

Re-Discovering Kinship: The Cell Group as the  
Ideal Functional Structure for Discipleship

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## Introduction

The Kinship Group was one of the most integral structures for facilitating ecclesial life within the Vineyard movement in its earliest days. In one of his essays in the book "Everyone gets to play," John Wimber outlined the reason kinship groups were integrated into the early stages of vineyard ecclesial life when he wrote:

In the first few years of our fellowship's existence we often referred to ourselves as the "walking wounded," Many of us had been "pillars" of our former churches -- we had taught Sunday School, sat on committees, taught Bible studies, set up chairs for special meetings and done countless other worthwhile activities seeking to serve God. But in the process we had been hurt, bruised, battered and worn out from church life. Ministering to others was difficult if not impossible. In our exhausted state we turned to God and learned to worship, to minister to God. As we began to be healed and revitalized in worship, we then started to have fellowship with each other in our "kinship" groups. As a natural outgrowth of worship and fellowship we saw the need to start ministering to others.<sup>1</sup>

Wimber's description of groups formed for the express purposes of ministering to others is a great definition for, and description of the terminology of *organic relational discipleship*. But for many congregations that have moved toward more building and program centered approaches to ecclesial life, Kinship Groups (hereafter *cell groups*) have largely lost their centralized place in the disciple-making process. In many churches (Vineyard and otherwise), cell groups are often merely utilitarian vehicles for promoting things like building campaigns or

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<sup>1</sup> John (Christy) Wimber, *Everyone Gets to Play* (Ampleton Publishing 2008), p. 37.

a new teaching series rather than for organic relational disciple-making that allows the every-day stuff of life happening in the lives of group members to shape the focus of the group. Thus, organic and relational disciple-making is often replaced with small groups that are actually highly programmed religious structures with a prescribed agenda that often hedges against authentic discipling relationships like the ones described by Wimber above. In fact, I have personally found that highly programmed small groups make it possible for a few people to gather in a room and actually hide their real lives behind the well-crafted materials and discussion guides used to facilitate their discussions. More on this in the material that follows.

This study suggests a return to the cell group as the ideal and timeless structure for organic relational disciple-making in the Vineyard movement. The study begins with a very brief examination of the cell group as the primary unit for discipleship in the early Church, throughout Church history, and in the foundation of the early Vineyard movement, and then moves into an abbreviated review of literature emphasizing small groups as a forum for revitalization and renewal movements across Church history and around the world. Finally, the study will encourage ecclesial leaders within the Vineyard movement to embrace the Cell Group as the most timeless and culturally relevant means to carry out its mission to make disciples.

### **Kinship in the Early Church, Throughout Church History, and Early Vineyard Formation**

One of the prevailing images of the Church of Jesus in the New Testament is that of a family or a household.<sup>2</sup> The familial language and relational dynamics that would be expected among people who thought of their faith community not as an institution, but as a family of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, and sons and daughters, is pervasive in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In addition to familial language describing their relationship to God and one

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<sup>2</sup> c.f. Eph. 2:19, 1 Tim. 3:15, Titus 1:7, and 1 Pet. 4:17

<sup>3</sup> c.f. 1 Cor. 4:15, Heb. 12:8, 1 Tim. 5:1-2

another, the patterns and practices of the earliest Christians for gathering together (apart from the earliest Jewish converts' access to the temple in Jerusalem in Acts 2:46a) centers on meeting together in the homes of fellow believers (as in Act 2:46b). It was in these settings familial settings that relational discipleship, worship, communion, teaching, and the exercise of Spiritual gifts took place among the earliest followers of Jesus.

