GROWTH WITHIN THE SINGLE-CELL CHURCH: AN EXAMINATION
OF THE CURRENT ATTITUDES AND TEACHINGS
AMONG CHURCH GROWTH AUTHORITIES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The small churches in the United States have a significant influence on the lives of millions of our citizens. To many people they are the image of what a church should be and stand as a symbol of those principles that have made this country great. These churches are found in every type of community, at every economic and social level, and among the various cultural groups within our borders. In the words of one church growth authority, "The majority of Protestant churches are small, and they are everywhere."\(^1\)

Since the early 1970s, there has come into prominence a field of study referred to as the science of church growth. This science developed partly as a reaction to several trends that had occurred in our society. First, America had given herself over to the measurement of her institutions, including churches. Second, more attention was being paid to the efficiency of organizations. Third, there had been a tremendous explosion in the field of communications.\(^2\)

As a result of this interest in church growth, many books and journal articles have been written. Seminars have been developed, as

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well as seminary courses and degree programs in church growth. Some of this attention has focused on the small church, but there is much disagreement as to its exact role in God's program. Some view it as the finished product, while others consider it to be the first stage in the growth process.

The small church is frequently described by church growth experts as a "single-cell church." Carl S. Dudley, a professor at McCormick Theological Seminary and an expert on the small church, states: "The small church can be described as a 'single-cell' with one unusually large fellowship group, which includes most of the members, dominating the life of that congregation." It is necessary to point out, however, that not all small churches are to be considered single-cell. Some churches that are small have the embryonic form that can develop into a multicell or multicongregational church.

The dynamics and limitations of the single-cell church, as well as how it relates to growth, form the basis for this thesis. Because there are so many small churches in the United States, influencing millions of people, they are worthy of study.

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3Peter Monkres, "Small Is Beautiful: Churches as if People Mattered," The Christian Century, May 10, 1978, p. 493. This article is representative of the view that a small church is an end in itself. The author states, "Where more than one meet in Christ's name, there Christ will empower the experience of the church. Disciples are therefore freed from the tyranny of statistics. For Jesus, bigger in not necessarily better."

4Elmer L. Towns and Jerry Falwell, Church Aflame (Nashville: Impact Books, 1971), p. 34. Jerry Falwell's comments on the small church reflect the view that this size is only the first stage of growth, "Every church was small at one time. We were small here at Thomas Road Baptist Church; however, if we stopped growing, that would have been a sign of spiritual sickness or sin."

The study is important to the author because he spent the first eighteen years of his life in a single-cell church. He has many fond memories of those days, yet there were also questions in his mind concerning the church's lack of growth. In the community surrounding the church there were many unsaved people and nominal Christians who did not attend church. The author often wondered why the church was not reaching them and even questioned the pastor about the problem.

Several years later the author found himself called of God into the ministry. Again he became well acquainted with the joys and problems of the single-cell church, as he pastored such a church. So, through this study he hopes to answer some of his own questions about small churches, and assist others in their understanding of this subject.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to research authorities in church growth, including some from the behavioral sciences, in order to determine the current attitude and teaching on growth within the single-cell church. This will include an inquiry as to the principles and methods for breaking the barriers that prevent growth beyond the single-cell.

This purpose will be accomplished by asking and answering the following five questions:

1. What is a single-cell church?
2. What are the dynamics of the single-cell church that develop out of its definition?
3. What are the growth limiting factors of the single-cell church that develop out of its definition?
4. Is the single-cell church an adequate biblical objective?
5. What are some of the principles that will assist a single-cell church to overcome its inherent limitations and grow to its maximum potential?

Each of these five questions forms the basis of a chapter in the thesis.

Limitations and Methods of Research

This study is a thesis of definition, seeking to determine the nature of the single-cell church and not its effectiveness. Therefore, a statistical survey of single-cell churches was not necessary, since it did not relate to the purpose.

