

Unit 3: The First Wave Interpreted Worldwide

Lecture: Ralph W. Neighbour, *Where Do We Go From Here?*

Abbreviations for page numbers in parentheses:

WD: Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook For The Cell Group Church*. Tenth Anniversary Edition. Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2000.

SG: Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr. *The Shepherd's Guidebook: Spiritual and Practical Foundations for Cell Group Leaders*. Revised Edition. Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1995.

It's hard to imagine the developing understanding of the cell church without the work of Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., and the publishing ministry he founded in Houston known first as TOUCH Outreach Ministries. Yongji Cho formed Church Growth International in 1976 to share the cell church model with foreign pastors; in 1989, Ralph Neighbor wrote the 463 page book that would set the standard for the American understanding of what was happening at Yoido church: *Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church*.

Ralph Neighbour had been working on a modern expression of New Testament Christianity since 1969; his brilliant adaptation of the cell discipleship system for evangelism is a blend of both Neighbour and Cho, of his perceptions of Yoido with his experiences as an evangelist and church planter (WD: 13, 97-109, 353-358; SG: 7). This lecture can only superficially describe a few of the facets of this thinking; in each unit and lecture, however, we are developing a terminology which I hope will be helpful in seeing how each author's approach fits into the big picture. All of the authors contribute their own terminology; Neighbour, for example, prefers to call cell groups "shepherd groups."

Neighbour is a classic example of an **Innovator** as defined by the *diffusion of innovations*, the scientific sociological study of the cultural adoption of change which I first encountered in *Where Do We Go From Here* (WD: 360-367). Neighbour quotes C. S. Lewis and unintentionally provides a good illustration of the idealism that fuels the innovator's experience: *Those like myself whose imagination far exceed their obedience are subject to a just penalty: we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there* (WD: 193). An inspiring vision of the good that can be accomplished through the best possible cell group experience is birthed in "the listening room," Neighbor's metaphor for time spent in prayer with God. Neighbour's painful experiences with systemic resistance to the innovation of the cell groups is largely due to the inability of others to believe, let alone grasp, the visionary benefit he sees as possible. Innovators are tired of business as usual (WD: 14), challenge the status quo, believe that all change is enabled by discontent (WD: 359), and are rebuffed by church systems that would rather be more comfortable and please themselves than more holy and pleasing to God. Innovators are idealists who only reluctantly come to agree with Jesus: new wine cannot be put in old wineskins (WD: 353-358; SG: 7-8).¹

¹The diffusion of innovations, however, does suggest methods which make cultural transformation possible; what leads to success, however, is counter intuitive to an innovator's natural preferences.

Faith Communities

In the cell church, it is the cell that provides the community in the faith community. Just as at a major league baseball game, community is experienced in the small group with whom we attend the large group event, often our family. In traditional churches, the desire to provide community experience in the worship service equivalent to that found in a small, intimate group is a primary hindrance to growth. This tendency is a primary characteristic of Prairie DNA and often reflects a desire to preserve the rural cultural patterns of the 1800s.

The math is seductive: an evangelistic small group of 12 multiplies into 120 as each of the original members lead a group of ten; if this cycle of each member of each group eventually leading a group of 10 continues, then 120 become 1200 believers, and then 12,000 believers, and so on. If this cycle repeats consistently on a yearly basis, the entire world population of 6.6 billion will be converted in less than ten years. For those whose highest priority is the fulfillment of the Great Commission, the potential of the cell church as an evangelistic innovation is fascinating, whether it is seen at Yoido or in the New Testament church of Acts. This fascination with the mathematics of multiplying growth has dominated the thinking of the western innovators and led to innovations that depart in many ways from the standard set by Yoido's discipleship system. To me this calls for a reconsideration of the original.

The theme of rapid cell multiplication dominates the cell church movement after Yoido. In Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Africa, where poverty and unemployment allow for much time to be invested in spiritual relationships and activities, cells regularly multiply in three months (SG: 9, WD: 305). The goal in Neighbour's method is multiplication every six months (WD: 271, SG: 45, 149-150).² If each person involved had Neighbour's innovative idealism, commitment and focus, this pace could be maintained and would convert the world's 6.6 billion people less than five years. (I admire Neighbour and wish I were more like him.)

