

Lecture:

Craig Kennet Miller
NextChurch.Now: Creating New Faith Communities
(Revised edition with DVD. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2004).

What is a faith community?

Sometimes a simple phrase can open our eyes to vast, amazing possibilities. For me that phrase is in this section from Craig Miller's book, *NextChurch.Now: Creating New Faith Communities*, where he describes a faith community as made up of two cooperative, interacting components: worship and a discipleship system.¹

Key to this movement of the Spirit is the concept that conversion happens in the midst of Christian conversation, that rather than an us-against-them approach, people come to faith in the midst of Christian community. The primary evangelistic strategy of the 21st century is the establishment of new faith communities that invite people to experience the grace of God through the practice of the Christian spiritual disciplines, through hands-on experiences of mission and ministry, and through the celebration of the Christian life in worship.

A faith community is created when a worship experience is tied to a discipleship system. A worshipping group without a discipleship system is not a faith community; it is simply a place to worship God. A faith community intentionally creates settings that link worship to discipleship and spiritual formation. The primary purpose of this community is to reach out to new people to offer them experience of the grace of God that can transform them into disciples of Christ.²

Miller's understanding of a faith community can help us to understand what is happening within cell churches that allows them to make and mature thousands and thousands of disciples, resulting in a church like Yoido Full Gospel Church which is as large as 700,000 members. While these cell based faith communities are organized differently from the church we attend in the United States, there are common factors. Once we get beyond our discomfort with the sheer size of these churches, we can see the common factors and understand how to apply the principles of the cell church to the common factors in our churches with the hope for common results.

I like to call these giant churches "major league churches" because people are comfortable attending major league baseball games in large stadiums filled with thousands of

¹Craig Kennet Miller, *NextChurch.Now: Creating New Faith Communities* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 114, 116. Balancing the dual aspects of the large group worship service and a discipleship system of cells in a "two winged church" is a major emphasis of cell church author Bill Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1995). We will encounter Dr. Beckham in Unit Three of this class.

²Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 6; see also 50-51.

people. Bishop Eddie Long makes a good point: *“Some people are bothered by a large church of thousands of people; they don’t like a big crowd. Well, there are going to be a lot of people in heaven and a lot of people in hell. Wherever you’re going, you might as well get used to it.”* While we can understand the value of a little league game, we can also understand the value of a major league baseball game.³ We attend major league sports in a small group, often our family. That meets our needs or we would not attend. The other people in the stadium are not our primary concern. Our concern is the small group community we sit with and what happens down on the field. The same concerns fuel large cell church growth.

The world’s largest church is actually an interlocking network of over 10,000 faith communities, all cooperating to make and mature disciples for Jesus Christ.⁴ And while there are many differences because of the size of these churches, they basically operate as faith communities, just like your local church. While the world’s largest churches are found in Seoul, Korea, they are far outnumbered by churches of fifty or less: *“Seoul’s skyline after dark is filled with neon crosses, mounted on the tops of buildings where a church exists. There are literally hundreds of them! A Presbyterian pastor said to me, “Most of those crosses mark small churches with fewer than fifty members. They never seem to grow beyond that figure.” Those who seek to discount the amazing growth of the cell group churches in Korea must understand not all their churches are growing at the same rate.”*⁵ Small churches are the norm in Seoul, Korea, as elsewhere in the entire world. Yoido Church has overcome normal and natural systemic limits to church growth through the world’s most effective discipleship, rapidly filling up organizational capacity with new converts to the highest possible size in a context where much smaller churches are culturally normative.

What is a discipleship system?

Miller describe faith as a journey where “God calls us to move forward, that we are to invite others to join us, and that the journey is one that is not to be walked alone.”⁶ People in the 21st century “come to truth through a process of discovery rather than by adopting a set of beliefs.”⁷ That process of discovery is the discipleship system.

Conversion, then, is a lifelong process.⁸ The Apostle Paul encourages believers to “work

³Check out the visual parable at http://www.disciplewalk.com/parable_baseball.html.

⁴For a brief description with examples of cell churches, see pp. 2-6 of the Project Introduction at <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

⁵Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church*, 10th Anniversary ed. (Houston: Touch Publications, 1990), 41. We will encounter Dr. Neighbour again in Unit Three of this class.

⁶Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 5; see also 103-111.

⁷Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 66.

