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**A Second Reformation?  
A History of the Cell Church Movement  
in the Twentieth Century**

**Jim Egli**

In the closing decades of the twentieth century a new form of church has emerged entitled the cell church. Although this new model of church life began in an Assemblies of God Church in Korea, it has been embraced by churches of many denominations in many nations. Its impact has been so far-reaching that today it appears that nine of the world's ten largest churches are cell churches.<sup>1</sup> It is also true that the largest churches in many of the world's major denominational families are cell-based churches.<sup>2</sup> Some speculate that the cell movement at the close of the twentieth century is the beginning of a "second reformation," that will ultimately transform the church on a scale similar to the reformation that began in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The definition of a cell church is simple. It is a church that not only meets in a large Sunday gathering but also meets in small groups in homes during the week. The purpose of these cells or home groups is to build up believers in their relationship with Christ and also to reach out and bring others to Christian faith. There is also a goal to raise up future group leaders within the group so that new groups can be formed either by multiplying the initial group into two groups or by planting new groups out of the cell. For the purposes of this article a cell church is a church that has a weekly attendance in its cell groups that is at least 60 percent of the average attendance of its worship services. To give the reader an accurate picture it is important to point out

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that in some cell churches the attendance in the cell groups far exceeds the attendance at the weekly worship services. For example, the Elim Church in San Salvador, El Salvador has a weekly cell attendance that is more than triple the combined attendance at its five weekend worship services.

Even though the cell church movement has swept the globe and now is over 30 years old, no one has written its history. It is important that this be done before the initial leaders in the movement pass away and key events are forgotten and lost. This paper is a beginning attempt, outlining in broad detail the key events in the emerging cell movement.

#### *An Unusual Beginning*

On a Sunday evening in the summer of 1964 Yonggi Cho, a young Korean pastor, collapsed on the platform of his church. Then 27 years old, Cho had reached a point of utter physical exhaustion. Earlier in the day he had preached at the morning services and then baptized 300 new converts. After picking up an American evangelist from the airport, he was translating for him in the evening service when his breakdown occurred. His church had grown from four to 2,400 members. Although assisted by his mother-in-law Jashil Choi and missionary John Hurston, Cho had shouldered an almost impossible ministry burden at the growing church. He preached at both Sunday morning services and mid-week services as well as the daily early morning prayer meetings. He also took it upon himself to counsel and to perform all weddings and funerals. Crumpled on the stage that summer evening, he whispered to Hurston, "John, I'm dying."<sup>4</sup>

After being rushed to the hospital and examined, his associates were told by the doctor looking over his medical tests: "This man is physically exhausted. His health has been broken, and his heart is weak. To recover, he will require total bed rest. After that it would be my suggestion that he find another line of work. It would be better if he never preached or pastored again. The strain could kill him."<sup>5</sup>

In spite of his depleted strength Cho attempted to continue as usual. Against the wishes of others he tried to preach in the first service of his church the following Sunday but fainted after just eight minutes. In the second service he again tried to preach but lasted only five minutes before again collapsing. In the weeks and months that followed Cho cried out to God from his

sick bed for healing but the heavens seemed as brass. In his book *Successful Home Cell Groups* Cho recounts that he was blindly claiming the promises of healing in the Bible without ever seeking God's will. On one occasion, however, he prayed, "Father, you gave all of these promises to us. But I claim them and you don't heal me. Aren't you going to heal me?" Immediately Cho was startled by an inaudible but clear voice. "*Son, I am going to heal you, but the healing is going to take ten years.*"<sup>6</sup> Little did Cho realize at the time that the desperate situation he found himself in would not only change his church but set in motion a revolution in church structure that would transform churches around the world.

Cho felt a strong call to pastor and he had a vision to grow a colossal church that would be the biggest in all of Korea, yet his devastated health dictated that he could not carry out his pastoral responsibilities in the only way he knew how. As Cho lay in his bed he searched the scriptures to see how the early church ministered to thousands of new believers. He was struck by how these early Christians met from house to house in small groups to worship and fellowship. Likewise, he noticed how Moses in Exodus 18:13-26 divided the millions that he was responsible for into divisions and small groupings of people.

