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Lay Equipping Leadership and Church Growth

Dr. Eddie Gibbs

I must begin this paper with a word of apology, in that my research has not been as thorough as I would have liked. In using the Yoido Full Gospel Church as a case study I have had to rely on David Yonggi Cho's books written more than a decade ago, supplemented by consulting more recent articles and information from the church's excellent web-page, and conversation with a few of our many Korean students at Fuller Seminary.

One cannot address the topic of Lay Equipping Leadership and Church Growth without reference to the cell group structure that is so integral to the growth of this remarkable church. In order to do justice to the topic I would need to have spent several months interviewing lay leaders, sharing in their training program, and visiting cell groups. As it is I have only visited three cell groups, and that was during my visit to Yoido in 1985 celebrating the tenth year of the present sanctuary, when we occupied the enlarged building for the first time.

I beg your forgiveness for the inaccuracies that inevitably result from my remoteness from the situation. My limitations also add importance to Professor Sung Bae Jang's response, which I look forward to hearing. Perhaps my small contribution will be to place the lessons to be learned from Yoido Full Gospel Church in a broader perspective, especially in relation to global cultural trends that are impacting both the West and South Asia.

There are many theoreticians who have written on the strategic significance of equipping lay leaders to stimulate and sustain the growth of the church. The unique contribution of Cho Yonggi is that he has demonstrated its significance on a grand scale and over several decades. Furthermore, his theories and strategies have been applied far beyond the Yoido church in the churches it has planted and through the leadership conferences that have been held on a regular basis for the past twenty years

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or more. The sheer scale of accomplishments in the area of lay leadership training and deployment means that the Yoiddo church provides a significant case study.

Caring for New Believers

As we begin to examine the key components of this case study I think it is important to begin by reminding ourselves that the training of lay leaders to develop cell groups did not arise as a strategy to stimulate growth in a stagnant church. Rather, it was developed out of necessity in response to rapid growth. Pastor Cho was beginning to feel the crushing burden of caring for increasing numbers of people and of the acute pastoral problems that many new believers brought (Cho, 1981:17-19). The demands were accentuated by the acute poverty and suffering brought about by the Japanese occupation during WWII followed by the Korean War. It is reported that the challenge of incorporation reached 10,000 people a month at one stage in the life of YFGC.

The closest historical precedent is the ministry of John Wesley who faced the challenge of incorporating "awakened sinners" who responded to his field preaching. Although Charles Wesley was the better preacher, it was John Wesley who had the gift of organization, creating class meetings in which the "awakened sinners" were nurtured, and in which they came to a fuller understanding of the gospel and of the need for the new birth in order to become authentic followers of Christ (Hunter, 1992:81-83).

Solving the Leadership Bottleneck

Many churches that have attempted to emulate Cho Yonggi's model have faltered at two points. In the first place they could not provide groups quickly enough to absorb new members. Second, they did not provide adequate training. Pastor Cho's classical Pentecostal theology enabled him to sustain a growth dynamic in that he believed that the primary qualification for leadership was not theological education, but the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and especially his stress on "fellowship of the Spirit" that results in people having an "overflowing blessing" to share with others (Cho 1981:15; Anderson 12). Third, they attempted to import the Korean cell group model into the western context rather than tease out the principles. They assumed that groups were the way to go to stimulate numerical growth to jump start churches after decades of non-growth.

Given the conditions of suffering and deprivation in the years following the Korean war, the gospel message of forgiveness, healing, blessing and empowerment was extremely liberat-

ing (Cho 18-25:1979; xi-xix: 1985). Conversion to Christ restored human dignity as converts came to realize that they are made in the image of God, and as members of the body of Christ each person has both a location and a function (Anderson 10-12). In baptism they are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, they are incorporated into the body of Christ and commissioned to participate in the ongoing mission of their Ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Spirit baptism bestows this new identity, provides the possibility of character formation into the likeness of Christ, and bestows the necessary gifts for Christian service.

The creation of hundreds, and eventually thousands of groups, needed an army of leaders. Once again urgent necessity provided the stimulus for a creative response. As an initial response to the need to provide cell group leaders, Pastor Cho initially looked to his church elders, but soon came to realize that there were not sufficient elders, most were too busy in their secular employment, and may not be equipped by the Spirit as cell group leaders (Cho 1984:42). He had to find another solution. Mission leaders are innovative risk-takers, and Pastor Cho was prepared to follow, what he believed to be the Spirit's leading, in appointing women for the task (Cho 1981:25-29). Rather than remaining captive to the Korean cultural model of male leadership, he re-examined the Scriptures to see if there were biblical precedents that he had overlooked due to his cultural bias. The fact that in the traditional Korean family the woman usually worked in the home, caring for the family, while the husband served as the wage earner, they were available in large numbers for this task.