In order to achieve the purpose, a review was made of the literature available on small churches by those authorities within church growth and the behavioral sciences as applied to the church. A library search was conducted at Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia; the University of Richmond, and the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

In the course of analyzing the nature of the single-cell church, certain principles and methods were determined that could assist with growth. These were implicit in the definition and description of a single-cell church. The principles and methods may possibly be used as a tool by local churches to determine why they are not growing and what can be done about it.

Chapter Divisions and Summaries

Chapter I, which is the introduction, sets forth the problem and establishes the purpose for writing the thesis. It includes the importance of the problem, method for accomplishing the purpose, limitations and methods of research, chapter divisions and their summaries, and a list of pertinent terms.
Chapter II considers the first of five questions, with this one asking, What is a single-cell church? This type of church will be considered from a sociological, biblical, and quantitative perspective. It will examine the definition and description of the single-cell church.

Chapter III asks, What are the dynamics of the single-cell church that develop out of its definition? It considers the moving forces that give birth to and continue the existence of these churches. The chapter looks at the sociological and biblical factors that make up these dynamic forces.

Chapter IV contemplates the question, What are the growth-limiting factors of the single-cell church that develop out of its definition? Several of the factors inherent in a single-cell church keep it from progressing to the next stage of growth. These elements are considered under the major headings of Organizational Structure, Emphasis of Ministry, and Attitude of the Members.

Chapter V considers the matter, Is the single-cell church an adequate biblical objective? This includes an examination of various passages from the New Testament that may indicate the biblical size of a church. The second part of the chapter considers the importance of growth as expressed by church growth authorities and the New Testament.

Chapter VI deals with the final question, What are some of the principles that will assist a single-cell church to overcome its inherent limitations and grow to its maximum potential? The principles are considered according to those which create internal growth so the church can reach its maximum potential, and the ones that assist it in growing beyond the single-cell stage.
Definition of Terms

The study of church growth has generated many terms not always familiar to those outside this field. Some terms are also defined differently by various authorities, depending on their theological and sociological persuasions. It is therefore necessary to clarify some of the basic terms used in this thesis.

**Church**—An organized group of professed believers, in whom Christ dwells, under the discipline of the Word of God, organized for evangelism, education, fellowship, and worship; administering the ordinances and reflecting the spiritual gifts. 6

**Church growth**—An application of biblical, theological, anthropological, and sociological principles to congregations and denominations and to their communities in an effort to disciple the greatest number of people for Jesus Christ. Believing that "it is God's will that His Church grow and His lost children be found," church growth endeavors to devise strategies, develop objectives, and apply proven principles of growth to individual congregations, to denominations, and to the worldwide Body of Christ. 7

**Homogeneous groups**—A group of people who have many areas of mutual interest, such as the same culture, language, occupation, social or economic status. They socialize freely, feeling at home and very comfortable with one another. 8

**Multicell church**—A church made up of several or more primary groups whose members interact with one another, and who may or may not interact with a given person in another group. 9

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Multicongregational—A church that provides two, three, or more worshiping congregations, meeting for worship at various times, perhaps in various settings, styles, and even languages. It also permits the evolution of a number of other large groups. ¹⁰

Single-cell church—A church in which everyone knows and regularly interacts with everyone else. Usually there is only one staff member, the pastor. ¹¹

Single stretched-cell church—A church in which everyone relates to the pastor or other authority figure and their relationships to one another have become non-effective. ¹²

Types of church growth—There are four ways in which a church may grow:

1. Internal—Growth of Christians in grace, relationship to God, and to one another.
2. Expansion—Growth of the church by the evangelization of non-Christians within its ministry area.
3. Extension—Growth of the church by the establishment of daughter churches within the same general homogeneous group and geographical area.
4. Bridging—Growth of the church by establishing churches in significantly different cultural and geographical areas. ¹³

Summary

The chapters that follow will examine the single-cell church and how it relates to the subject of church growth. This primary group has had a great influence spiritually and sociologically on the American people. It must be given consideration in the plans of the various denominations, associations, and fellowships concerned with the growth of their churches.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid. A single-cell church may or may not be a homogeneous unit. It sometimes serves as the catalyst around which the activities of a homogeneous group are centered.