Following these biblical insights, Cho devised a plan to divide his congregation into home groups under the leadership of his deacons, his male lay ministers. They rejected the idea, however, and Cho ended up taking his plan to the women lay leaders who agreed to do it. Under his close supervision and instruction, twenty home cell groups were initially launched by these women. The groups encountered various difficulties at first and it would have been easy for Cho to drop his new plan but two things prevented him. First, he clearly knew that he would not be healed for ten years; and, secondly, he had no other plan except this one which he felt the Lord had given him. In the months and years that followed Cho refined his growing cell system. Initially, his church and its new methodology was easily overlooked, but in 1974 the church moved to a larger facility on Yoido island and assumed the name Yoido Full Gospel Church. At that time there were 16,000 members in 542 cell groups and in its first year in the new location they added 3,000 members. In 1976 the mushrooming church reported 1600 cells.<sup>7</sup> It was during

this time of explosive growth that the church began to attract wide attention. One significant visitor to the church was Dr. Donald McGavran, the founder of the Church Growth Movement. McGavran encouraged Cho to hold seminars to instruct the many pastors that were visiting the church. In 1976 this ministry, Church Growth International (CGI), was born under the leadership of John Hurston. Since then tens of thousands of pastors from every part of the world have attended the annual conferences of CGI. It has also disseminated its teaching through its quarterly *Church Growth* magazine published in English and distributed internationally. Cho's book *Successful Home Cell Groups* published in 1982 has also been pivotal in the diffusion of the movement.

Interestingly, while Cho was developing his cell system other churches on other continents unaware of Cho's innovation were also beginning to use almost identical methodology. In Central America, Amor Viviente, a charismatic church began by Mennonite missionaries Ed and Gloria King, began using a home cell system in 1974 when their meeting place was taken away. When they realized the superiority of the cell structure for evangelism and discipleship they retained it. This church which currently numbers about 7,000 has planted churches throughout its native Honduras and in several U.S. Cities. Likewise in 1975 Pastor Dion Robert in the Ivory Coast began using a cell group strategy. After hearing Brother Andrew who ministered to persecuted Christians in communist countries speak, Dion sought a structure that would not be dependent on large meetings nor centered on the pastor. His initial inspiration for the cell methodology came from Moses' organizational methodology in Exodus 18.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with just 3 people his movement numbered 3,180 cells in 1993 in the city of Abidjan and its vicinity. Additionally, at that time 1,896 cells were counted in daughter churches in the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Benin, several other African countries and the United States.<sup>9</sup> In 1997 this family of churches claimed a total membership of 93,701.<sup>10</sup>

In the United States in south central Pennsylvania DOVE Christian Fellowship was likewise birthed in October of 1980 under the leadership of Larry Kreider using a cell methodology.<sup>11</sup> DOVE has planted churches in the U.S., New Zealand, France, Scotland, Uganda, Kenya, Barbados. It now numbers 53

congregations. Thirty-nine of these churches are original DOVE plants and fourteen previously established churches have joined the DOVE family.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of Yonggi Cho and Church Growth International in disseminating the cell methodology around the world has been tremendous. For example, in the doctoral research of Joel Comiskey, reported in the book *Home Cell Group Explosion: How Your Small Group Can Grow and Multiply*, he studied eight large cell churches in eight different countries. One of these churches was Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Church. All seven of the other churches recognized their indebtedness to Cho and all but one of them (Amor Viviente) were initially inspired to the cell model through Cho's example and teaching.

Although many churches influenced by Cho adopted the cell methodology and succeeded, many more attempted cell groups and failed (or at least failed to implement them in a way that they brought continued multiplication and growth). Cho himself has pondered this and reached conclusions on why the cell methodology has floundered in many churches. Reasons he has given in his books and articles are:

- Failure of the senior pastor to provide leadership of the cell system.
- Failure to learn the cell method thoroughly.
- Inadequate training and support of group leaders.
- Lack of evangelistic focus in the cell groups.
- Failure of the pastor to relinquish authority and ministry.

