Pastor, the Secretary of the Church and the husband and wife coordinating team Dr. Newton and Mrs. Newton. The following is based on those interviews and supporting documentation.

The St. Thomas Assembly of God was founded in February 1971. The goal of the founders was to build a Church based on 'full Gospel standard and doctrine. Most of its membership was drawn from families who migrated to St. Thomas from the Eastern Caribbean. The first worship service was held on March 7, 1971 under the ministry of Pastor Abraham Fenton. After his death, the Rev. Dr. Carlton Williams became the pastor. From 1981-1983, the Church was without a Pastor. In 1983 Pastor George Phillips was appointed Pastor. Under the leadership of the three Pastors and a very capable Board, the Church grew in numbers, and impacted the community with its varied ministries and outreach programs. The membership has grown to over three hundred members. Some of the ministries in this 'purpose-driven' Church are: Children's Church, Christ ambassadors, (a Youth Ministry), Health Ministry, Helping Hands, Jubilee Bible Club, Jubilee Praise Dancers, Prison Ministry, Queen Louise Ministry, Missionettes, Royal Rangers, and Puppet Ministry. Missionary outreach has taken teams to regional countries, parts of Africa and Asia. With such a dynamic ministry, why did the Church embark on a cell ministry? To this question Dr. Phillips responded stating that it was recognized that the individual member was not achieving his/her full potential as a child of God. To achieve the above, the Board with urging of the Pastor agreed to launch a "cell" group ministry. Why cell (small} groups? A document entitled, St. Thomas Assembly of God small Group Ministry" gives the following reasons.

Why small Groups?

1. **CARE** and preservation of members and guests alike. As we grow it becomes easier for people to slip through our hands.
 - a. Small groups allow us to breakdown the general congregation into more manageable parts and incorporate more persons into the caring ministry of the Church.
 - b. It is easier in the small group to track individuals' Church attendance, identify problems and provide help.
 - c. In the small group we can effectively live out the commands of Scripture.
 - d. Small groups better allow us minister and care for the needs of each member.
 - e. Small groups afford a good healthy environment to assimilate new persons into the body.
 - f. Small groups provide greater opportunity to help each grow and to track the growth of each other.

2. **TEACHING** the truths of the Bible for life changes. Changed lives are testimonies to the Gospel. Only by applying Biblical truth are lives changed.

3. **DEVELOPING SERVANT LEADERSHIP.** Often in Scripture, God called and used people with commitment, vision, passion and purpose, to provide leadership for His Church.
4. **GROWTH** by addition and multiplication. One of the goals for each group is to invite new persons, converts, attendees, visitors, area residents, and friends, resulting in the birth of new groups. As the groups grow, there will be the need for further division. Multiplication is essential to growth (Gen.1:22; Acts 2:46-47).

A key component of this small group model is the role of leaders. The organizers devised the following goal for leaders.

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND EXPECTATIONS FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

1. **Prayer Emphasis.** Each group should spend quality time in prayer. There will also be specific times to bring group leaders together for prayer. Missionaries and other ministries that we support will be assigned to each group to provide prayer covering.
2. **Harmony** between group leaders and Senior Pastor. There must be a sense of harmony between group leaders and Senior Pastor/Small Group Coordinators. The spirit of the leader will permeate the group.
3. **Evangelism.** There should be a serious commitment to evangelism and sharing the Gospel. Each group should adopt a respective community/area and seek creative, innovative and aggressive means to reach the residents of the community with the Gospel. This should include invitations to attend group meetings and door to door visitation.
4. **Strengthening of the fellowship.** Each group should endeavor to minister to the needs and circumstances of each member. Each member must be free to share and feel a part of the group. There should be times for free and open communication and self-examination.
5. **Baptism of the Holy Spirit.** Group members should be encouraged to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Opportunities to enjoy this experience should be provided.
6. **Time Limits.** Each meeting should be structured to last approximately 90 minutes. It is important to respect time limitations and other obligations of group members, particularly those with small children and/or unsaved spouses.
7. **Reporting.** Each leader must submit a monthly attendance/progress report to the small group coordinators. A format for the reports will be provided.
8. **Servant/Leader Model.** Each leader should model the servant/leader example provided in John 13. One must have a servant's heart to be an effective leader. In addition, each leader must make himself/herself available to receive from the leadership of the Church by faithful and regular attendance at Church meetings,

visibility within the Church, and being positive and supportive of Church leadership.

9. **Division.** Each group should seek to grow by healthy division which will provide opportunities to nurture new leadership and maintain a small intimate group setting.

Because much was being entrusted to the leadership, they were invited to make a covenant indicating their commitment to the program.

