

Lecture Kueker Unit 1 *Faith Communities, Discipleship Systems and Healthy Core Groups*

Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore...

Next week we will be entering a strange, almost magical foreign land, where it will seem that everything is marvelous and new. Where it will seem that there are no limits to what God can do, where sanctuaries are overflowing and crowded, where there are prayer meetings twenty-four hours a day, where thousands and thousands of people praise God and are dropping by their neighbors with the hope of the gospel. I'm reminded of what Jesus said in Matthew 21:42-43: *"Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it."* In this marvelous country, Jesus is the cornerstone and it will seem like the kingdom of God has come to earth. All this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. It's not perfect, but because it's different, it will seem marvelous. And you are here to look and learn and bring home what you've learned from this Oz to whatever sort of Kansas you would call home.

This week we are looking at some common threads so that you can see links between Oz and Kansas in your travels. And they are our old friends: faith communities, discipleship systems and healthy core groups. Next week we will arrive in Oz. Fasten your seatbelts!

Faith Communities in Oz

Faith communities in the Kansas kingdom open up within communities of lost people. They are not necessarily lost because they are wicked and bad, but because they are not with the other sheep. In a new faith community, there are no strangers because everyone is new, so it is easier for people to get involved. A church planter forms a healthy core group; they choose a community of people who are not involved in other faith communities and reach out to include them. The core group gathers new people into small groups to practice spiritual disciplines, perhaps 12 groups of 12 people each. Worship events begin after the crowd is larger than 120 and the faith community is born, because a faith community consists of a worship event linked with a discipleship system for spiritual growth.

Faith communities in Oz seem very different. They begin with small groups and largely remain as groups, sometimes as small as three people. Rather than growing to the point where they conduct their own worship event in their own church building, they participate in worship services elsewhere which others provide for them seven days a week and all hours of the day, even all night long six days a week in some countries. Frequently they will cooperate to charter buses and travel together to join thousands of others in praising God at a worship event. It is not their purpose or concern to start a worship service or build a church building of their own; they are linked to a worship event that someone else plans and provides. As each faith community is very small and flexible, it is very easy for a new healthy core group to form within another group and then go out to start another faith community. This happens all the time. In one year, a Kansas faith community may form twelve small groups to start a single worship event; in Oz, a dozen small faith communities will form in a year and then possibly double every year or two thereafter: 12 becomes 24, then 48, 96, 192 faith communities, etc. In this way dozens and dozens of Oz faith communities spring up, multiply and spread in a network throughout a city.

They visit their neighbors, make friends, help out, pray for problems and invite non-Christians to their group meetings. All involved take turns in the leadership roles during the weekly meetings, including the non-Christians who don't seem to mind taking their turn to chair the meeting or lead the prayers.

The Kansas type of faith community results in what could be called a single new congregation. In Oz, as the only results are just more small communities that make disciples, they could be referred to as an expanding network or by a very old fashioned term: a connection, because the leaders are connected with each other. The true core group is the connection between all the leaders of all the small faith communities linked together in a giant network. Things seem really different in Oz, but it is still a faith community.

Discipleship Systems in Oz

Just as the faith communities in Oz are very diverse, so are the discipleship systems. It will take five weeks to look at the four major types. To help us to better explain this back in Kansas, I think it's more useful to consider four priorities that it seems to me that they all share.

Priority #1: Jesus is Lord.

What does it mean for Jesus to be Lord?

Lordship leads to prayer which leads to goals which lead to action.

The Lord Jesus Christ clearly informs us in the Bible how we are to be obedient.

Goals are clear, specific, measurable and written. Goals are behavioral and therefore visual; actions can be seen. (Behavioral goals show behavior that a camera would see.)

Priority #2: Evangelism or Working in Prevenient Grace.

Matthew 28:19: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .*

If Jesus is Lord, then the Great Commission is to be obeyed. These churches do not believe in limits to growth, but rather believe as Jesus said: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest* (Luke 10:2). The harvest is ready; what is lacking are the laborers. Every member in a cell church, without exception, is expected to be directly involved in the making of new disciples and is fully supported in that task by the church's organizational structure. Every program of the church is subordinated to the goal of making disciples.

One cannot be like Jesus without making disciples. The making of disciples cannot be delegated to institutions, clergy or others who are evangelistically gifted. The goal is generations of disciples making disciples making disciples (2 Timothy 2:2).

Priority #3: Leadership or Working in Sanctifying Grace.

Matthew 28:20: . . . *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

In a discipleship system, converts learn behavior obedient to the commands of Christ, including the command to make disciples. The progress of individuals through each of the steps in the process can be measured. The process used to develop spiritually mature leaders for these churches is often called an "equipping track." Wesley's goal of "going on to perfection" is measured by our becoming fully observant disciples of Jesus Christ.

Priority #4: Cells

Matthew 18:20: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

The small faith communities of Oz are called “cells.”

Cells are the preferred and primary means of making disciples in this type of church; they will not work unless the prior three priorities are in place. Institutions are not as effective; programs are not as effective. Joel Comiskey defines a cell church as ““a church that has placed evangelistic small groups at the core of its ministry’. The word ‘evangelistic’ is crucial to this definition.”¹ They are more than just the means to form a worshiping congregation.

Cell groups are like spiritual nuclear families. They learn together, work together and love one another. Spiritual parents help spiritual children grow up to have their own children, and they are supported by their extended families in a spiritual network.

Laitly who serve as spiritual parents vastly increase the competence of a local church to care for disciples. Often only pastors spiritually parent, which creates abandonment issues when there is a pastoral change. These abandonment issues are a major problem in conflicted churches.

The Healthy Core Group in Oz

The leadership priority of the cell church insists that all members participate in leadership training experiences. Equipping tracks rapidly raise the quantity and quality of leaders in the church to very high levels.²

Spiritual maturity could be described as having five basic stages correlating to human development: *newborns, children, adolescents, parents* and *grandparents*.³ The goal of developmental spirituality is to fulfill each stage properly and move the individual onward to full developmental spiritual maturity. Problems occur when a person becomes stuck at one stage (arrested development)⁴ or is forced prematurely to the next stage (codependency). Churches can become imbalanced such that the majority of ministry is focused on meeting needs at one stage rather than ensuring a steady flow of persons through all of the stages.

Well managed cells can move people rapidly through the stages of spiritual development toward spiritual maturity. Many cell churches believe this goal can be achieved in one year. Cells are misunderstood as bible studies, as ministry teams, and as care groups; they are better understood as spiritual nuclear families thriving in the context of an highly organized extended family. The core group itself is the network of adults in the extended spiritual family working to build each other up in love. Raising people to maturity is best accomplished in families.

¹Joel Comiskey, quoted by Steve Cordle, *Church In Many Houses: Reaching Your Community Through Cell-Based Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 22. Steve Cordle is pastor of Crossroads United Methodist Church, <http://www.crossroadsumc.org>, whom we will meet in a later unit of this course.

²For a visual parable of the differences between the quality of the core group leaders in each type of church, see the visual parable at http://www.disciplewalk.com/parable_army.html.

³Greg Ogden talked about these as stages in Paul’s model of spiritual maturity. For more information on levels of spiritual maturity, see *Module Four*, pages 30-41, in *Seminar One*, www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.

⁴It is estimated that 83% of worship attenders in traditional churches are stuck at spiritual infancy levels.