#### *Fed Up with Churchianity*

In 1965 as Cho was just beginning to refine and grow his cell methodology, around the world in the United States another young pastor was about to set out on a new course. Recounting his experience Ralph Neighbour, Jr., writes: "When I turned thirty-six I was absolutely, completely disgusted with traditional church structures that catered to self-needs and ignored the unchurched."<sup>13</sup> Neighbour had worked with churches in a wide diversity of settings. He grew up as a pastor's child, had worked for the Billy Graham organization in its infancy, planted 23 churches in southern Pennsylvania, and had acted as an evangelism consultant for five years for the Texas Baptist Convention. During these years Neighbour had become increasingly disillu-

sioned with churches structured for maintenance rather than mission. At 40 years old Neighbour left the comfort of his denominational job to spear-head “an experimental church” in rapidly growing west Houston. He writes,

In 1969, a non-traditional church in Houston was formed with 38 courageous pioneers. We called ourselves “The People Who Care,” and became a “Parable Church.” Without knowing what we were doing, we stumbled into patterns which were being used by other cell group churches we didn’t know existed.<sup>14</sup>

The church Neighbour led targeted unbelievers and refined a home cell and target group strategy. It numbered 600 in attendance when he left in 1974 to go to Singapore where he spent several years pioneering a similar strategy before returning to the Houston church.<sup>15</sup>

The important thing about Neighbour is the way in the 1990’s that he became a spokesman for the entire movement. One significant person impacted by Neighbour was a young Baptist seminary student named Lawrence Khong from Singapore who became involved in the Houston church. Some time later when this young pastor led a growing church in Singapore he unexpectedly received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Baffled by this surprising encounter which he experienced in the privacy of his own time with the Lord, he shared it with his deacons. Little did he realize that this revelation to his leadership would spell the end of his ministry in a church with traditional Baptist doctrine. Launching a new church called Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC) in 1988, Khong asked Neighbour to guide him and his church into an integrated cell methodology. At first Neighbour did this by dividing his time between Texas and Singapore, but in 1990 he moved to Singapore to become the Associate Senior Pastor at FCBC. The combination of an outstanding Senior Pastor—tremendously gifted in speaking and leadership—and the cell strategy spear-headed by Neighbour enabled the church to grow from 600 to 5,000 in attendance with 400 cell groups between 1988 and 1995 when Neighbour returned to Houston. FCBC was an ideal platform for Neighbour. It allowed him to refine his cell strategy and material. Neighbour and Khong aggressively shared the cell strategy through the annual International Confer-

ence on the Cell Church which drew first hundreds and then thousands of pastors, missionaries and leaders from all over the world. Neighbour's cell church manifesto *Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church* published in 1990 fanned the flames of the cell movement in many countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, greatly accelerating its growth in these countries and beyond. In 1991 Neighbour launched *CellChurch* magazine from his publishing ministry in Houston. This magazine has become a unifying voice of the movement. Most movements are propelled forward through publications. TOUCH Outreach Ministries, the publishing and seminar ministry founded by Neighbour and based in Houston, Texas, and Lawrence Khong's Touch Ministries International in Singapore have been international heralds for the cell movement. The prolific Neighbour through his visionary and practical books and magazine gave wind to the movement at a time when an increasing number of pastors and church leaders were becoming disillusioned with the traditional church structure. As one pastor of a large church in South Africa told me in 1995, Cho gave him the inspiration for cells but it wasn't until he encountered Neighbour that he actually had the instruction on how to do them.