SMALL GROUP LEADER COVENANT

Believing that being a small group Leader as taught by the St. Thomas Assembly of God is the area of ministry the Lord would have me to serve, I hereby enter into covenant with God and this Church and commit myself to the following:

1. To faithfully serve as a small Group Leader for the period of _____ to _____.
2. I agree to adopt and abide by the goals and objectives provided for small groups during the period of time this covenant is in effect.
3. I shall get to know all the members of the group and pray for them regularly.
4. I agree to keep all information that is shared strictly confidential and within the group. It shall not be a breach of this confidentiality provision, if information is provided to the senior Pastor, small group coordinator or other persons as designated by the senior Pastor who may be able to assist the member in specific cases.
5. I agree to create a safe group environment and place, where members can be heard and feel loved and accepted.
6. I agree to work diligently to assist group members' live healthy, balanced and spiritual lives that are pleasing to God.
7. I shall be an example to the group members by regular attendance at Church and special services and active, visible participation in Church activities.
8. I will not openly criticize or question Church leadership. Such concerns must be addressed privately with the appropriate leadership persons (s).
9. I will faithfully teach the curriculum provided and will not deviate from it except to supplement the information.
10. I will not teach any doctrine and philosophy that is contrary to the church's doctrinal position on Biblical and other issues. If there is any doubt, concern or uncertainty, I must consult with the senior Pastor, small group Coordinator or other appropriately designated persons, prior to teaching any questionable doctrine or position.
11. I will actively and consistently seek to live a holy, consecrated and exemplary life to avoid any negative impact on the Church and small group.
12. I will spend quality time in preparation for all group meetings, investing at least two hours per week in preparation.
13. I understand that the Church will provide adequate training and resources to enable me to successfully meet goals and objectives for my small group.

Small Group Leader

Witnesses

St. Thomas Assembly of God, Inc.

By:

**George E. Phillips
Pastor**

METHODOLOGY

Dr. Phillips, the Pastor of the congregation, outlined his vision to the Board to create a Cell (small) Group Ministry to minister to the needs and concerns of the individual member in the congregation and those who attend as visitors. The Board endorsed the vision and began preparation for the implementation of the ministry.

In addition to pulpit announcements, notices in bulletins, information on notice boards et al. the Pastor ensured the maximum participation of the membership by giving every member a copy of **The Purpose Driven Life** by Rick Warren. This financial commitment has helped to ensure the success of the program.

STEP 1

The congregation was engaged in 40 days of study to correspond with the forty chapters of that remarkable book. The major themes discussed were: ministry, worship, evangelism and discipleship. A video series was also used emphasizing the above mentioned themes.

STEP 2

After the forty days of study was complete, the Coordinating Committee mapped out the island into sixteen areas, and organized sixteen groups to correspond to that division. A leader was appointed to administer the affairs of the group. The leader was chosen from among the group in the area where he/she resided. In addition to the general information and the Congregational study of **The Purpose Driven Life**, a Saturday was set aside for intense preparation for leaders.

STEP 3

Of the sixteen small groups, twelve met in the homes of the leaders and four met in the annex of the Church. The membership of a group ranges from eight to ten. As the membership exceeds sixteen, the leader identifies potential leaders and training is begun

and the group is further subdivided. The curriculum used in the groups. Thus far the curriculum has included, “The Purpose Driven Life,” ‘Connecting with God’s Family,’ ‘Growing Strong in God’s Family,’ “Deepening Your Roots in God’s Family,” and “The Ministry of Helps.”

OUTCOMES

1. A Church which was already highly motivated and growing numerically, saw a membership increase of over ten percent. This does not include the increase in attendance by children and young people.
2. Members became spiritually mature and purpose-driven. This has led to a deepening involvement in ministry and mission.
3. An under-shepherding has developed in the congregation and specifically among the groups, thereby ensuring that cell groups continue to play a significant role in the ministry of the Church.
4. A sense of belonging has developed among group members unknown before. This sense of belonging has heightened the quality of fellowship among the believers. Individuals commented that the intimacy found in the group experience, has enabled them to speak and pray with confidence in the group and in public.

CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, I chose the St. Thomas Assembly of God for my case study for the following reasons. Most of the membership is migrants from the Eastern Caribbean, mainly British territories. These territories and nations, share a history and religious traditions common to most Third World/Developing Countries, characterized by patterns of unemployment, underemployment, political victimization and in some instances violations of human rights. The major difference, however, is the fact that St. Thomas being an American territory has a higher standard of living, and institutions which are much more stable than those of the Eastern Caribbean.

Secondly, Out of this case study, with the emphasis on “cell group” ministry, one is made aware of the power inherent in an idea to transform or revitalize a group, and by extension the community. We have already noted that this is the experience of the fastest growing Churches in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean. The ramifications of this are far-reaching. As stated in the ‘outcomes’, there is a deep sense of belonging, but more importantly, they members of the cell groups were empowered to take the lessons learned from the collective experience which was conscious raising, to initiate changes in the economy, the political system and social institutions. This process of conscientization, then, is holistic as it addresses all facets of life – spiritual, social, political and economic. In so doing, it is in keeping with the mandate of our Lord to his disciples and to the Church in every age to – preach, teach and heal.

Our contention can be summarized in this manner: the cell group model has the power to revitalize Churches and other social institutions, by empowering individuals to maximize their potential and collectively to impact and transform those institutions for the common good.

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