Rapid multiplication is deemed necessary for four basic reasons. First, evangelical theology understands that delay causes more people to experience an eternal suffering without Christ; this creates a significant urgency for effective evangelism, and urgency stimulates systemic resistance to change. Second, traditional "churchianity" models that evolved in rural areas cannot evangelistically keep pace with exploding, urban world populations; only evangelism by multiplication, where disciples make disciples who make disciples, can fulfill the Great Commission (WD: 29-36). Third, in Neighbour's experience, small groups that do not multiply can become stagnant after six months; they lose their focus on the lost, "rewind and play their traditional church tapes," and usually reorganize to nurture themselves in a self-centered manner (WD: 87; SG: 149-150). This stagnation cuts off all the potential converts downstream that could have been helped if the group maintained its pace and focus on evangelism.

²Conversion growth at Yoido Church is not uniform. Half of the cell leaders in one survey by Hurston reported no conversions in the previous year, while others reported from one to twenty-three; many groups, then, primarily provide pastoral care to their members and experience long periods between multiplication. Karen Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church*, 218, 73. This was a random sample of 340 cell leaders from eight districts. At Yoido, multiplication follows conversions made within the cell by evangelistically gifted leaders.

Fourth, evangelism at this pace *is* possible, and examples abound in the cell churches.³

Multiplication has become the primary goal of the cell group's existence, and a reorganization of methodology can take place that subordinates every activity to the goal of cell group multiplication. In order to ensure a full cell, required to multiply, churches fill up cells with strangers drawn in through harvest events (WD: 17, 343-351) or by cell interns following up on worship visitors (SG: 101). Cell groups begin with apprentice leaders in place who will be ready to lead the new cell group in six months or less; every new group has to have a shepherd in place in order to start (SG: 31). Mandatory cell division once cells reach 15 fuels rapid multiplication (SG: 14, 23). New groups begin with 5-8 persons and are halfway to multiplication (SG: 23). The goal of multiplication shapes the methodology used in the cell in explicit and subtle ways.

Traditional church growth theory understands that the gospel expands through relational networks which McGavran called "the bridges of God." **This *oikos* strategy focuses on making a convert and then evangelizing through that person to their network of influence, particularly among family relatives** (WD: 133-140, 281-284; SG: 87-93, 163-167). People are drawn by the newness of changes God makes in a converted person's life and by the quality of life within community that the cell offers. Each conversion opens up a new *oikos* network of lost relatives and friends; the window of opportunity to convert one of these people and gain access to another new *oikos* for evangelism is brief and frequently closes within six months.⁴ New people fuel new enthusiasm and help keep the cell focused on evangelism.

A high level of shared interest and common experiences can create a relational kinship network. Neighbor organizes relational outreach groups he calls *share groups* to create new relational networks or penetrate existing networks. Cell groups develop out of relationships formed in share groups; the share groups can be short or long term (WD: 105, 220-223, 281-290, 293-300; SG: 101-107). Cell groups also practice "kinning" to create community within the cell (WD: 259-260; SG: 92) and "holy eavesdropping" to identify ways to minister to and love lost people (SG: 99). **Neighbour perceives the biggest problem in evangelism to be the difficulty of helping Christians develop relationships with lost people (WD: 386); I agree.**

As cells cannot multiply without leaders, competition between cells and programs for the time and energy of leaders can be a source of serious conflict in traditional churches. In a "pure cell church" there are only cells and a worship service; there are no programs, so all leaders can focus

³In the same study reported in footnote 2 above, Hurston noted that many section leaders over three to eight cells reported conversions of over one hundred families in their section. Hurston reports one section in 1983 leading over three hundred families to Christ and church membership. God's people are inconsistent.

⁴Each person has a limited number of relatives and persons who share their hobbies; eventually the pool of existing *oikos* relationships dries up. In a mobile society, however, new people are always moving into the old neighborhood and members of cell groups are always moving into new neighborhoods. The geographical approach used at Yoido consolidates influence of leaders in existing neighborhoods and extends influence into new neighborhood *micro-mission fields*. Each mature Christian thereby becomes the *person of peace* in his or her own neighborhood, and that influence builds continually and long term among the lost. The neighborhood approach simply and literally fulfills the commandment of Jesus that each Christian love his or her geographical neighbor (Matthew 22:19).

