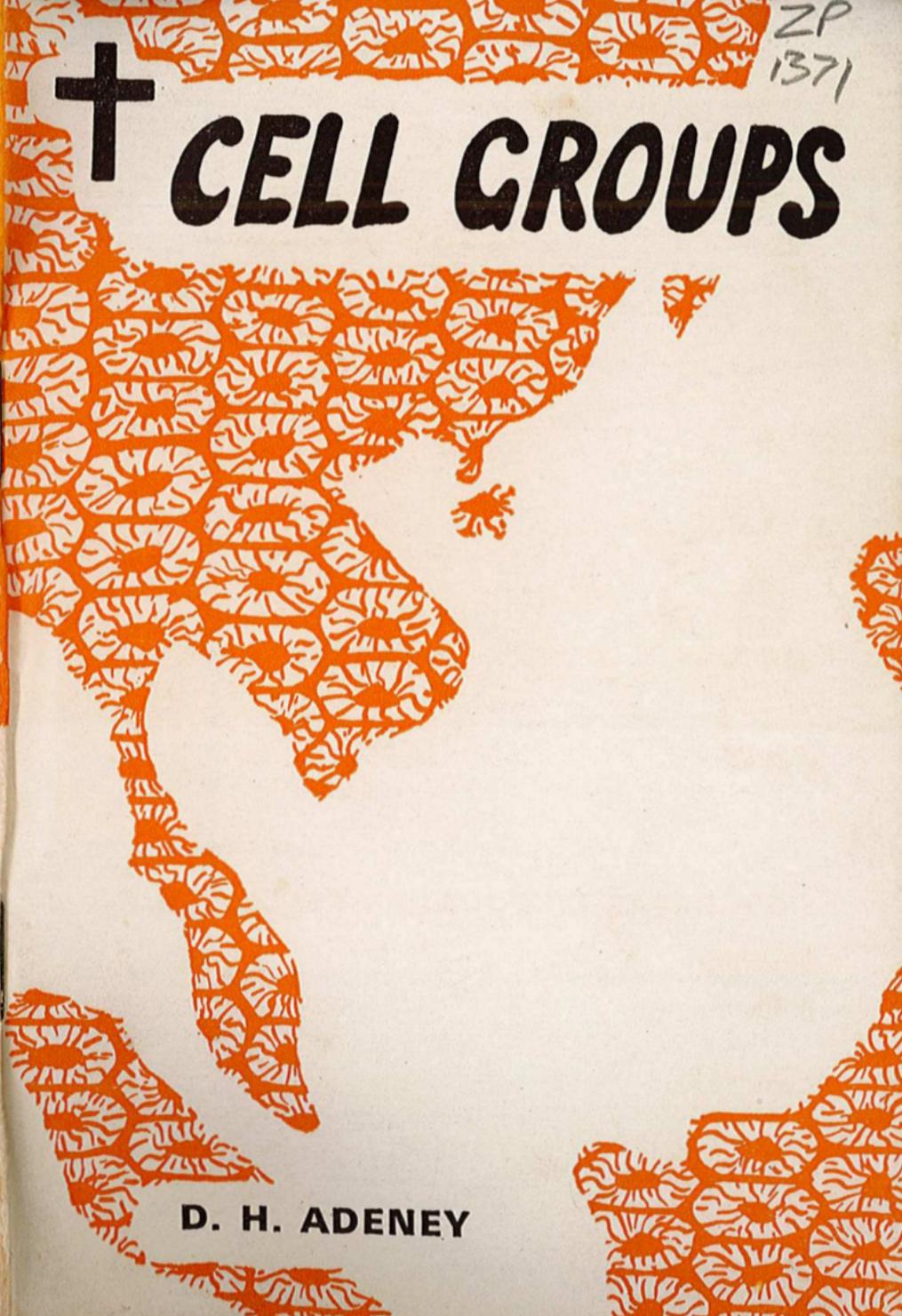


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CELL GROUPS



D. H. ADENEY



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THE CHRISTIAN CELL GROUP

Means of Growth and Witness

Mr. David H. Adeney, Singapore

Father, long before creation
Thou hadst chosen us in love;
And that love, so deep, so moving,
Draws us close to Christ above,
Still it keeps us,
Still it keeps us,
Firmly fixed in Christ alone.