¹³McGavran and Arn, Ten Steps for Church Growth, pp. 127-128.
The small church is a definite part of God's plan to take the message of salvation to the entire world. This study should provide pastors, laymen, seminary professors, and others interested in church growth, with some additional insights into the structure and function of the single-cell church.

It is important to note that even the "super-churches" owe their existence to the single-cell church. In the words of Peter Wagner, "Just as every river was once a stream, every large church was once a small church."\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, p. 86.
CHAPTER II

WHAT IS A SINGLE-CELL CHURCH?

In order to understand the single-cell church, consideration must be given to the various terms and descriptions used to define it. Even though it is small in terms of the number of people, budget, and size of facilities, the single-cell church can still be a very complex organization. Because of its complexity, this type church needs to be considered from three major perspectives: sociological, biblical, and quantitative.

Sociological Perspective

The single-cell church is a human group, so it must be considered from a sociological perspective. This view concerns the number of people in the church and how they relate to one another.

The simplest and most common term used to describe a single-cell church is "small." This term primarily indicates the number of people who attend the church or are on its membership roll.¹ Peter

¹Elmer L. Towns, Church Growth II lecture, Liberty Baptist Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, 24 January 1984. There are two major concepts on church membership. The first one is referred to as "open door membership," which means that anyone who professes faith in Christ and is baptized can unite with the church. The second type is "pure church membership," where you are admitted based on the two criteria just mentioned, plus other requirements. This may include an instructional course on the church's doctrine, plus adhering to their moral standards. In terms of numbers, the church with an open door policy would have a larger membership roll than one with a pure membership, even though their actual attendance was the same. For the purposes of this thesis, membership references shall be based on the open door type.
Wagner, who is a professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, defines the small church as having 200 active members or fewer.²

Wagner's view on the membership of a small church has been confirmed by others who have written on this subject. Robert Maner, a Nazarene pastor for twenty-eight years, states that this type church is "a church with an average attendance at its maximum service of 200 or less."³ This maximum service is either the Sunday school hour or the Sunday morning worship hour.

The Hartford (CT) Seminary Foundation has funded research in the area of small churches. Jackson Carroll has edited a book for the foundation that includes articles contributed by such denominations and schools as the Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, United Presbyterian, United Methodist, Reformed Church, Auburn Theological Seminary, and Duke University. In the introduction to the book, Carroll states that "small churches are defined here, somewhat arbitrarily, as churches with memberships of two hundred persons or less."⁴

Paul Madsen, who serves on the Board of National Ministries for American Baptist Churches, comments on this matter of numerical size as follows:


The thoughtful reader will ask, "Who decided the size of a small church?" There is no common definition between denominations. Some say the figure of 250, even 300, and some say 150. Somewhat arbitrarily, this book is using 200 as the dividing point.5

In relation to Sunday school size, Elmer Towns refers to the 100 to 150 range as the first danger stage of growth. This size would be typical of the single-cell church, and is difficult to grow beyond because of the organizational and administrative structure. There are usually ten classes and ten teachers, with inherent factors that keep it from expanding. Perhaps one other inhibiting factor is the very nature of the single-cell church.6 This size fits into the category that previous authorities have considered "small."

Although the term small is the most frequent one used to describe the type church being researched in this thesis, it is not the most descriptive. George Hunter, former Assistant General Secretary for Evangelism with the United Methodist Church, prefers to use the term single-cell because it conveys numbers and social structure.7 This study will consider the terms small and single-cell8 as referring to the same size and type of church. It will include those churches with 200 or fewer active members.


6Elmer L. Towns, Church Growth I lecture, Liberty Baptist Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, 4 October 1983.


