

Unit 5: The Third Wave of Cell Innovation

Lecture: Question: Are Willow Creek, Saddleback and Ginghamburg Cell Churches?

Over the past four weeks we've looked at a variety of cell churches; this week our attention turns to three well known churches in the United States: Willow Creek Community Church of suburban Chicago, Saddleback Community Church in Orange County south of Los Angeles, California and Ginghamburg United Methodist Church of rural Dayton, Ohio. These three churches are well known for their small group ministries; if they are not cell churches, they are certainly "cellish" enough to be a stop on our tour. Standing in the center of our reminisces, we can make some generalizations about cell churches, particularly with regard to the perspectives I've brought to our guided tour. And we can discuss a valuable question: in your opinion, do Willow Creek, Saddleback and Ginghamburg qualify as cell churches?

Three concepts from the Doctor of Ministry project help me to establish a matrix of common factors related to cell churches. These are my generalizations; they may or may not be helpful to you. We can use that matrix to help us compare and contrast cell churches with each other. The three matrix concepts are:

A. The Four Systemic Problems that prevent disciple making,¹ which are:

1. *Not making disciples.*
2. *Institutional world view.*
3. *Prairie DNA.*
4. *Stranger evangelism.*

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church,² which are:

- #1: *Jesus is Lord, leading to prayer and goals. (Matthew 28:18)*
- #2: *Evangelism or Working in Prevenient Grace. (Matthew 28:19)*
- #3: *Leadership Development or Working in Sanctifying Grace. (Matthew 28:20)*
Equipping Tracks
Management Structures
- #4: *Cells are the best means to fulfill these priorities (I fulfill my purpose best in a group.)*

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity,³ which are: *Newborn (aka Infants or Eddies), Child, Teen, Parent, Grandparent.*

IS WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH A CELL CHURCH?

A. The Four Systemic Problems:

☺ Willow Creek has a definite and clear purpose of making disciples at the core of all that they do. In their history, whenever they have lost this focus or it has become fuzzy, they have reorganized to restore disciple making as the primary priority of the church. Their current "Reveal" program is another such reorganization. The networking approach of the seven step philosophy, neighborhood groups and insistence that members participate in groups ensures that no one enters the church as a stranger. Willow

¹See *Chapter One: Systemic Problems*, p. 5-35, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

²These are defined in *Seminar One: Diagnosis*, p. 10-23, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

³These are defined in *Seminar One: Diagnosis*, p. 30-41, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

Creek places a high emphasis on relationships and social networks.

☺ Willow Creek uses a relational network model, the Seven Step Philosophy,⁴ but the focus of the network is to bring people into the church building for worship and other large group learning activities. Whenever evangelism is by invitation to a service of worship, no matter how emergent or creative that service is, one has an institutional church. Institutional churches promote attendance as spectators in events and activities which they believe cause spiritual growth through the presentation of information; Willow Creek's growth is due to expanding the size of these events and using the *contagious* relational network to funnel people into them. Ministry is through organized programs; Willow Creek is a *program base design* church. While they are very creative, almost all of the activity of their church is large group oriented and entirely within the traditional wing of the church. The preferred means for learning is the large group bible study known as New Community with 6000 attending. The primary understanding is that God acts primarily through services of worship in the "temple."

Willow Creek's self-image is modeled on the best practices of effective business corporations. According to a *diffusion of innovation* understanding, this model of forceful leadership stimulates resistance to change. They are more corporate than organic; they are, to use one of Bill Hybel's favorite symbols, very "Dutch."

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church:

☺ Jesus is certainly Lord at Willow Creek, and a corporate model leads to very specific goals and strategies. The "contagious" relational network and Yoido like neighborhood approach builds relationships in convenient grace with the lost; these relationships create a "sort of small group" that ministers to the lost person. To the extent that leadership can be taught in presentations at worship and conferences, no one does it better than Willow Creek. Their implementation of the metachurch model and insistence that all members participate in small groups ensures that the large group ministry of the church is balanced by nurturing, caring relationships in peer groups. The *Network* program for identifying spiritual gifts, calling and ministry goals is excellent.