Peter Bunton, director of DOVE Christian Fellowship International in Europe (a network of cell churches and house churches in several European nations) explains that, in addition to what can be seen among the first Christians, many Christian movements throughout church history have – though entrenched in traditionalist organizational structures – sought to establish small groups as a way to promote reformation. He cites examples of small groups being a central force for change in “the Reformation; Conventicles [as the] Puritan vision for small groups; the Reformed churches; German Lutheranism; Radical Pietism; Anglican religious societies; The Company of the Blessed Sacrament [Roman Catholic]; the Moravians; and the Methodists.”<sup>4</sup> Bunton points out several factors that have historically and typically motivated the establishment of small groups among Christians when he writes: “A number of motivations for the establishment of small groups are discernable in history [including] primitivism; the pursuit of personal and ethical holiness; ministry to those outside the group in spiritual and material need; and Church reform.”<sup>5</sup>

This New Testament value for seeing the church of Jesus primarily as a family, and the need for a functional structure for organic and relational discipleship was central to Vineyard founder John Wimber's ecclesial praxis in establishing Vineyard congregations. It is arguably

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bunton, *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us*. (House to House Publications, 2001), pp. vii-viii

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 78-79

the reason why cell groups played a key role in the established rhythms of early congregational life. Regarding this early Vineyard value, Don Williams writes: In an age of alienation, Wimber also knew the need for family. He knew that a network of small groups meeting weekly could stem migration from church to church. He called them “Kinship groups,” highlighting the longing for belonging. He taught his leaders to grow the church from “the inside out.”<sup>6</sup>

Though contemporary ecclesial practitioners tend to think of church life in terms of ecclesial models, it is highly unlikely that the first Christians would have thought of their meetings, primarily in homes, as adherence to an idealized model of church life to which they were being faithful. It is more likely that they were simply doing what was natural and practical as they sought to live out their God-given mission in community together.<sup>7</sup> Thus there is no prescriptive language for either house churches or small groups in the New Testament. There is, rather, a descriptive narrative, often embedded into the cultural scenery of New Testament church life, of what the earliest Christians typically did when they met together.<sup>8</sup> However, the thesis of this project, developed further in the material that follows, is that although small groups meeting in homes cannot be said to be prescriptive or biblically imperative, it is still possible to conclude that they are the ideal timeless functional structure for relational discipleship.

### **The Problem with Organization and Structure in Congregations of Christians**

According to organic church proponent Neil Cole in his book *Church 3.0*, “...large numbers of people [are] leaving the old ways of doing church (2.0) for new, more relational and viral churches less dependent on clergy and programs.”<sup>9</sup> There are many possible reasons for this

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<sup>6</sup> See the article entitled *Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship* by Don Williams in *Church, Identity, and Change* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> c.f. Acts 2:42-27

<sup>8</sup> c.f. Acts 8:3; 20:20, Rom. 16:15, 1 Cor. 1:11; 16:19, Col 4:15, Philem. 1:2, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Cole, *Church 3.0* (Jossey-Bass, 2013), p. 10.

ever-growing phenomenon but perhaps one of the keys to understanding it has to do with the ways in which many churches tend to use organization and structure. J. Michael Shannon, Dean at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, states that “the church is unique in its need to serve people and use people in the same organization.”<sup>10</sup> But perhaps a growing number of believers feel that organized churches are not balanced in their tendency to use people as tools to fuel, feed, and care for the organization, rather than using the tool of organization to fuel, feed and care for people. In order for a congregation to get anything done, it needs to identify and release leaders and organize functional structures to carry out shared objectives. But there is an obvious tension between that reality, and the reality that – if not used carefully, organization and structure can tend to make people feel that they are merely a depersonalized component of the “machinery” of the church.

The problem with organization and structure in congregations of Christians centers on maintaining the proper order of the relationship between people and structure. This study contends that functional structures are secondary to, and ought only to be created for the purpose of serving the needs of people. People must not be used to serve ecclesial structures. The following section discusses the search for ideal functional and relationally-driven structures that can legitimately serve the needs of God’s people as they pursue their shared mission.