In 1994 the political foundations of the country of South Africa were crumbling as apartheid was being dismantled and a new multi-racial government was being formed. In the midst of this upheaval there was an incredible spiritual openness in the country. As political structures were being radically altered, pastors and churches were also looking for new ecclesiastical patterns. At the invitation of Pastor Martin Hopkins of Newcastle, Natal, Dr. Neighbour led three introductory cell church conferences in May 1994 in Pretoria, Newcastle and Mossel Bay. This created incredible interest in the cell model and mid-1994 about 120 South African pastors went to Singapore to learn from Neighbour at Faith Community Baptist Church. In response to this specially planned training seminar, Neighbour was invited to come to South Africa to give in depth teaching in cell church methodology. In response he developed a four week course with one week being taught each quarter. This training entitled "The Year of Transition" was launched in October 1994 in South Africa and over the next two years would be taught to thousands of pastors. Churches implementing cell groups in South Africa

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shared their learnings and helped further disseminate cell methodology to churches in the nearby countries of Lesotho, Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, as well as countries far away including the Ukraine and the United States. In January of 1995 Neighbour met with the denominational leadership of the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa (the AFM is the largest Pentecostal denomination in Southern Africa) and was invited by them to offer the training to all of their pastors, which he did in 1996. This is the first time that leadership of a denomination embraced and broadly encouraged the cell methodology among its churches.

The Year of Transition (TYOT) training and its successor entitled Advanced Cell Training (ACT) has now been taught by TOUCH and its affiliated international ministries in many countries including the United States, Russia, Brazil, the Philippines, El Salvador, Canada and Australia. Besides continuing in these countries it is being launched in 1999 and 2000 in England and Germany. Regent University School of Divinity of Virginia Beach, Virginia, in the U.S., in 1996 became the first seminary offering Master's and Doctor of Ministry level degrees with a major in cell ministry. The core of their cell ministry courses have been the TYOT and ACT cell curriculum developed by TOUCH. In September of 1998 several other seminaries and Bible Colleges from the United States and Brazil also came to TOUCH's international training seminar in Houston, Texas, for ACT instructors and are beginning to integrate this material in their curriculum.

*Winds of Change from Colombia, South America*

Late in 1982 César Castellanos, a disillusioned young pastor in Colombia quit his pastoral ministry. Reflecting on that experience in an interview in January of 1998, Castellanos told this writer:

I had come to a crucial moment in my life where even though I was pastoring I did not feel satisfied in what I was doing. For that reason I decided that it was better to resign from being a pastor, and to be still, waiting for God to speak to me. Four months after I resigned from that church God gave me a message that transformed my life.

Following this four-month period of seeking God, Castellanos was given a vision that lasted forty-five minutes that

changed the direction of his life. Recounting that experience Castellanos said that God told him: "Dream of a very large church, because dreams are the language of my Spirit. Because the people in the church that you will pastor will be as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sands of the sea, the multitude will not be able to be counted." In response to that vision in February of 1983, International Charismatic Mission (ICM) was birthed in Bogota, Colombia. Although Castellanos had never before pastored a church of over 120 people, he knew from the vision that God gave him that now he was to lead a church with an innumerable multitude of people.

Inspired by the example and teaching of Cho, Castellanos used a cell methodology to begin growing the church. Yet after seven years of leading the church he became frustrated in 1990 because the church had plateaued at just 3,000 people. Part of his frustration with the Cho cell methodology was how long it took to produce cell leaders. When people followed the leadership training method modelled after Cho's it took two full years to become leaders. Few of the people who began it actually completed the training; and those that did had few non-Christian friends left to win once they had completed the course. Castellanos shares how he sought God for a breakthrough to release unlimited growth:

But the moment came in my life when I said, "Lord, I need something that would help me accelerate the purpose." And in my times of spiritual retreat God ministered greatly to my heart. In one of those moments He said, "I'm going to give you the ability to train people quickly." And then he removed the veil and showed me the model of 12.

