

PARISH EVANGELISING CELLS

The Fields Are White with the Promise of Harvest, But Where Can We Find the Reapers?

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I found both the harvest and the reapers in my own backyard.

One of the greatest discoveries of my 47 years as a priest was Parish Evangelizing Cells with which I have been working for 19 years. It all began in 1983. At that time I was pastor of St. Boniface Parish Pembroke Pines in the Archdiocese of Miami. I was searching for some way to lead a parish into ongoing spiritual growth. My great fear at that time was that we were becoming just "a spiritual filling station" surviving from Sunday to Sunday. Parishioners were crying out for spiritual growth, Bible study, and a deeper knowledge of their Catholic faith. I had a gut feeling that the answer lay in small groups but did not have "the know-how" to establish them.

After a lot of searching I discovered a church on the other side of the world in Seoul, Korea, where 'cell groups' had phenomenal success in evangelizing a church. Pastor David Cho, pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, who had a passion for sharing his gift, hosted a workshop for pastors, which I attended in 1983. I was amazed to find that his church had 20,000 cells with 250,000 members. A spirit of evangelization was in the air, evidently the work of the Holy Spirit. I took Pastor Cho's methodology and structure and adapted it to a Catholic parish. It worked, and still works 19 years later in St. Boniface Parish, and now in St. Edward's where I have been pastor since 1995. I have no doubt about it – Parish Evangelizing Cells are a movement of the Holy Spirit in recent times in many Catholic parishes around the world, even more so in Evangelical and Charismatic churches.

In Catholic parishes, the parish cell system is flourishing in Australia, inspired by Fr. John Speekman, Mr. Christian Kwan in Singapore, Don Pigi Perini in Sant' Eustorgio in Milan, Don Gian Matteo Botto in Rome, Fr. Michael Hurley in Ireland, and Bernie Joyce in Florida. Through a series of annual workshops, Don Pigi Perini in Milan has been instrumental in cells being established in six European countries, not to mention many parishes all over Italy. Statistics are not easy to come by, but my guess would be that there are at least 1,000 cells in Europe alone.

Now comes the shocker – statistics on cell groups in Evangelical and Charismatic churches, particularly in Central and South America: I share with you statistics as published by Pastor Joel Comiskey in his book "Reaping the Harvest", published by Touch Publications in Houston, Texas. Pastor Comiskey is an American missionary working in Ecuador, who has made an in-depth study of cell churches around the world. Here are just a few of the statistics he discovered: International Charismatic Mission, Bogota Columbia-24,000 cells; Elim Church, San Salvador- 6,000 cells; Christian Centre, Guayaquil Ecuador-2,000 cells; Living Water Church, Lima Peru-1,000 cells; Bethany Prayer Centre, Los Angeles- 800 cells; Faith Community Church, Singapore-600 cells. At the top of the list in numbers, Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul Korea-25,000 cells. Evangelical Cell Churches in Central and South America would claim that the vast majority of their cell members are baptized Catholics who have left the Catholic Church

Why the Term "Cell"?

Cells in the human body are living, vibrant, multiplying units. They are programmed to multiply or die. This also is an accurate description of Parish Evangelizing Cells. They too are living, vibrant, multiplying units, programmed to multiply. Here is a definition given by Pastor Joel Comiskey: "A cell group is a group of people (5 to 15), who meet regularly for the purpose of spiritual edification and evangelical outreach with the goal of multiplication, and who are committed to participate in the functions of the local church". Groups meet in the leader's home weekly or biweekly for 1½ hours, following a set agenda. While nurturing and fellowship do take place at the meeting, the main focus is outreach, the recruiting of new members. An evangelizing mind-set towards the goal of multiplication is at the heart of a cell. In short, this is the Great Commission of Jesus, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation", Mk 16 (16), being implemented at the grassroots of the parish.

What are the Purposes of Parish Evangelizing Cells?

The seven (7) purposes of Parish Evangelizing Cells are spelled out as follows:

To grow in an ongoing intimacy with the Lord.

To share our Faith – evangelizing by word and lifestyle.

To grow in love of one another.

To minister in the Body of Christ.

To give and receive support.

To raise up new leaders.

To deepen our Catholic identity.

What is the Agenda for a Cell Meeting?

The agenda for a fruitful meeting was worked out in the school of experience by Pastor David Cho 30 years ago, and although not etched in marble, is very valuable in keeping a meeting on track. The meeting begins with Prayer and Praise, with a few praise songs on tape or if fortunate enough, led by a cell musician. This period is followed by some Evangelistic Sharing – responding to the question: "How have I shared my faith recently, especially by inviting someone to my cell?" This sharing is very focused.