One consequence of turning to this solution to the leadership challenge was that predominantly female leaders meant that a greater proportion of women became cell group members than men. They also met at a time when the women were available, which was when their menfolk were at work. The need to incorporate more men into cell groups has led to the developing more groups for men that meet at times convenient to the men, and that they tend not to be neighborhood based, but rather consist of affinity groups of men in similar secular jobs.

Context in Which New Leaders Emerge and Develop

In many ways the cell groups provides an ideal environment in which each person can discover their particular gifts and in which new leaders can emerge naturally. Surrounded by a small group of friends each person begins to make his or her contribution to the group. Spiritual gifts are not principally identified through self-administered questionnaires, but in the context of

relationships responding to the challenges and opportunities of daily life. The group provides motivation; recognition and positive reinforcement, provided the group leaders are trained to understand the church as a gift-bearing, gift-evoking, gift-developing and gift-disciplining community of believers. On the other hand, when cell group leaders become domineering and members are suspicious or critical of one another then gift-based, every-member ministry does become stifled.

The training of leaders is not confined to the learning of the bible and doctrine, but includes the issues of spiritual warfare and healing prayer, which are crucial areas in a culture so permeated by issues of spiritual power. The ministry of Yoido has faced much criticism from theologians who have been primarily influenced by western modernity in their theological formation. As Professor Allan Anderson, of the University of Birmingham has written in defense of Pastor Cho, he has developed his theology and practice from insights drawn from the bible and not from shamanism. In missiological terms the gospel, the church and mission must find distinctive expression in various cultural contexts. It must engage culture; indeed it cannot avoid doing so. The crucial issue is whether the missional engagement consists of *naïve*-contextualization, in which the church simply subsumes its message according to the criteria of the dominant culture, or whether its approach is one of *critical*-contextualization, (Hwa Young 13,14x; Anderson p.8).

Quality Control

As the number of groups continued to expand at a great rate, how was quality control maintained? At the outset, potential cell group leaders had to be carefully screened in terms of their spiritual maturity and gifts and the call of God for this ministry. Second, the leaders were provided with a lesson for the group meeting that is published in the church's weekly newspaper *Full Gospel News*, of which a million copies are available following the Sunday services (Synan p. 4). This ensures a uniform teaching content for each week's meetings. Third, leaders are trained by the apprenticeship method of learning by observation and contributing under supervision. Fourth, as educational opportunities increased and standards rose, so the leaders needed to be more adequately trained to relate to an increasingly sophisticated urban population. Empowering the incompetent will bring disastrous consequences!

The YFDC web site has a full page dedicated to education, and lists four channels for the education of laypersons (I notice it does say "laymen," but I assume this includes both male and

female!). There is a Bible School for Laymen providing a five-month course applying the lessons of seven selected books of the Bible to the life of faith. Students can they move to the next level of Bible College for Laymen, with a curriculum providing a topical study of all 66 books of the Bible. In 1982 The Bible Graduate School for Laymen was established, providing a deeper level of study. Then there are In-depth Bible study courses. To provide further resource the cell group leaders, *The Home Cell Study Guide Volume 1 and 2* were published by Pastor Cho. The English language translation of volume one appeared in 1990 and volume two in 2000. (Yoido web-site <http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/edu>).

The tightly structured system of YFGC works because of the Senior Pastor's clear vision and outstanding leadership ability of being able to communicate clearly and in a way that inspires. It also functions well in a society that is very homogeneous and has a traditional acceptance of hierarchical authority. However, it is much more difficult to apply in cultures that are diverse and individualistic, in which "one size does not fit all," and one style does not suite all. Once a diversity of approaches is deemed necessary, quality control becomes more complicated to develop and difficult to enforce.

Support and Supervision

The YFGC operates on the Jethro model, named after Moses' father-in-law, who advised Moses that he would wear himself out trying to meet all the demands of the Israelites. He counseled him to officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (Exodus 18:13-23); advise which Moses promptly accepted. Here at YFGC the cells are organized into 19 regional sanctuaries, 24 mid-Districts, and 208 sub-districts. There are a total of 171 ordained pastors (of whom only one is a woman). In addition there are 356 non-ordained pastors, of whom 278 are women. Such large numbers indicate the high level of support and supervision for the cell-group ministry.

Although the church maintains a large number of social service programs, it is not so strongly focused on centralized programs that the cell groups are relegated to a level of lesser importance. YFGC is truly a church *of* small groups rather than a church *with* small groups. In other words, it is a large church consisting of thousands of cells that are central to its life and growth. Cho himself states, "A cell group is the basic part of our church. It is not another church program—it is the program of our church" (Cho, 1984:42) Churches that have failed to establish this priority have encountered difficulty in sustaining cells and of

providing adequate leadership, because both leaders and members become exhausted by the demands placed upon them to attend cell groups in addition to supporting other ministries.