### **The Search for Functional and Relationally-driven Organization and Structures**

Christian Schwarz, in his pamphlet, *The ABC’s of Natural Church Development* asserts that “of all the...marks of growing churches, the...characteristic [of] ‘functional structures’ has emerged as the most controversial point.”<sup>11</sup> He defines a functional structure as those which are

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<sup>10</sup> J.M. Shannon, *Leadership Toolbox*. Retrieved on 4/01/15 from Christian Standard: <http://www.christianstandard.com/leaderstoolbox.asp?id=17> (Shannon, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Christian Schwarz, *The ABC’s of Natural Church Development*. (ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), p. 13.

“...never an end in themselves but always only a means to an end.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, if there is structure in a church, it must only exist to help the church to fulfill its stated purposes for existence. If a structure does not accomplish this, it is not functional, and – according to Schwarz must either “change or [be] laid to rest.” Schwarz goes on to ask:

So where does the resistance against this principle come from? Well, it is simply the result of the lifetime tendency of people to become more and more traditional. Traditionalism means church forms have to stay the same way I have become used to them. It is not by accident that traditionalism is a factor that shows one of the highest significant correlations with church growth.<sup>13</sup>

Schwarz’s conclusion reinforces the idea that there is tension between the desire of some Christians to be traditional for tradition’s sake and a polar-opposite desire by other Christians to throw away any hint of tradition if it is perceived as having no practical purpose.

Schwarz’s research on the subject of global church health – the largest and most comprehensive of its kind in church history; was gathered between 1994 to 1996 in over one thousand congregations on all five continents of the globe. He concluded that the most enduring, most functional structure that contained the most elements of what he calls “the biblical concept of holism” is a “system of small groups where individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help, and intensive spiritual interaction.”<sup>14</sup> He concludes that groups are healthy, or “holistic” when the people in them “do not only discuss Bible texts or listen to interesting explanations by experts, but they apply biblical insights to the everyday issues of the [group’s] participants.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

The conclusion that holistic small groups, or “cell-groups” as they are often called, are the ideal blend of organization and relationship-orientation is not a new idea, and it is not unique to Schwarz’s research. Author Charles P. Schmidt, in his book entitled *Root Out of a Dry Ground: A History of the Church*, traces what he calls “the decline of second-century Christianity” directly to the church’s departure from the earliest dynamic expressions of church life. His assertion is that the church was struggling with the issues of structure, leadership, and relational-orientation as far back as the second century after the birth of the Church. He writes:

It is...apparent to all church historians that a shift takes place in the *government* of the churches. In the churches of the apostles spontaneity is the rule of the day. The Church is an organism, carried along by the buoyant life of the Holy Spirit. In the second century we notice a change. The church becomes less an organism and more an organization. Structure begins to replace spontaneity<sup>16</sup>.

Schmidt’s observation reinforces what Schwarz asserts; namely that congregations naturally tend to become institutionalized over time. Even as early as the second century, the church struggled to maintain the balance between structure for its own sake, and practical, functional structure and organization for the purpose of fulfilling the mission of the Church.

### **The Cell Group – The Ideal Functional Structure for Relational Discipleship**

Nearly twenty years before Schwarz’s research and conclusions about church health as it relates to holistic small groups, Author Howard Snyder in his book *The Problem of Wineskins*, called small groups “the basic structure of the church.”<sup>17</sup> He writes in agreement with Schmidt’s historical observations when he states: “The small group was the basic unit of the church’s life

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Schmidt, *Root Out of A Dry Ground: A History of The Church* (Fellowship Publications, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins*. (Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), p. 139



during its first two centuries. There were no church buildings then; Christians met almost exclusively in private homes.”<sup>18</sup>

Stressing the vitality and strength that holistic small groups bring to a congregation, Snyder goes on to say:

Today the church needs to rediscover what the early Christians found; that small group meetings are something essential to Christian experience and growth; that the success of a church function is not measured by body count; that without the small group the church in urban society does not experience one of the most basic essentials of the gospel – true, rich, deep Christian soul-fellowship.<sup>19</sup>