The "Groups of 12" or "G12" model is a combination of principles and methods that enabled Castellanos to unleash incredible church growth. Castellanos credits Jesus example of discipling 12 people as the biblical inspiration for this method. Since implementing the G12 method the number of cells at ICM has gone from 70 in 1992, to 600 in 1993, to 1200 in 1994, to 4000 in 1995, to 10,000 in 1996. In June of 1999 it is estimated that ICM has 20,000 cell groups and a weekly worship attendance of 45,000.<sup>16</sup> What are the characteristics of the G12 model:

1. A "consolidation" process to disciple new believers that

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almost immediately sends them on a weekend "Encounter" retreat to help them be set free from spiritual bondage and be filled with the Holy Spirit. This discipleship system then equips every cell member to start their own cell group within the first year of coming to Christ while remaining in their parent cell.

2. An emphasis on the multiplication of homogeneous cell groups targeting specific populations such as business men, women, students, couples, etc.

3. A system of oversight that has cell leaders in "Groups of 12" where they meet and are discipled on a weekly basis. Leaders of the Groups of 12 are also members in another Group of 12 led by someone else. The central point in the system is the pastor and his own Group of 12.

The G12 methodology is now being implemented with many variations in cell churches around the world from Canada to India, to Peru to South Africa. Initial research suggests that its principles appear to greatly accelerate cell growth.<sup>17</sup>

The diffusion of the G12 method has been promoted by the large annual conferences that the ICM church holds and by international conferences that Castellanos has been leading in the United States and Europe. The G12 has also been further diffused through its promotion in *CellChurch* magazine of TOUCH Outreach Ministries and its Advanced Cell Training seminars in the U.S. and overseas.

*A Second Reformation? The Future of the Cell Movement*

Ralph Neighbour, Jr., opens his 1990 book *Where Do We Go From Here?* with the declaration: "I am convinced that the traditional church worldwide is being slowly replaced by an act of God. Developments taking place today are as powerful as the upheaval in 1517 during the time of Martin Luther."<sup>18</sup> Concurring with Neighbour in a 1993 article in *CellChurch* magazine, church growth strategist Carl George proclaimed,

In fact, what the Holy Spirit wants to do may be even more radical than what Dr. Neighbour is prophesying! In Christian communions from Orthodox to Anabaptist, Pentecostal to Lutheran, the notion of a cell-driven church is completely reorienting our understanding of the nature of ministry.<sup>19</sup>

Do we stand at the onset of a second reformation? What is God doing in the church and the world today? What church transformation can we expect to see in the 21st century in North America and around the world?

Although the cell movement has yet to capture the attention of the broader church, it does indeed appear that we may stand at the onset of something big. What began in an out-of-the-way church in Seoul, Korea, has now swept into every continent. Interest in the cell methodology has been up and down over the last couple of decades but the movement continues to experience tremendous growth. At one point people dismissed cells as something that would not work in North America, yet now large cell churches are emerging. Churches like Victory Assembly and Bethany World Prayer Center in Louisiana number in the thousands. Cells are working in metropolitan churches like Colonial Hills Baptist Church near Memphis and rural churches like the Cornerstone Church in rural Virginia. There are Hispanic, White and Black cell churches and ones that are charismatic as well as non-charismatic. As Raymond Ebbett, a missionary to Spain points out in a 1998 article in *CellChurch*, cells will see a more tremendous harvest in countries with the greatest spiritual openness. At the same time, however, Ebbett explains that cells are equally important in countries where the soil is hard and it takes the concerted effort of prayer and relational evangelism to penetrate.

One indication of the growth of the movement is the growth of ministries servicing it. In 1990 TOUCH Outreach Ministries, currently the largest publisher for the cell movement, had one employee. Now in 1999 it has 14. During the same time other cell resource ministries have begun in the US. The most sizeable are the Bethany Cell Church Network begun by Bethany World Prayer Center—the largest cell church in the U.S. with 7,000 members and 700 cells—and House-to-House Publications, the resource ministry of DOVE Christian Fellowship International. TOUCH also has sister publishing and seminar ministries in Asia, Africa, South America and Europe. The impact of TOUCH's training is often much greater overseas. Where their U.S. conferences draw hundreds, the same training offered in countries like the Philippines and Russia draws thousands.