without distraction on their cells (SG: 13). In traditional churches, approximately 10% of attenders are leaders focused on meeting the 90% of church members who are “Eddies” or consumer Christians (WD: 16). Neighbour warns that seeking out and including traditional Christians in cell life can cause a cell to lose its focus on evangelism (SG: 101). Without a continual stream of new, trained, capable leaders, cell group multiplication comes to a halt. **The mathematics of multiplication shape the western understanding of the cell church.**

Discipleship Systems

The making of disciples takes place within the cell; for Neighbour, the cell is the discipleship system. Neighbour makes four points about the relationship between the disciple and the disciple maker: (SG: 35-36)

1. *The one being equipped depends on the equipper.*
2. *Basic to the whole relationship is the inner fellowship between the two, and the practical effects of it.*
3. *The relationship is not merely an external connection with the goal of picking up information or skills under expert direction.*
4. *It is grounded in a fellowship which arises because all who participate are equally striving.*

Equipping cell members for the Lord’s service involves *mending* them where they are dysfunctional and *training* them with new knowledge and skills (WD: 60). In Neighbour’s understanding, this is accomplished through the relationship between two persons in a “mentor-driven discipleship process.” In this model, the cell leader is the primary equipper of each cell member (SG: 35-42, 48, 23-34; WD 16). Like the relationship between parent and child, it cannot be done in a couple of hours per week. **Properly done, cell leadership requires a large investment of personal time with each person being equipped.**⁵ Mutual equipping between members helps ease this “one on one” time requirement, but the leader’s commitment to invest time in mentoring will be continually tested by other priorities. Prayer time can also become neglected. There is a temptation to focus on improving the quality of the weekly cell “event” (WD: 261-275; SG: 146-217) to meet these needs rather than developing the spiritual maturity of each cell member throughout the week. Cells seem to flourish best in environments where people have a great deal of free time; this is especially true of the cell leader.⁶

Disciplewalk identifies five basic levels of developmental maturity: newborns (infants), children, adolescents, parents and grandparents. **The Touch model uses four correlating levels of spiritual maturity: Beckham’s “eddie” and Neighbour’s *children, young men and fathers*. The latter are derived directly from 1 John 2:13-14** (SG: 14-16, 36-38; WD 16, 235-237, 250-255, 338). Neighbour says that “The extent of a person’s spiritual maturity is the extent of the commitment he or she has to Kingdom activity” (SG: 53). A form of Hersey & Blanchard’s situational leadership model explains the form of equipping ministry needed by each of the four maturity group (WD: 379; SG: 56). Mutual ministry and equipping also takes place as members exercise their spiritual gifts in the cell (WD: 185).

⁵An extraordinarily talented Christian could mentor 12 spiritual beginners in the cell or share this task with a talented intern. A cell filling up with beginners drawn from harvest events could easily overwhelm the system and stop growth.

⁶Cells seem to flourish best among the impoverished, uneducated, unemployed, oppressed and powerless. Often these people have time on their hands. Cells provide very effective tools for people to overcome these conditions. There are many correlations between the cell movement and the social work discipline of community organization. (SG: 132).

Healthy Core Group

Church size depends on the linking relationship between the “crowd” and a leadership “core” and upon the span of control in the leadership core. In a small church, each person in the crowd is directly linked by a relationship to someone in the leadership core. This limits the growth of the small church as only two layers are allowed: core and crowd. When the span of control is six, there can be one pastor, up to six leaders and thirty-six followers for a total of forty-three. When the span of control is twelve, as Jesus chose, there can be one pastor, up to twelve core leaders and 144 followers for a maximum total of 157. A competency limit is often reached beyond this total.⁷ A church cannot grow beyond its capacity to link the “crowd” to the “core.”

Some form of hierarchical organization in a larger church must link each person in the “crowd” to the leadership core; that common link defines a “base design.” Ralph Neighbour first identified this way of defining organizational paradigms with the Program Base Design, or PBD, where members are linked with the core group by participating in programs, activities and events. Programs require leaders who minister codependently to passive recipients/consumers and frequently burn out, resulting in a long term, chronic shortage of leaders to operate the programs in a PBD church (WD: 65-76).⁸ The form of the link between the leadership core and the crowd can be used to identify five basic paradigms or “base designs” of churches. In the Chaplain Base Design (CBD), individual nurture to passive members by the pastor as chaplain is the priority.⁹ In the Temple Base Design (TBD), people are linked to leadership only by presence in a worship service in the Temple. In the Academic Base Design (ABD), persons are linked by learning experiences, usually Sunday School or clergy participating in denominationally sponsored workshops; the answer to every problem in this environment is “more information, more seminars!” These forms of organizational linking are unhealthy.