Evangelistic Significance

It is often said that a church grows big by growing small, i.e. through its cell groups. However, we must always be cautious in attributing growth to a single cause. Vinson Synan quotes Lee Young Hoon, one of the leading associate pastors, who identifies cell groups as one of the six causes of the wonderful growth of the church (Synan 4). It is not the sole factor. Church growth, in almost every case, arises out of a number of factors, and the relation between them is complex. In addition to the institutional factors, the contextual factors must also be taken into account. Furthermore, we must never overlook the sovereign and unpredictable operation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is safer to speak in terms of *correlation* rather than *causation* in relating the various characteristics of a church to its growth pattern. Research to date upholds the claim that growing churches are more likely than non-growing churches to have cell groups. On the other hand there are many churches with cell groups that are not growing.

Although the cell group system may originally have been introduced in order to care for the many people attending the church and to ensure that the growth dynamic was sustained, there is a further factor that must not be overlooked. The many newcomers were brought by relatives, neighbors, and friends in order to receive ministry of healing and restoration. The early wave of cell groups at Yoido were largely composed of first generation believers who were recent adult converts from non-Christian backgrounds. I would be interested to know to what extent that is the case today.

As neighborhood cell-groups were established, they provided accessible multiple-outlets for ministry. The first contact with the church for increasing numbers of newcomers was with the cell-group, where they heard the gospel, received ministry and were then brought by members of their group to the Sunday services at Yoido Full Gospel Church. I personally observed on one of my visits to the church, members encouraging the people they had brought to stand at the appropriate moment when the pastor concluded his sermon with an invitation to surrender their life to Christ.

There is a great deal of evidence that most of the church growth taking place in the West is due to church attendees moving from one church to another. One church grows at the ex-

pense of other churches, rather than through the conversion of people from the world. From its beginning YFGC has been committed to growth through evangelization, and that this is best achieved by the training of laypersons in evangelism. By making cell groups as the launch pads to this mission in the world, the church has tied evangelization to disciple-making. It takes a community to communicate the gospel effectively, rather than on relying on individuals operating in isolation.

When cell groups are introduced to stagnant church they are more likely to turn into holding-pens for the already committed. They are groups to which church members are referred after they have become part of the congregation. As we have seen at Yoido, they are often the first point of contact after which cell members bring their new people to the worship service where they make a public act of commitment to Christ and are then welcomed into the larger body through baptism.

When there is a passion for evangelism to be the heartbeat of the cell groups, then the ministry of the laity is no longer marginalized. Whereas most churches give the greatest recognition to those ministries that contribute to the internal programs of the church, the church that ministers primarily through its cell groups recognizes that lay people are not on the periphery of the church but are at its frontier. At the conclusion of every worship service the congregation is not *dismissed* to go its own ways, but rather is *dispersed* in the service of Christ. They represent the church in dispersion. Furthermore, instead of exhorting the congregation to undertake evangelism and scolding them for their failure to do so, the cell groups provide a support structure through which they are able to operate.

Finally, we must not overlook the distinctives of the cultural context in which the cell group strategy was developed here in South Korea. Christians in this country have faced brutal suppression in the living memory of present church members. They are acutely aware of their vulnerability with the border with North Korea just 28 miles away. They have learned the lessons of history, that for the church to survive persecution it must decentralize, and ensure an army of lay leaders are in place and equipped to take over the leadership of the church if their pastors should ever be removed (Cho 1984:40f).

Current Challenges

1. Avoiding the peril accompanying success

In some ways success can prove to be perilous for the future of any institution. In a situation of rapid, and discontinuous cul-

tural change it is dangerous to argue that if something isn't broke don't try and fix it! Throughout the developing world significant changes take place as society moves from agrarian, to industrial, and then to high-tech and the information age. If these transitions have presented challenges to the West they are even greater in the East. For these transitions have come to much more rapidly to a country like Korea. So much so that all three stages co-exist, with all the resulting anxiety producing tensions. Long accepted ideas are being questioned and customs challenged. I would like to conclude this paper by raising a few issues that I believe the churches, especially those in urban contexts, must face if they are to maintain their effectiveness in the ministries of evangelism, discipleship and leadership training.