8The original source of this term could not be determined. Lyle Schaller attributes it to Carl S. Dudley ("Looking At the Small Church," p. 5) as does Elmer Towns (Church Growth II lecture, Liberty Baptist Seminary, 31 January 1984).
Hunter focuses on the social aspect of the single-cell church when he defines it as one where "virtually all the members regularly interact with almost all the others." He continues by quoting Ray Sells, who stated in an unpublished article, that this type church is comparable to a Winnebago motor home: "The single-cell (Winnebago) is a contained, intimate, sharing fellowship with everyone a full partner in the journey and fellowship."\(^9\)

Writers in the church growth field often refer to the single-cell church in sociological terms. Roy Johnson, writing about the lack of growth in the Church of the Brethren, discusses the single-cell church and describes it as follows:

The single-cell church can be defined as a church which for practical purposes exists as a single group of persons with no adhesive, functioning sub-groupings. Everyone in such a church tends to know what others are doing and feels obligated to take part in whatever programs are planned. The main fellowship occasion is on Sunday morning during Sunday school and worship. Contacts outside this time are limited and casual for the most part.\(^10\)

Sociologists have recognized for many years that there are differences between small and large churches that go beyond numbers. Douglass and Brunner, two prominent sociologists, wrote in 1935:

The real difference is not between the church in the small city and in the large, but between churches of different sizes; for larger churches everywhere strongly tend to have more complicated organization, to employ staffs of paid workers instead of the single pastor, and to undertake more varied programs.\(^11\)

\(^9\) McGavran and Hunter, Church Growth Strategies That Work, p. 83.


The sociological aspect of the single-cell church is also evidenced in some of the synonyms used to describe it. One of these is "the family church." Carl Dudley, a professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, deals with this matter in an article he has written:

The small, single-cell church behaves like an extended family in many ways. There are levels of participation, and latitude for individual characters. Members contribute to the whole, yet have a life apart from it. The most natural growth for the small church is family-style, by birth and by adoption.12

Carl Dudley also refers to the single-cell church as a primary group:

The small congregation is the appropriate size for one purpose: the members can know one another personally. Not all the members can know all the others on a continuing, face-to-face basis, but they can all know about one another. They expect to be able to "place" everyone physically and socially in the fabric of the congregation. The caring cell church may be defined as a primary group in which the members expect to know, or know about, all other members.13

According to William Dobriner, American Sociologist Charles Cooley was the first person to formulate the concept of the "primary group."14 In his prominent work, Social Organization, Cooley wrote:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a


"we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling. 15

Sociologists usually consider churches as institutions of society, and the relationships within such institutions are considered to be secondary. They are part of the dynamic urban, industrial society, referred to by Ferdinand Tonnies as Gesellschaft. But, in the single-cell church, the relationships are closer to what Tonnies calls Gemeinschaft, which is the traditional rural, agrarian society and the type of human relationships prevalent in that society. In the Gemeinschaft, relationships are primary and are characterized by an intensive sense of community. 16

Peter Wagner confirms the view that single-cell churches are a primary group. Within the context of a church, he refers to primary groups as "fellowship circles" and secondary groups as "membership circles." In a church of 300 or fewer members, these two circles are coterminous, so the predominant relationship between the members would be primary. 17

We have seen that, from a sociological perspective, the single-cell church usually consists of 200 or fewer members and, in the area of human relationships, is a primary group. The members know or know about all other members. They have intimate face-to-face associations and cooperate together in achieving collective goals and share personally in

the results of their efforts, much like an extended family. They have a sense of obligation to take part in the various programs that are planned by the church.

**Biblical Perspective**

In order to understand a single-cell church, the biblical evidence must be examined to determine if it supports the concept of such a church. Carl Holladay, of Emory University, believes that the best source for a study of church growth is in The Acts of the Apostles:

Luke's fondness for datable, locatable events, for names and places was combined with his fondness for statistics, and thus he alone of the New Testament writers documents the numerical growth of the early church... his account has etched itself within the consciousness of the modern church as the official version of the church's growth and expansion during the first century.18

Many Bible scholars believe that the New Testament church began on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts chapter two. In verse one it states that "they were all with one accord in one place." It is not absolutely certain as to the exact location of this place and who were included in the group.19 However, we do know the events occurred in Jerusalem, probably in the upper room (Acts 1:12) or a chamber in the Temple.20 The group may have been limited to the apostles, although James Hastings and others have pointed out that "there is ancient testimony, however, to the inclusion of 'the one hundred and twenty,' and

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some extension beyond the Twelve is almost necessitated by the language of Joel's prophecy."