Yet it is interesting to note that Neighbour prophesied “the traditional church worldwide is being *slowly* replaced” (empha-

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sis mine). His projections were not as confident as Carl George's that said in his 1992 book *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, "One day soon, North American churches of 25,000 to 50,000 will appear in every metropolitan area."<sup>20</sup> Neighbour is probably right. Though the diffusion of the cell methodology has mushroomed in some countries such as South Africa, Singapore, Korea and Russia, in many locations it will take much longer before the innovation gains wide acceptance.

In his outstanding book *Diffusion of Innovations*, communication scholar Everett Rogers points out that diffusion studies have consistently demonstrated an S-Curve pattern.<sup>21</sup> A successful innovation always begins slowly but it reaches a point of critical mass when diffusion rapidly accelerates. Sometimes the span of time between the beginning of the innovation and its rapid diffusion is years, at times it is decades and sometimes it is even centuries. The 20th century cell movement began 35 years ago in 1964. It is growing significantly now but I predict that it will likely not reach a point of critical mass in most countries until 2015 to 2020.

One of the most significant realities pointing to the need for the cell-based church is the times in which we live. Sociologists and historians have pointed out that the 21st century world will look much like that of the first century. It will be a time of rapid urbanization, of moral decay and increasing religious plurality. Many Christians and churches are frightened by this scenario. Yet this is just the type of soil that the early church thrived in, as it spread from house to house across the Roman empire.

Neighbour declares that an act of God is transforming the church in a tremendous upheaval. I fully agree with him and would even consider this a second reformation, but it is important for those in the cell movement to realize that the cell methodology is only one part of this divine upheaval. It is important that we heed the words that echo throughout the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (2:7,11,17, 29; 3:6,13,21) God is speaking through the cell movement but his reformation began much earlier. Late in the 19th century God mobilized Protestant churches for the first time in wide-scale foreign mission. Soon after that the Pentecostal movement began spreading through the improbable preacher William Seymour

from the unlikely ramshackle 1906 Azusa Street Revival to the far corners of the world. In the last half of the twentieth century the charismatic renewal and the "Third Wave" have made the Holy Spirit a reality to hundreds of millions of people and hundreds of thousands of churches. In the closing decades of the twentieth century worship, spiritual gifts and concerted prayer have been rediscovered in wonderful ways. God is speaking to His church. He is calling it to missions, to the empowering of the Holy Spirit, to worship, prayer, and to the body life and evangelism that can be unleashed through cells. Cells are only part of this act of God. At the same time, we must not minimize their importance to the cell church structure. As God has brought new wine to the church through the twentieth century moves of the Holy Spirit, He is also now offering it new wineskins that can effectively penetrate the world and reap the harvest. "He who has an ear, let him hear...."

#### Writer

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#### NOTES

1. This information was given to me by John Vaughn in a personal conversation in May 1996. Vaughn is the leading expert on world's largest churches. The one church of the world's twenty largest that does not use a cell strategy is the Waves of Love and Peace Church in Argentina that uses a multi-congregational structure.

2. The largest Methodist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Baptist and Mennonite Churches in the world are all cell-based churches.

3. This speculation is put forward by church consultant Carl George in his book *Prepare Your Church for the Future* and author Ralph Neighbour, Jr. in his book *Where Do We Go From Here*.

4. Yonggi Cho with Harold Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups*.

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  10. Lassiter, 1.
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  14. Ibid, 84.
  15. Ibid, 87.
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  17. Jim Egli, "What Do I Do with the G12 Model? Insights from those who Have Begun the Journey." (*CellChurch*. Volume 7, Number 4. Fall 1998), 26.
  18. Neighbour, 6.
  19. Carl George, "What Is a Meta-Church? (And How Does it Differ from a Cell Church?)" (*CellChurch*. Volume 2, Issue 2. 1993), 5.
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  21. Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*. Fourth Edition. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 322.