☺ The current "Reveal" study indicates the lack of a true equipping track at Willow Creek; what they have is weekend worship, followed by new community, followed by small group participation, followed by some sort of ministry service. Willow Creek prefers to primarily train and serve through events and programs rather than primarily through cells. Persons are not really taught to make disciples or mature them in small groups; that occurs during worship and conferences. Small groups do not multiply due to conversions. I would expect that mentoring within small groups is more peer-to-peer than mentor-to-disciple. While small group leaders are supported by coaches, the high expectation leadership development environment of the cell church management structure is not present; I would assume that small group coaches are not supervisory leaders nor do they function as leaders in the way Willow Creek normally defines leadership. I am not aware of specific goals or standards for prayer time or reading scripture or other standardized spiritual disciplines as expectations of members; I believe this is more a matter of individual decision than standardized training present in an equipping track.

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity:

☺ Through the "Reveal" program, Willow Creek had identified an equipping track they call the *spiritual continuum*⁵ consisting of *Exploring Christianity* (newborn), *Growing in Christ* (child), *Close to*

⁴The evangelistic use of the relational network at Willow Creek is thoroughly explained in books by Mark Mittelberg and Bill Hybels such as *Becoming A Contagious Christian* and *Becoming a Contagious Church*.

⁵Cf. *Key Findings*, <http://www.revealnow.com/storyPage.asp?pageID=12>.

Christ (teen) and Christ-centered (fully matured, i.e. spiritual adult). Their research indicates that they do very well with the first two levels; these levels can be well done in event and presentation based learning. The higher levels require interactive learning in small groups or mentoring relationships; Hybels' understanding of leadership has an excellent understanding of this but I expect the sheer size of numbers prevents them from providing this time intensive, high quality leadership to every individual. Network helps teens identify their ministry careers and they begin to work in the church.

⊗ The end result of the equipping track at Willow Creek is a *spiritual adult* in ministry, participating in a small group and contagiously inviting friends to worship at Willow Creek. The goal is to place lost persons upon the conveyor belt of weekend worship and the institutional church will take over responsibility for their spiritual growth from that involvement forward. Not only is this very traditional church, it is very far from the cell church concept of a *parental* responsibility for those converted. Parents raise their children, teach them how to parent, and then help them parent as grandparents. The corporate model that has so influenced Willow Creek perceives people as leaders and workers but ignores their identity as parents and grandparents of families. When cells are perceived as gatherings of friends, there is no pressure to multiply; when cells are perceived as spiritual families, spiritual parents hunger for their children to grow up and begin their own families.

Conclusion: Willow Creek is “cellish” but not a cell church. Cell church principles could significantly benefit their ability to care for multiple thousands of converts but would require significant changes in their corporate self-image and organizational culture.

IS SADDLEBACK COMMUNITY CHURCH A CELL CHURCH?

A. The Four Systemic Problems:

⊗ Saddleback has a definite and clear purpose of making disciples at the core of all that they do. They are definitely a “two winged” church, blending traditional, institutional elements with their *purpose driven* discipleship system. Saddleback is famous for avoiding facility ownership, meeting in 79 different locations for 13 years and not building until they had thousands of members. This resulted in a healthy leadership core group of thousands focused on faithfulness rather than easy access to a campus. They built relational connections within the socially disconnected world of wealthy, suburban Los Angeles.

⊗ Saddleback doesn't really seem to have a problem with these systemic problems.

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church:

⊗ Jesus is Lord at Saddleback; it's not about you, after all, it's about God. Saddleback follows a Purpose Driven model which very specific goals and strategies; Warren is a fan of Peter Drucker's writings on corporate management. Individuals build relationships where kinship is present (“Saddleback Sam”) that grow into church involvement. The membership covenant lays out the responsibilities of the emotionally mature. The four classes of the famous baseball diamond are the equipping track which takes place in the church. The *Purpose Driven Life* is the curriculum for an equipping track that takes place in the context of small groups. The SHAPE process for identifying spiritual gifts, calling and ministry goals is coupled with Ministry Fairs which involve people in community ministry.