This hymn was born out of the experience of a group of Christian University students whom I knew in China. It was written in Peking during the early days of the Communist regime. We can understand the significance of the opening lines of the second verse, "Though the world may change its pattern, yet our God is e'er the same." Great changes had indeed taken place. Christian students were all forced to attend Communist indoctrination cell groups in which they had to explain why they were Christians and often faced much ridicule. We know very little of what has happened to those students. This group continued to meet for a number of years. Undoubtedly many have suffered for their faith. I have occasionally received messages from a young couple who formerly belonged to that group. The husband has been in prison and labour camp. Their bibles have been destroyed but the wife can still write "We no longer have the Big Book but we have the Holy Spirit. We live by the grace of God." Thus the witness on the mainland of China continues in little groups of people in whose hearts the fire of love to Christ still burns.

It is obvious that the strength of the church cannot be measured by the number attending the Sunday morning service. The true effectiveness of the church's ministry is to be seen

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in the number of her members who are actively engaged in a witness within the community. The services and teaching of the church should aim at the building up of small vital personal fellowships where those attending are participants rather than spectators. Such groups will function not as segregated fellowships separated from the life of the community but as working teams in homes, business offices, schools and colleges.

Origin of Cell Groups

Cell groups for religious purposes are not a new development. Much publicity has been given to them in recent years especially because of their effectiveness in the spread of the Communist movement. Other religions, such as the Soka Gakkai in Japan have used them extensively. Recently in Japan I watched small counselling groups at work in the most luxurious modern temple of a new Buddhist sect of Laymen—the Rishso Kosei Kai.

But many centuries before people were discussing group dynamics and growth through cells, Christians in the early church were using little groups to spread the message of the Lord Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. Long before church buildings and the rise of ecclesiastical institutions Christians were meeting in homes which at that time contained the workshops. Thus the witness of the church was given where the people lived and worked.

When persecution arose they met in secret places such as the catacombs in Rome where you can still see their names inscribed on the rock hewn tombs. It was not until after the second century that the increase of institutionalism and clericalism led to a weakening of the witness of the laymen and a misunderstanding of the real function of pastors, teachers, and evangelists. God's purpose is that the witness of the church should be given by all the people of God, and the object of those to whom special gifts are given is to equip the saints that they may engage in ministering (Eph. 4:11, 12). The

services and teaching of the church should be used to prepare Christians to function as witnessing cell groups in the midst of society. If a hostile government should curtail the main services of the church, the cell groups will continue an unstructured witness. This may eventually in times of severe persecution involve breaking down into very small groups of twos and threes meeting secretly. Interviews with people coming out of the Chinese mainland indicate that this type of witness is continuing today.

The Lord Jesus concentrated on the training of a small group of men. He called them to be with Him, to learn from Him and then He sent them out to witness, with instructions to return and report on their work. Thus we see God's design that the church should be a centre from which Christians will receive spiritual renewal and teaching in order that they may go forth into the world—not living in segregated communities from which they make raids on the outside society in order to bring back captives to the church fellowship, but working in small groups right where the non Christians are living. See diagram 3.

Characteristics of the Christian Cell Group

A.

The basis of fellowship in the Christian cell group is Christ the living truth revealed through the working of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God. The first century Christians were enthusiastic and courageous in the proclamation of the central fact of their faith—"Jesus Christ is Lord"—"Simply concentrate" said Peter "on being completely devoted to Christ" (1 Peter. 3:15 Phillips). Much is being written today about maintaining the "Christian Presence" in society but it is well to remember that without the personal experience of the indwelling Christ and complete devotion to Him there can be no group expression in society of the Christian Presence.

The Spirit of God, revealing Christ through the little groups in the early church, caused the non-Christian world to marvel

at the reality of the presence of the risen Jesus. Wherever cell groups are operating successfully there is also the expression of loyalty to a central leader. In China the communists found that just the teaching of dialectical materialism was not sufficient to command the loyalty of the people. The teaching must be embodied in a man and so we have seen the development of the cult of Mao Tse Tung leading to a virtual worship of the leader. It is indeed tragic that Mao Tse Tung who is described as the "Red Sun in our hearts" has been substituted for the Lord Jesus, and communist cell group members often appear more enthusiastic about spreading his teaching than Christians are in proclaiming the Gospel.

B. True Fellowship

See diagram 1

The members of the cell groups must enter into a very close fellowship with one another and their discussions will be concerned with the application of the Word of God to the relationships and happenings of daily life. In secular cell groups everything depends upon man's desires and the concepts of the group as a whole. In the fellowship of the Spirit, the love of God is the controlling force but in the human fellowship there is a mixture of love and fear of men.

