

Unit 3: The Second Wave: South American Innovations Lecture: Introduction to the Second Wave

Pastors from all over the world were going to Seoul, Korea, to learn about the cell system at Yoido Full Gospel Central Church. They came home filled with fire and enthusiasm and began to adapt the cell system to their own cultural situations. In South America this led to sufficient new forms of cell life that I believe that it is correct to speak of a second wave of cell innovation taking place. Three churches will serve as examples of the second wave in our class: the Elim Church of El Salvador, the International Charismatic Mission (ICM) of Columbia and the example in the United States of Bethany World Prayer Center of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The primary authority on the second wave is Joel Comiskey. Joel was born in 1956 and grew up in Long Beach, California. After pastoral ministry in Long Beach 1982-1989 that included pioneering an inner city church plant, Joel and Celyce Comiskey left in 1990 for missionary service with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Ecuador, South America, to work as a church planter, pastor and teacher. He established a cell ministry in El Batán which added 450 new members, planted a daughter church from El Batán in 1994 that grew from 150 to 1000 in 6 years (10 cells to 200 cells), and joined the pastoral team of the La Luz Church as consultant in 2000, where church attendance grew from 120 to 200+ and cells from 10-50+. While continuing to serve as a missionary, Joel earned a Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1997 and taught graduate seminary level classes in Colombia, Ecuador, and Perú. His first book, *Home Cell Group Explosion: How Your Small Group Can Grow and Multiply* was published by Touch in 1998 and has sold over 90,000 copies. In 2001 the Comiskys returned for ministry in the U.S. and planted a cell church in Moreno Valley, California. The Joel Comiskey Group was started in 2002 to “equip churches to complete the great commission by providing resources and coaching to plant new cell churches and transition existing churches to cell-based ministry.”

I was privileged to meet Joel in 2002 when he joined our Fuller Seminary Doctor of Ministry cell church planting class for two days. A vast amount of Joel’s research and writing is available online at <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/> and **I appreciate permission from Joel to quote directly from that material in these presentations so that you may hear these ideas in their most authentic voice.**¹

The “community” in the *Faith Community* remains in the cell of second wave churches that grow into multiple thousands of disciples. Cells provide a forum for relational intimacy and for cell members to use spiritual gifts to edify and build up one another. The cell is small enough for each member to minister to every other member; this opportunity for each person to practice their gifts is why small groups build up active leaders and large group presentations tend to create passive spectators. ***A healthy core group, therefore, is found both at the micro community level within the cell and in the network of active ministry leaders functioning within the macro community of the large group.***

Cell church pastors believe this represents the situation in the New Testament, where the early church functioned as a network of small groups described in Acts. The early church ministered within

¹These direct quotes from online materials will usually be identified by printing sentences in *italics* with the source usually identified in the context or by footnote. Sources for Joel’s quotes will be found in the original.

the context of the institutional church that was the Jewish temple, but not in positions of leadership in that institutional church or with any control over institutional worship forms. In my understanding of the “two winged” system of church that I propose, they functioned as a discipleship system *within* but not in *control* of an *institutional church*. I believe that Wesley’s societies functioning within but not in control of the politics or worship forms of the Church of England are another example of this pattern. I believe this distinction is very useful in understanding how to help a church to transition to the cell model.

As Joel writes,² *The New Testament clearly teaches that the church is not a building or an organization. It is a living organism. As a living organism under the headship of Christ, it’s function is spiritual as opposed to political. In the early church, the atmosphere of the house church enriches this important concept. In all three of the major passages (Eph. 4; Rom. 12; I Cor. 12-14) in which Paul talks about the body of Christ, he defines each member’s part by their corresponding gifts. In fact, when Paul talks about the church as the body of Christ, the implication is that the believers were able to participate in the exercise of their spiritual gifts. They had the opportunity to interact among themselves. Banks reminds us, “Paul’s communities were instead theocratic in structure. Because God gave to each individual within the community some contribution for its welfare, there is a strong democratic tendency. Everyone participates authoritatively in its activities” (1994:148).*

How did everyone participate? Along with the united celebration (Acts 2:46a), we read that they also broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (2:46b). Paul taught the people, not only publicly, but also from house to house (Acts 20:20). It is with this intimate atmosphere in mind that Paul could say, “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction...” (I Cor. 14:26).

Looking at the effectiveness of the early church and drawing from my own personal experience, it seems that there is no better atmosphere for the exercise of one’s giftedness than in a home group. The primary atmosphere of the early church was the intimate character of the home. This atmosphere of participation is being rediscovered in a fresh way through the cell group movement. Churches are realizing that as they grow bigger, they must also grow smaller. Only in the intimacy of a small, closely knit group will many Christians ever be able to exercise their spiritual gift. George reminds us that, “Because of the intimate, accountability-inviting context of an affinity-based group, participants will readily accept the call of God that accompanies the discovery of their gifts” (1993: 136). Following the same line of thought, Dr. Ralph Neighbour asserts, “All are to exercise spiritual gifts to edify others. The early church did exactly that! Recognizing there cannot be total participation by every member when the gatherings are only made up of large, impersonal groups, the people of God moved from house to house in small groups. By moving among their residences, they became intimately acquainted with each person’s surroundings” (Neighbour, 1990:41).

Functioning within an institutional church, the cell movement has two distinct parts: the cells themselves, which function as a *discipleship system* where individuals are allowed to learn how to exercise their gifts without being stifled by the institutional needs of the large group. The cells are linked by a network of active leaders; the network is the *healthy core group* which functions both as the managing structure of the discipleship system for the supervision and support of cell leaders and the *equipping track* by which they are trained.

²*The Body Of Christ Motif*, <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/chinese/articles/tutorials/CellHistPt2.html>, traces the New Testament origins of the cell movement and its institutional transmutation into monasticism.