As you read through the book of Acts, this initial church of 120 continued to grow in an amazing manner. Acts 2:41 records that after Peter's sermon at Pentecost, about 3,000 were added to the church; then in chapter four, verse four states that another large group believed, including 5,000 men.

Luke comments in Acts 6:7 on the growth of the church: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." Peter Wagner writes concerning the church at this stage:

The Jerusalem church had grown so rapidly at this point that precise figures are impossible. But it seems quite clear that by the time Acts 6 and the persecution came along the church had grown from an original 120 to something between 10,000 and--more likely--25,000.22

Since the church at Jerusalem was so large, how could they assemble for education, fellowship, and worship? At that time in church history there were no facilities specifically built for church meetings as we have now. An examination of the New Testament reveals the primary gathering place for the churches:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: ... Likewise greet the church that is in their house (Rom. 16:3, 5).

Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house (Col. 4:15).

These biblical passages, and others, indicate that the early churches often met in the homes of the believers. Commenting on the passage in

21 Ibid.

Colossians 4:15, Edward Roustio states that: "Christians did not have church buildings until the third century."23

Because some churches assembled in homes, each house church was in some respects like the single-cell church of today. Donald McGavran comments on this situation:

A church was an assemblage of 15 or 20 people or, at the most, 30 people. Everybody knew everybody else; they cared for everybody else. It was a household of God.24

But, they were probably more than just little, individual churches, as McGavran explains:

We must see the New Testament church as an assemblage of house churches. This didn't mean that if there were 20 or 30 house churches in Corinth, the church was fractured. Paul always speaks about it as one church, the church in Corinth, it was one church, even though it met in many different places.25

The situation in Jerusalem was probably the same as that in Corinth regarding the use of homes for the assembly of Christians. Each house church was similar to a single-cell church in its ability to care for people on a personal basis. But, the corporate church in each city probably functioned like the multicell church. Each house church was a part of the larger assembly known as the church at Jerusalem." This is evidenced in the administration of the church, as illustrated by the comments of F. F. Bruce:

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25Ibid., pp. 34-35.
From the middle forties onwards, Peter and the other apostles were increasingly absent from Jerusalem; James, on the other hand, stayed there, administering the large and growing church of the city with the aid of his fellow-elders. James was possibly similar to what is referred to now as the senior pastor of the church. Even though there were many houses in which the people gathered, there was one leader over them all. Harold Willmington confirms this in his writings on the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15):

While all of the apostles appeared to be actively involved in this discussion, it seems clear from this passage that James, the pastor of the church at Jerusalem, was the ultimate leader and his decision was accepted by the others. Rather than Peter or Paul being in the leadership role at this point, James alone assumes that responsibility.

It is apparent from this brief survey of the New Testament, that the single-cell church was not the biblical pattern. There are similarities when it comes to the use of small cell groups who ministered to the needs of the people on a personal level. But, in the administration of these house churches, the pattern was more like the multicell church, with one ultimate leader assisted by others under his authority.

Quantitative Perspective

Determining what a single-cell church is would have little importance if the number of such churches were small. An examination of the current statistics indicates that these types of churches are significant in quantity. Carl Dudley writes concerning their number:

The majority of Protestant churches are small, and they are everywhere. Small churches are found in every kind of community--

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city, suburb, and rural village; they are rich and poor and exist in every kind of cultural background.\footnote{Dudley, Making the Small Church Effective, p. 20.}

The small church is not a recent phenomenon in the United States. In 1776 less than ten percent of the population lived in communities of over 10,000 people. The isolation of people due to inadequate means of transportation and communication created the need for churches in every small community.\footnote{M. Wendell Belew, Churches and How They Grow (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), pp. 80-81.} Harold Longenecker, President of the Montana Institute of the Bible, refers to the influence of these village churches in early America, "From this beginning the village church in America progressed to the point where it became a recognized force in American Christianity."\footnote{Harold Longenecker, Building Town and Country Churches (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), p. 24.}