If the Christian cell is to succeed there must be a deep concern for each other and a sharing of the burdens and problems in the lives of the individual members. Undoubtedly Paul's letters were read and discussed in the little groups that met in the home churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean area. In these letters we find not only deep doctrinal teaching but also the application of principles of belief to the details of daily life. The Lordship of Christ has to be recognized in every level of life. Decisions are constantly being made by individuals relating to their families, education, business, recreation, social and political involvement. Such decisions often affect several areas at the same time, and members of the cell will often need the help of others in the group as they

seek to discern and obey the guidance of the Spirit. Paul writing to the Christians at Colosse gives us the picture of a group of believers considering the Word of Christ and then teaching and admonishing one another, recognizing that every action and every decision is to be made in the name of Jesus Christ (Col. 3:16,17). The impression Paul gives us is not of Christians sitting passively listening to a sermon but actively discussing and helping each other. We see them praising, worshipping, studying, sharing, exhorting one another and then going out to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. See diagram 2.

Christians whose only contact with the church is the Sunday service in which they worship and listen to a sermon, are lacking in one of the most important parts of Christian fellowship. In Communist cells discussions are always linked to the struggles of the people in the society in which they are living. In the Rissko Kosei Kai, a new Buddhist laymen's movement in Japan, the Hoza or Group Counselling is the very life of the movement. It is essentially a system of personal counselling in which the group leader counsels the individual in the presence of a group of about 10 people. In this group counselling, personal, physical, spiritual and economic problems are discussed. At the same time, they deal with problems of human relationships and attitudes towards political and social questions. How true it is that "the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light."

May it not be that the witness of the church in Asia has been hindered because we have failed to give sufficient emphasis to lay leadership and the reality of small group fellowships penetrating every level of society? Even Christians who are involved in many church activities are often very lonely because the fellowship is superficial. They lack a close relationship with other Christians who will stimulate them both to grow in the knowledge of Christ and relate their faith to the society in which they are living. The sense of belonging to a group is very important in Asia and the witness of the individual

is greatly strengthened when he knows that he has the support of friends in his cell in whom he has real confidence. I think of the tremendous encouragement and strength which I have obtained from belonging to a small group in Hong Kong in which we could really pray together concerning both our work and our own personal problems.

C. Teaching and Training

The cell group must also emphasize the training of its members and the necessity of "being transformed by the renewing of the mind." It must not degenerate into a subjective sharing session without objective teaching. The first century Christians "continued in the teaching of the apostles." The believers in Berea examined the scriptures daily. Cell groups among students in the Philippines have a regular programme of study and take exams at the end of each term. Thus they lay a foundation of study of the basic doctrines of the faith and also receive instruction in personal evangelism and Bible study methods. In Hong Kong some groups have been formed for special study or writing projects. Thirty cell groups are operating among the 170 members of the Christian Association in Hong Kong University while in Taiwan University, the Campus Fellowship has 25 groups.

Non Christian Movements also emphasize teaching through small groups. In Soka Gakkai cells each member is supposed to master a manual of instructions "The Lotus of the Wonderful Law." By taking part in a graded series of studies and by passing various exams he may become a leader of a group or a lecturer in his district. Communist cells emphasize constant study of the thoughts of Mao Tse Tung which are to be memorised, displayed, shouted in public and appealed to as the solution for every trouble.

Christian cells, while differing completely from Soka Gakkai and communist groups, must also have clear objectives but they can never be organized and controlled by a central

committee. They should be characterized by a degree of spontaneity and will only continue as long as there are men and women devoted to Jesus Christ and impelled by the Holy Spirit to form and lead such groups. Pastors who encourage the formation and growth of these cell groups will see Christians built up in the faith both through the teaching given in the pulpit and in the training in small groups. In preparing for a large Gospel Campaign more effective training can be given in small groups than in large meetings. If there are too many people present it is very difficult to give the teaching that is relevant to the needs of individuals. Young Christians will need to be taught the basic principles of personal evangelism while those who may have attended similar courses in the past will long for further insights and help in dealing with different types of enquirers. Mass production methods cannot be used in training Christian workers. For large campaigns in Asian cities a nucleus of qualified Asian Christian leaders could be trained to set up small groups on different levels for the different types of Christians who are preparing to serve as counsellors.