2. Responding to a situation of non-growth

The churches in Korea are facing a new situation in that the phenomenal numerical growth for which this country is world famous petered out around 1994. However, during the past decade many new churches have been established in the urban areas and many more pastors have been trained in the seminaries. The consequence, as reported to me by Korean students is that there is a competitive environment, with churches growing at the expense of other churches. The recent cultural changes that we will consider under our next heading have stimulated a great deal of movement between churches, with Christians looking for a different expression of the gospel or even abandoning the faith. Once again the churches face the challenge of prioritizing evangelization rather than resorting to proselytization. They need to be far more intentional in reaching out to the non-Christian majority of the population in less aggressive and legalistic ways to authentically minister the grace of Christ.

3. Adjusting to the knowledge revolution

When I began teaching a course on the church's response to popular culture at Fuller about four years ago I assumed it was a Western issue. But an increasing number of Korean students attending the course assured me that the issue I was raising was as relevant in their context. One of my students wrote a brilliant Th.M. thesis on postmodernity in the Korean Context with an extensive bibliography of books and articles in Korean that represented original thinking (Lee, 1998).

The knowledge revolution that has come about through the worldwide web has meant that information is no longer privileged. We used to say that it was the people "in the know" that held the power. The industrial age also represented a culture of

hierarchy and control, which both reinforced the position of the privileged as well as creating a new meritocracy. The information age is now challenging the culture of hierarchy and control, to one of networking and empowerment. This has profound repercussion for the emergence of leadership at the present time and into the foreseeable future. The under 35 generations that have grown up in the new environment are walking away from institutions characterized by top-down management. It is too soon to say whether this is a trend that will be limited to a couple of generations, or whether it represents a long-term culture shift. This presents a particular challenge to societies that has traditionally given respect and defers to age, which, the older I get the more I enjoy!

In terms of developing lay leaders this means that they will not simply be the extension of the pastor's vision and seeking to reproduce his or her style of leadership, but will be eager to contribute their own vision and to develop their own leadership style. This is likely to be far more relational and corporate.

4. Equipping lay leaders to relate their Christian faith to the pressures and temptations of daily life

A further factor that we must take into consideration is the changes in the economies of the developing nations. In a high-tech world, in which significant new ideas create whole new industries, and old technologies lose their hold, people are no longer regard the company for which they work as a life-commitment. During their lifetime they may undergo three or four transitions from one employment to another. This creates additional anxiety regarding job security and satisfaction to the point where people are working more hours than ever before and are nervous about taking a vacation in case their job is no longer there when they return! Whereas some younger people are becoming millionaires, there are many more who Dual-income families, means that there is not such a pool of women leaders as in former years.

The prosperity teaching that brought hope to an impoverished and disempowered people becomes a snare to those who are seeking a theological justification for the insatiable materialistic expectations. In both east and west we witness the sad spectacle of the corrupting influence of greed and the lust for power, and the questionable dealings that offer a way of escape when the economy suddenly turns sour. We need to include in our training programs for Christian leaders a strong emphasis on character formation, integrity issues and the need to live out the values of the gospel of the Kingdom with all of its radical de-

mands and comprehensive coverage reaching to every aspect of life and level of society. In addition we need to have support and accountability structures in place in recognition of our human frailty.

5. Adjusting to the increasing demands of urban living

We must also take into account the phenomenal growth of Seoul during the past twenty-five years. It is now ringed by satellite cities from which many thousands of people commute each day. Consequently, traffic has become increasingly congested and the journey time extended. With many people working long days and having to face the tiring daily commute the time that people can devote to the nurture of their own spiritual lives and to commit to the demands of cell group ministry has become an increasing burden.

Perhaps our church programs need to be pruned and made less demanding in terms of time and multiple commitments. I am not suggesting this as a compromising accommodation to society, but in order to ensure that our lay leaders have the time and energy to be good parents, to contribute to their neighborhood opportunities and needs, and to have time to engage in evangelism and Christian service outside of the church. Many devout Korean Christians I meet are weary and complain of their tiredness. They shoulder a burden of shame if they feel that they cannot meet the demands placed upon them and cannot keep up with the rigorous regimens of their fellow believers. Are we in danger of losing the joy of our salvation? Jesus came to bring us abundant life, not to subject us to a frantic life!

6. Affirming and empowering younger leaders

In the 1980s Pastor Cho took the bold step of appointing women as cell group leaders, perhaps the bold step today is to appoint couples to share the leadership responsibilities, and to appoint younger leaders in order to bring their insights and concerns for Christians of all ages to give their response. The challenge facing many churches in the West is to take steps to encourage, equip and empower younger leaders. In most of the traditional denominations less than ten percent of their leadership is under the age of thirty-five.

It has been a privilege to lead this first plenary session, and I pray that my comments, which are offered tentatively, will serve to stimulate further discussion. I look forward to the response of Dr. Sung Bae Chang and to the sessions that follow during the days of this conference, so that I might return home with a better understanding with fresh insights.

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