These small village and rural churches did not disappear as our nation's population gradually shifted from the rural areas to the cities and metropolitan areas. According to a recent report issued by the Southern Baptist Convention, their typical church has 237 total members, which is the median-size. The report also indicated that over seventy percent of the SBC churches fall below the average total of 388 members.\footnote{Southern Baptist Report on Growth, Fundamentalist Journal 3 (December 1984): 64.}

The Southern Baptist Convention is not the only denomination with a large percentage of small churches. Lyle Schaller states that the small church is the "normative institutional expression of the worshiping congregation" among Protestants in North America, and
supports that thesis with the following statistics:

At the end of 1980, one half of the 8,832 congregations in the United Presbyterian Church reported a communicant membership of 178 or less. Three quarters of the congregations in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have fewer than 255 participating members. Two thirds of all United Methodist congregations in the United States average less than one hundred at the principal weekly worship service. Fifty-five percent of all congregations in the Lutheran Church in America have fewer than two hundred confirmed members. Nearly three fourths of the congregations in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. include fewer than 250 members. ... Two thirds of all United Church of Christ congregations include fewer than 300 members. One half of the congregations in the Baptist General Conference average less than 105 at worship on Sunday morning. 

Since the small or single-cell churches are so significant in number, they need to be examined in order for church leaders to be in tune with the needs of all their people. Schaller points out that this is not always a reality among most denominations:

> Despite the fact that most Protestant congregations can be classified as "small churches," the dominant perspective of most church leaders is that of the large church. One obvious reason for that is that a majority of the members and most of the denominational leaders are in large congregations.

**Summary**

In order to determine what a single-cell church is, it is necessary to examine it from a sociological, biblical, and quantitative perspective. Beginning with the sociological, the single-cell church has less than 200 members and is considered to be a primary group. All of the members regularly interact with almost all the other members, and care for each other in a personal way. It is this intimacy of personal relationships which attracts people to the smaller church.

As a primary group, the people in a single-cell church


33 Ibid., p. 11.
experience an intensive sense of community. They cooperate together to achieve collective goals and then have a share in the results of their accomplishments. The church assists in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual, so that in some purposes the individual finds his chief aims to be that of the whole group. It can be compared to an extended family.

From a biblical perspective, the single-cell church is not the New Testament pattern. Considering the church in Jerusalem from the book of Acts, it began as single-cell church, but did not stay that size. It grew rapidly from 120 to over 5,000 men, plus women and children, in a period of about two years. They met in many house churches throughout the city, which probably had from fifteen to thirty people in each one. All of these groups together made up the church at Jerusalem, under the pastoral leadership of James and the elders who served under his authority. This church was equivalent to what church growth experts refer to as a multicell church.

From a quantitative perspective, the single-cell churches are the most prevalent. This was initially the result of inadequate transportation and communication in the early days of our country, which created the need for churches in each small village and in rural areas. Even with the shift in population from rural areas to the suburban and urban areas, many of these churches are still in use. The small or single-cell church is still the normal size of a large percentage of Protestant churches in the United States, even though the perspective of most denominations is focused on the large church.
CHAPTER III

WHAT ARE THE DYNAMICS OF THE SINGLE-CELL CHURCH
THAT DEVELOP OUT OF ITS DEFINITION?

As indicated in the previous chapter, the single-cell church is the normal size of a large percentage of the Protestant churches in the United States. Since there are so many of them, it is logical for us to inquire as to the reasons for this situation. In this chapter we will examine the moving forces that give birth to, and continue the existence of, the single-cell church.

In reviewing the church growth literature, it is readily apparent that there are many sociological factors involved in the birth and growth of single-cell churches. There is also another major area to be considered, which is the biblical perspective. The dynamic forces at work in the single-cell churches will be considered under these two major headings, Sociological and Biblical.