D. Evangelistic Outreach

See diagram 4

Regular cell groups connected with the church will always give priority to evangelism. Unless the cell multiplies it is likely to die. The object of the cell will be to reproduce itself by preparing its members to start other cells. The cell meetings will usually be held outside of church buildings in places more easily approached by the non-Christians. One of the main objectives will be to help members of the group to contact their non-Christian friends. Members will pray together concerning the friends with whom they have been talking about Christ and discuss ways of making their witness more effective. Those who are really interested may be invited to visit the cell group and occasionally when non-Christian friends are present members may bear witness to the power of Christ in their lives. From the parent cell little off-shoots may

be formed as one or two of its members meet with one or two non-Christians for evangelistic Bible studies or discussions concerning the claims of the Lord Jesus. See diagram 5.

The "Nameless Groups" which Dr. Toyotome has been starting in many Asian countries are dedicated completely to the task of evangelism, with each of their members pledging himself to speak to at least one non-Christian every month concerning the Lord Jesus. They dedicate themselves to the objective of leading at least one person to Jesus Christ during a one year period with a view to training that person to lead someone else to Jesus Christ during the coming year. In the "nameless groups" membership remains the same for a whole year without taking in new people. Other groups may welcome new members to their fellowship splitting into smaller groups when numbers become too large. Through the "nameless groups" churches have come to see the importance of winning men to Christ.

In other places, groups have been formed for special projects. One student cell group runs an evangelistic book table. The members meet weekly for Bible Study and prayer for those to whom they have talked at the Book table. They may also have book reviews to help them introduce the literature which is for sale on the table.

It is interesting to note that the Soka Gakkai regard mass meetings as useful for the teaching and stimulation of their own members but consider the cell groups much more useful for winning converts. Undoubtedly God uses both types of evangelism but we should expect the cell group to become the growing edge of the church and the Christians who are continually involved in this evangelistic outreach to the community will manifest spiritual growth in their own lives. Without the effective use of cells leading to greater numbers of Christians becoming involved in personal witness the long term fruitfulness of the great Evangelistic crusade will be limited.

E. Conscious of God's Purpose in History

Members of Christian Cell Groups must have a wide vision, Christian cell groups are related to a movement in history which possesses a living hope. Members see their group witness in relation to the overall work of the church. They are caught up in the great purposes of God and are not only concerned about the present. For them history is not a meaningless cycle such as you find in Buddhism and in some forms of existentialist philosophy, but a straight line progressing towards an ultimate divine destiny. The early disciples, even though they were a despised minority, possessed a burning hope for the future and a great sense of confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christ and His Kingdom. They might lose their earthly home but the Lord had gone to prepare a place for them. Thus they were delivered from the bondage of fear and were assured that God is working out His plan for the world and His Church. This is in great contrast to the communist trust in the kingdom of man based upon dialectical materialism with an ultimate hope in the victory of the proletariat. Cell group members must demonstrate through their enthusiastic witness and courageous faith that they have a sense of destiny believing that every knee shall bow to the Lord Jesus.

Cell Group Commitment

Before a cell group can be formed there must be one or two people who have a clear grasp of their objectives and an understanding of the type of people that are needed within the cell. They must keep high standards before them. Full membership should be restricted to those who are prepared for a disciplined life and are not afraid of being involved in spiritual conflict.

It is useless for a church or Christian movement to organize cell groups. They must spring from the vision and evangelistic concern of a nucleus of devoted Christians. The first step will be to call together for prayer those within the church who share

the same vision. They will then decide on certain basic commitments which must be made by the cell group members. These will probably include the following promises which should be signed as a covenant between themselves and God:

"I am determined by God's grace:

A. To seek to obey the commands of the Lord Jesus and to acknowledge His Lordship in every area of my life. (This, of course, is only possible when there is a clear experience of regeneration and an assurance of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit);

B. To spend time alone with God in prayer and Bible reading every day. (My fellowship with others can be no substitute for a quiet waiting upon God alone.)

C. To set aside a definite time each week to meet with the other members of the group in order to enter into a real fellowship of learning as well as sharing one another's joys, sorrows, and problems so as to bring mutual encouragement in the work of the Lord. (As the members get to know each other intimately, a sense of responsibility for one another will develop.)

D. To accept a course of study in order to become a more effective witness for Christ. (In addition to group Bible study, members will be reading certain books and from time to time they will share the lessons learned from their reading and practical experience.)

E. To engage in personal evangelism, seeking to speak to at least one non-Christian about Jesus Christ every month. (Each member of the group will seek to lead at least one person to Christ during the year and to train that person so that he may lead someone else to the Lord Jesus in the following year.)