A Teaching (15 minutes on audio tape), usually produced by the pastor, is then presented on a variety of topics according to the needs of the cells at the moment. A pastor with his finger on the pulse of the parish has a marvellous teaching forum. This teaching is followed by a Discussion focused on the content. The leader then announces Cell Business, especially plans to get new members and upcoming parish activities. During a period of Intercessory and Healing Prayer, the needs of cell members, the parish, and the world are presented to the Lord. The meeting ends with members in a circle facing outwards, praying for the neighbourhood. Refreshments are served and fellowship concludes the evening.

Something important to remember about this agenda is, that although the members are nurtured spiritually in teaching and sharing, the main focus is always 'evangelizing'. So a cell is much more than a nurturing group, more than a Bible study, support group, or discussion group. Though all of these elements are part of it, when we use the word "cell", it is always in the context of an evangelizing group with a multiplication mind-set. In parishes where the cell system is most fruitful, it is not just another program, but a parish way of life. This, I feel, is the secret to the cell system's longevity and vitality – as the Church, through cell groups, is fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission. Whereas purely nurturing groups have a limited life-span, as is evidenced by so many programs in recent years, Parish cells can continue to exist and multiply indefinitely.

Leader Training – A Priority

One of the keys to a fruitful cell system is the ongoing training of old and new leaders. In all churches studied by Pastor Comiskey, he discovered that all cell members are encouraged to take the leader training course. The churches studied would claim that the vast majority of members can lead a cell, irrespective of social status, education level, personality type, or gender. The gifts most sought after in leaders were enthusiasm and a passion for evangelizing.

Variety of Cells

Just as there is a great variety of cells in the human body, so too in parish cells. Within a church community, where cells are a priority, the possibilities of new, homogeneous cells forming spontaneously is an exciting phenomenon, and is taking place. For example, in St. Edward's, the following cells have been born within the last two years: young mothers, engaged couples, newly married, Respect Life, Parish staff, young adults, and teenagers. Some Evangelical churches have successfully transitioned existing ministries into cell groups and also established cells based on professions, e.g. police, nurses, teachers, etc.

The Role of the Pastor

In his research, Pastor Comiskey discovered that the role of the pastor is crucial to a vibrant cell system. If full authority is delegated and the pastor withdraws from active participation, cells lose motivation. Some pastors may fear taking on another workload, but that fear is unfounded. The contrary is true. My experience is that hurting people minister to one another and often don't seek or need clerical counselling. The role of the pastor is simply that of teacher and motivator. One of my greatest joys is to have a forum for ongoing teachings to the core of the parish in the friendly atmosphere of leaders' sitting rooms - a forum I love to have after so many short-lived adult education programs.

How Do Parish Evangelizing Cells Link with Other Parish Ministries?

Two major links that we have established are Life-in-the-Spirit seminars and Eucharistic Adoration. The vast majority of cell members have experienced the grace of Baptism-in-the-Holy Spirit and are committed to an hour of Eucharistic Adoration weekly. The charisms of the Holy Spirit are exercised in cell meetings, fanning into flame especially the charism of evangelization. "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you" as Jesus said, "Then you will receive power and be my witnesses" Acts 1(8).

What are the Basic Strengths of Parish Evangelizing Cells?

I would list the major basic strengths as follows: a definite meeting agenda; a solid structure (every 5 cells have a supervisor); accountability (cell leader reporting system), an evangelizing mind-set, ongoing teaching, members ministering to members. The basic strategy (taking for granted an evangelizing mind-set) is the ongoing training and motivating of leaders. Every member is seen as a potential leader, and every cell is programmed to give birth to yet another cell and has a time goal. Cell groups are the most effective way I know to close the back door of the church. They have been rightly called doors of entry, gardens of growth, and schools of evangelization.

It is interesting to search the Gospels and discover Jesus' evangelizing strategy. He spent so much of his time with his cell group of 12, while at the same time exposing them to a wider preaching to the crowd. That same strategy passed over into the ecclesiolae of the Early Church. The harvest out there is enormous and ready for the reaping, "Look around you", says Jesus. "Look at the fields, already they are white with the promise of harvest" Jn 4(35)....

"And when Jesus saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to the disciples: " The harvest is rich but the laborers are few, pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers to his harvest" Mt 9(36-38).

Yes, the fields are white with the promise of harvest. Where can we find the reapers? Both the harvest and the reapers are in our own backyards.

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