⊗ While small groups are essential for membership at Saddleback, I am not aware of a drive toward cell multiplication or a management structure designed to develop leaders to make that happen. The small groups are definitely evangelistic and train their members to be evangelistic; it's one of the five

purposes. ***The Purpose Driven Life is one of the very few resources on discipleship which emphasizes that evangelism is a personal responsibility for every Christian.*** Yoido Church, likewise, focuses on evangelism within groups rather than multiplication of groups; groups only multiply when there are sufficient conversions to warrant multiplication. So perhaps this is not a problem.

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity:

- ☺ The four classes of the famous baseball diamond take persons through the stages of growth; small groups prepare persons for the next class in a relational environment, with leaders fulfilling the parental role.
- ☹ No problem here.

Conclusion: Saddleback is a cell church.

IS GINGHAMSBURG UNITED METHODIST CHURCH A CELL CHURCH?

A. The Four Systemic Problems:

- ☺ Ginghamburg has a definite and clear purpose of making disciples at the core of all that they do. The theology and teaching of their church is as inspiring and direct as any cell church. They have high standards for membership and set a very high example of creative ministries to the community.
- ☹ The focus of evangelism is to bring people into the church building for worship, and then onto a learning class, a relational small group followed by ministry service in the church and/or community. Ginghamburg is therefore a “come structure,” a traditional church revised to be an attractive environment to the unchurched. While they do not “go” to make disciples, they do “go” to perform acts of service to the needy in the community; these are organized as programs of the church rather than relational acts by small groups working together in their own neighborhoods.

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church:

- ☺ Jesus is certainly Lord at Ginghamburg and extreme obedience to Christ as Lord is consistently emphasized and practiced. There is very little room for hypocrisy in this church. The equipping track begins with a 12 week membership course and expectations are very clear; believers participate in “cell, celebration and call,” the latter referring to discovering and obeying the call of God upon their life. Ginghamburg strongly supports the concept of the priesthood of all believers. The congregation reads scripture together through an online “Life Transformation Journal.”⁶
- ☹ The equipping track prepares leaders for task oriented ministries rather than spiritual parenting through cell groups. Ginghamburg prefers to serve through events and programs rather than primarily through cells. Persons are not really taught to personally make disciples or personally mature them in small groups; that occurs during worship and conferences. There is no intent to multiply small groups but rather to build accountable fellowship through years of relational intimacy. This is intentional and consistent with the metachurch model and Wesley’s class meetings. There is no cell type linking management structure but the needs of group leaders are well cared for by the direct ministry of the small groups pastor and by the availability of optional monthly gatherings for training.

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity:

- ☺ Ginghamburg effectively moves people through stages of maturity to the teen level of understanding one’s personal call to a ministry. The emphasis is upon obeying Jesus Christ as Lord. There is no hypocrisy here as people literally practice what Ginghamburg preaches. While small groups do not function as cells, Ginghamburg is starting house churches with many of the features of cell

⁶*Life Transformation Journal: A One Year Journey Through The Bible*, <http://ginghamsburg.org/tjtour05/>.

groups; these house churches are closely monitored and supported by their small groups pastor.

☹ The end result of the equipping track at Ginghamburg is a *spiritual adult* in ministry, participating in a small group and personally ministering to the poor and oppressed. Evangelism is contagiously inviting friends to worship; the goal is to place lost persons upon the conveyor belt of weekend worship and the institutional church will take over responsibility for their spiritual growth from that involvement forward. This is very far from the cell church concept of every individual being taught to *personally go and make disciples* and then assume a *personal, parental* responsibility for those converted. The Great Commission calls for disciples to be made by another disciple (not an institution) who will then teach them to “obey all that Jesus has commanded” including the Great Commission itself. Ginghamburg is very good at explicitly, literally obeying Jesus Christ in all things; the rare exception is the literal fulfillment of the cycle of disciples making disciples making disciples called for in the Great Commission.

Conclusion: Ginghamburg is “cellish” but not a cell church.