Contrasting the small group’s structural and organizational strengths with today’s typical technocratic and programmatic structures, Snyder writes:

Most of today’s methods are too big, too slow and too organized, too inflexible, too expensive, and too professional ever to be truly dynamic in a fast-paced technological society. If the contemporary church would shake loose from plant and program, from institutionalism and inflexibility, and would return to the dynamic of the early church, it must seriously and self-consciously build its ministry around the small group as a basic structure.<sup>20</sup>

But the practical necessities of our day suggest the need for small groups as basic to church structure.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Bible nowhere commands congregations to meet in small groups. But the obvious benefits seen in the book of Acts, as well as in present-day

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 140

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 143

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 148

congregations who adopt a cell-based approach to organization reinforces the strength of this approach to congregational life over other types of organizational structures.

As noted in section two, Schmidt observed that congregations tend to become traditionalist over time. This perspective uncovers an intrinsic weakness in the Church that can be observed throughout most of church history (macro level). But it can also be observed on a congregational level in that most congregations tend to become traditional the longer they are in existence (micro level). However, Bunton points out that it is also historically verifiable – especially since the days of the Reformation – that Christians eventually tend to become weary of institutionalism and traditionalism for its own sake. He asserts that Christians most often respond to their discontentment – not by forsaking the Church altogether, but by returning to the functional structure of small groups as a key to healthy reformation. In Bunton’s historical research on the common motivations for throwing off rigid and traditionalized structures, and returning to a small-group-oriented structure, he writes:

There was a desire to cut through traditions, formulae and all intervening ritual forms which hindered the believer from experiencing God for himself. A return to the New Testament church, where it was believed that there were not such rituals, was an attempt to remove all such obstructions to God and thus open the way for personal and experiential relationship with God (p. 78).

These observations point to the possibility that an intrinsic balancing mechanism may exist in congregations of Christians. On one hand, they will naturally seek ways to organize and create structures to get things done. As has been said already, this must happen if a congregation intends to actually accomplish anything. But if they are not careful, they will begin to serve the structures that they create. As a corrective response to this imbalance, a discontentment with

rigid traditionalism will tend to compel the congregation, or at least a cross-section of the congregation to throw off their loyalty to the institution that has emerged, and return to the simplicity of a relationally-driven small group approach to spiritual life. The analogy of a rubber band stretching and snapping back may help to illustrate these intrinsic responses. As the church progresses through the years, they become tighter, more rigid, more inflexible, and more tensely formed by tradition, structure, formality, and ritual. As a corrective response to the mounting tension, a “snapping back” to the relaxed, loose, flexible and pliable structure of small groups occurs to bring a sense of renewed spiritual vitality back into the congregation.

## **Conclusion**

Cell groups must not become yet another program for the church to add to its menu of activities. The groups must be central to congregational life, and must be the central structure of the church in order to protect against a congregation’s natural tendency to become relationally disconnected. A congregation utilizing the functional structure of small groups must be no less proactive in mitigating against problems such as lack of clear leadership, lack of clear training for group leaders and assistants, compromising the God-given vision of cell groups, failing to incorporate intentional outreach and evangelism into the life of the groups, exalting a group’s values or agenda above the mission of Jesus, lack of group flexibility, over-structuring the group meetings, treating the cells as a program instead of as a primary functional structure, lack of pastoral care and regular contact with the cell leaders, too much emphasis on the meeting and not enough emphasis on relationships, failing to multiply the groups when they become too large, and lack of training about cell-based ministry for new believers and future leaders.

Although the structure of Cell groups is primarily relationship-driven, it still requires leaders to ensure that the structure does not become unhealthy. The reality is that there is no

structure that cannot be degraded, corrupted, or misused in a congregation. But cell-based organizational structures seem most suited to the needs of congregations who want to remain relationally-driven in their ministry activities while using organization to do the things that will enable them to fulfill their shared mission.

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