F. To take an active part in the work of the local church and to give regularly to the work of the Lord.

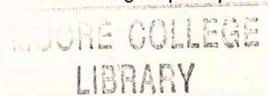
G. To study prayerfully the needs of unevangelised areas at home and abroad. (There must be a deep interest in the

missionary task of the church and a willingness to go wherever the Lord leads.)"

The Cell Group Program

The cell group meeting may be divided into three half-hour periods; the first being for Bible study, the second for sharing of experiences and the third for prayer. The first half-hour of study may take various forms. It may be well to start with a study of the book of Acts so as to get a real understanding of the activities of the early church. The study should be related to present day society and constant application made to the situation in which the members find themselves. Later, the cell may pursue a series of doctrinal studies so that a firm foundation is laid in the thinking of each member. Another series of studies may be on personal evangelism. During the half hour of sharing it is most important that members should be willing to speak very honestly concerning their own spiritual life and be ready to accept help from one another. They will also talk about their experience in speaking to others about Christ. Before they pray, definite requests for prayer will be mentioned both for themselves and for their non-Christian friends. They will also speak of ways in which God has answered prayer during the previous week.

If an emergency arises and some of the members are facing difficulties they should not hesitate to change the program and perhaps take a subject for study that will be closely related to the problems which they as a group or individuals in the group are facing. Every effort must be made to get everybody to take part in the discussion so that different ones will lead and the group will not be dominated by any one person. It is important that the inner circle of the group should be Christians with deep personal conviction, and willingness to make experiments and to take initiative. Others who are not full members but are seeking Christ should be invited and eventually encouraged to become members of the inner circle. The size of the group may



vary but it certainly should not grow to more than twelve, and probably six or eight would be the ideal number. The object will be to reproduce itself by preparing its members to start other cells.

This description of the cell group movement should not be regarded just as an interesting suggestion. It is a call to action. We live in critical times. The continuing witness of the church is threatened. Paul called the Christians at Rome to wake out of sleep "for the night is far gone, the day is near at hand." In Rome it seemed very dark—violent persecution was to break out—but in the catacombs today we have the evidence of the way the church went underground, and not only survived but also gave a triumphant witness. Whether our testimony is to be given in a free society or under some form of anti-Christian totalitarian rule, let us make sure that men will "take note of us that we have been with Jesus" and will recognize that active groups of dedicated disciples of the living Christ are at work in their midst. This may well mean that we will have to take the initiative in starting cells. Let us find a like-minded friend, spend much time in prayer, and then recruit members for our group, seeking to establish a really close fellowship leading to an active evangelistic outreach.

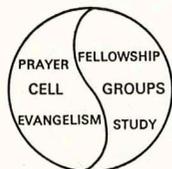


DIAGRAM 1

CHRIST-DIRECTED DECISIONS

FAMILY		ACADEMIC
CHURCH	BIBLE STUDY	SOCIAL
BUSINESS		POLITICS

IN ALL LIFE'S RELATIONSHIPS

DIAGRAM 2

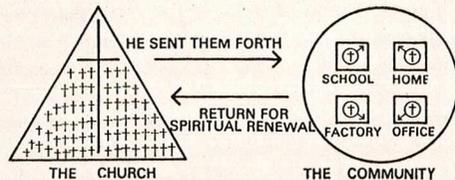


DIAGRAM 3

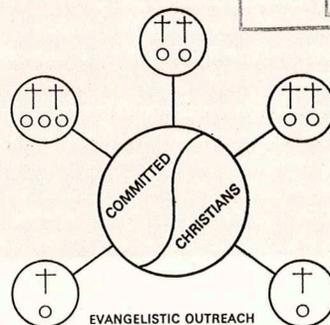
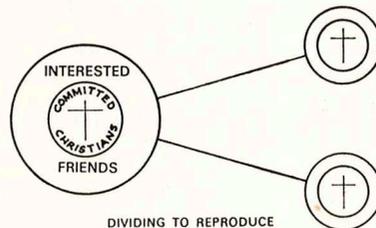


DIAGRAM 4



DIVIDING TO REPRODUCE

DIAGRAM 5

Mr. David Adeney was formerly the Associate General Secretary for the Far East of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. He is at present a member of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and Dean of the Discipleship Training Centre, 28 King's Road, Singapore 10. Fifteen university graduates from seven Asian countries are living with the faculty as one family at the Discipleship Training Centre preparing to serve the Lord Jesus in His church in Asia. In addition to their theological studies they seek to learn the meaning of true discipleship and gain an understanding of current trends in Asian society through special seminars and experience in the churches in Singapore and Malaysia.

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