Cell churches represent a Network Base Design which Neighbor calls the “People Base Design” (WD: 65). Traditional churches build up programs; cell churches build up people. The network management model of the Yoido/Neighbour cell church is known as the “5x5” because every five cell leaders are linked to a supervisor; every five supervisors is linked to another supervisor. This results in a management structure of many hierarchical layers which some consider inefficient, preferring to have as many leaders as possible multiplying cells. With a span of control of five, however, these supervisory leaders have all the time necessary to respond quickly to help with any need or problem experienced by a cell leader (SG: 231-235). When supervisors are tightly scheduled with many responsibilities, the cell leader support system is easily overwhelmed; then problems flourish and growth stops.

⁷For information on competency limit of the *Rule of 150*, see Kevin Martin, *The Myth of the 200 Barrier: How to Lead through Transitional Growth* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 2005), 39-42.

⁸Neighbour’s chart in the Assignments folder, *A Study In Contrasts*, demonstrates the PBD traditional church. While cells rapidly create leaders, drawing leaders out of programs to lead cells often sparks heated conflict in PBD churches.

⁹Chaplain Base Design churches usually have less than 100 in worship; Program Base Design churches usually have more than 300 in worship. Mid-size churches blend CBD and PBD traits in conflict and tension. It is a major cultural change for a CBD church to grow beyond the Two Hundred Barrier to become a Program Base Design (PBD) church. Many small churches are unwilling to do this and surrender their intimacy with the senior pastor.

It is involvement in evangelism and/or share groups that leads to rapid spiritual growth in developing leaders (SG: 9, 41, 95; WD 255). Neighbour distinguishes between ministry to two different types of unbelievers, type "A" and type "B" unbelievers (WD: 281, 254; SG: 39-41, 104-107). Type A unbelievers are open to the *message* of the gospel through bible study (SG: 39). Type B unbelievers are hostile to the message of the gospel but are open to a *messenger*; they are ministered to relationally or in share groups (SG: 40, 97, 16-17).

While equipping for maturity primarily takes place within the cell, the equipper is fully supported by the mother church. Leadership development printed resources are provided by Touch Outreach Ministries and known as the "Year of Equipping" (WD: 249, 329-341; SG: 61-72, 222-236).¹⁰ The year long process includes four weekend retreats (WD: 329-341). Cell churches cooperate in larger groups which Neighbour calls *congregations* to meet various needs (WD: 223-229). Neighbour reminds us that "one never joins a congregation; *the only available link to its ministry is to join a cell*" (WD: 224). The cell comes first.

In order to be successful with the 5x5 model, Neighbour writes, "these principles must be followed: 1) There must be a comprehensive equipping track that takes all new believers (and existing cell members) to a functioning level of maturity within one year. Without this there is a substantial breakdown in discipleship and leadership development. 2) Each cell leader must mentor two or three members with leadership potential to keep the number of interns higher than the immediate need. Without new leaders, cells cannot multiply. 3) A constant sense of urgency to see every cell member win a "Type A" unbeliever (man of peace) for Christ within six months of cell life must be maintained. The cell group will ossify and eventually die if evangelism is not considered the primary purpose" (WD: 234). A *person of peace* is a key person of influence with connections to many others in a social network; when they are converted, the gospel then spreads throughout that person's entire network of influence. The term *man of peace* comes from the missionary instructions of Christ in Luke 10:1-12. While not everyone is a *person of peace*, everyone is connected to a *person of peace*; they are connecting nodes in a social network. Conversion of a *person of peace* will lead to a wave of conversions among their *oikos* network due to their relational influence. Examples are Cornelius in Acts 10:1-2, 19-48 and the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:25-34.

Beautiful and inspiring testimonies of cell life can be found at the following pages:

WD: 222, 327.

SG: 29, 47, 106, 73-74, 82-84.

¹⁰The complete "mentor-driven discipleship process" is available from Touch Outreach Ministries here at a reasonable price: <http://www.touchusa.org/web/products/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=113>