⁸Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 103.

out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12b-13). John Wesley understood this as God working through sanctifying grace while we cooperate with God by practicing spiritual disciplines which help us to grow. The discipleship system is the process by which God works through God's people in prevenient grace to bring outsiders into the faith community and then through sanctifying grace to be mature disciples modeled after Jesus.

The significant difference between these giant churches and ours is not found in their worship or physical buildings. They sing the same songs, praise the same God, and read the same Bible. They are often innovative with regard to building in order to accommodate vast crowds of people, but innovations such as giant projection screens or Internet broadcasting of worship services more an adaptation to growth than a cause of growth. The real difference is how their highly organized, finely tuned discipleship systems work with God in prevenient and sanctifying grace. A discipleship system is always present in every faith community. In most churches it is misunderstood, ignored, starved of resources and strangled by institutional bureaucracy. In many churches it consists of little more than conversations people have with each other before and after worship.

As Miller writes, *“one of the critical steps for turning around an existing congregation is to evaluate and improve its current discipleship system. The way to approach the development of a discipleship system in either case - a new church or an existing congregation - is to ask: ‘What does our faith community need to offer to help a person reach spiritual maturity in the first three years of being a part of the faith community?’”*⁹ Craig Miller's understanding of discipleship systems in our churches can help us understand how our discipleship systems work, how they can be improved and how we can adapt aspects of the cell church discipleship system to work within ours.

What is a healthy core group?

Miller points out a common four year cycle that churches encounter as systems resist change. A new pastor arrives and is welcomed by all. As the pastor prays and learns the congregation's situation, the pastor attempts to solve the problems in the present and begins to lead the congregation forward toward a vision of a better future. The system begins to exert pressure upon the pastor to provide comfort rather than change as a “cleric” rather than a visionary leader. As the pastor leads forward, the balancing, backward pressure to maintain the status quo increases. The rising conflict level causes the ejection of the pastor, usually in the fourth year, and the cycle begins again.¹⁰

The first task of a new pastor in an existing church, according to Miller, is to work to create a healthy core group: *“In every congregation there is a core group which is made up of the leaders of the congregation who invest themselves in the life of the congregation. They may lead small groups and Bible studies, serve on committees and teams, or actively participate in the*

⁹Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 108.

¹⁰Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 91-96.

worship life of the congregation. . . . These people are seriously committed to the life of the church and find meaning and purpose in what they do.”¹¹ If the core group is healthy, the church can produce good fruit in abundance; if the core group members “love one another, the future can be built on a solid foundation.”¹² Healthy relationships are the heart of a healthy core group. As Miller points out, the productivity of a church depends on its leaders; the church is built on the foundation, solid or shifting, of its leaders.

The discipleship system, by building healthy theological values in a relational context, helps create a healthy core group. Growing churches reach a “competency limit” which is derived from Heylighen’s Generalized Peter Principle, which states that “in evolution systems tend to develop up to the limit of their adaptive competence.”¹³ Ultimately, any church can grow only to the limit of its competence; cell churches fundamentally grow because their discipleship system raises the competence of each leader’s ability to adapt to change in a healthy way.

Raising the standard required for leadership is one common factor of evangelistic discipleship systems. We will encounter many forms of “speed bumps” which prevent people from entering leadership until maturity levels are sufficient. Miller mentions one church’s requirement that leaders in the core group be faithful in worship attendance, and defined that as making a commitment to attend worship for out of the fifty-two weeks of the year. Other criteria this church set included daily prayer for the church, for other members of the core group, and for the pastor.¹⁴

Cell churches will often raise the requirements for leadership even higher. Dale Galloway’s New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, required tithing as a minimum expectation of cell group leadership based on Matthew 6:20-21, believing that a person not ready for leadership until their spiritual priorities were in order. Another church requires tithing and involvement in serving in the church as a requirement for membership; only those who show commitment to Christ, therefore, have a vote on important decisions. Raising expectations for leadership balances lowering expectations for participation in these churches by outsiders. The use of *speed bumps* protects the health of the leadership core by excluding persons from the core until they demonstrate spiritual maturity. Defining these criteria will often provoke extreme resistance to change in traditional churches.

¹¹Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 80-81.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Francis Heylighen, “The Generalized ‘Peter Principle,’” *Principia Cybernetica Web*, ed. F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn, and V. Turchin, <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/PETERPR.html> (accessed June 12, 2007).

¹⁴Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 88-89. For another example of this trend of raising expectations, see Thom Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (1999), with product description at <http://www.lifewaystores.com/lwstore/product.asp?ISBN=0805412662>.