Sociological Factors

One of the foundational church growth principles that gives birth to a church is expressed succinctly by Donald McGavran: "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."\(^1\) This concept is an outgrowth of the homogeneous unit principle, which in church growth terminology is defined as follows:

A "homogeneous unit" is simply a group of people who consider each other to be "our kind of people." They have many areas of mutual interest. They share the same culture. They socialize freely. When they are together they are comfortable and they all feel at home.\textsuperscript{2}

Our population is made up of many homogeneous groups, based on linguistic, economic, racial, ethnic or other sociological factors. These units tend to form their social organizations with those who share mutual interests, which includes the formation of churches:

In America homogeneous unit churches are also the rule. Even an uninitiated foreigner could readily see that in one city there are Hispanic churches, Oriental churches, WASP churches, European churches and Black churches.\textsuperscript{3}

A second sociological force that brings about small churches is the desire people have for individual expression. In a society that has become so impersonal, they feel a need to belong to some organization where they can express themselves in a meaningful way. Even experts in fields of study outside of sociology are recognizing this basic human need, as evidenced by the comments of E. F. Schumacher, a prominent British economist:

Today we suffer from an almost universal idolatry of giantism. It is therefore necessary to insist on the virtues of smallness--where this applies. . . .

An entirely new system of thought is needed, a system based on attention to people, and not primarily attention to goods. . . .

But people can be themselves only in small comprehensible groups. Therefore we must learn to think in terms of an articulated structure that can cope with a multiplicity of small-scale units.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{2}C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1976), p. 110.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 111.

It is easy for individuals to become discouraged over their lack of ability to effectively compete with others on the job or in other organizations. But, if a group is small enough, there is more opportunity for them to have some type of influence. Wagner points this out when he writes concerning the reasons why people join smaller churches:

They also like to feel that they are needed, and thus are adverse to entering into the heavy competition for leadership that comes with a large church. They want to be missed when they are absent and they like to believe that the church wouldn't be quite the same without their membership. Obviously, a small church best meets the needs of this kind of person.\(^5\)

David Ray, a pastor and adjunct faculty member at Hartford Seminary, was involved in a church growth project with the Trinitarian Congregational Church in Warwick, Massachusetts. Mr. Ray pastored this church for eleven years and his observations support the view that people have more freedom to express themselves in a single-cell church:

In a small church everyone can have a direct voice in decision-making. Frequently decisions can be worked through until a genuine consensus is reached. People participate directly, rather than indirectly. People who would seethe silently in a church meeting of two hundred will speak out before thirty. All the significant decisions in our building construction and restoring program were made by the whole church, in almost every case by consensus.\(^6\)

In chapter two we examined the fact that a single-cell church is a primary group. Sociologists recognize that one of the aspects of this group that differentiates it from the secondary group, is its greater range for personal expression. William Dobriner states that "because of the general diffuseness of role expectations there is a greater range for personality to express itself in the primary group and

\(^5\)Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, p. 85.

consequently a freedom and spontaneity of response between the participants which does not occur in more formally organized groups."\(^7\)

In the birth and continued existence of a single-cell church, the third sociological factor involves personal relationships. This aspect is the strongest sociological force behind the establishment of small churches. Carl Dudley, who, according to Wagner, has analyzed the dynamics of a small church as thoroughly as anyone, believes that "personal relationships lie at the heart of the small-church experience."\(^8\)

A pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention, R. Don Whitehead, wrote an article concerning the reasons for the decline of rural churches. In spite of the problems, changes, and declining attendance in these churches, he points out that they still can have a significant impact on their communities:

Texts on rural sociology almost always contain a chapter on the church, while few, if any, texts on urban sociology give much attention to the church. Also, the smaller numbers in the rural church make possible more personal relationships among the members.\(^9\)

Whitehead confirms that personal relationships are one of the strengths of the small church.

Wagner discusses this matter of relationships when he points out the differences between large and small churches. It is a mistake to think of the single-cell church as simply a miniature large church, 

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the two have completely different characters. But, what makes the difference?

The major difference lies in interpersonal relationships. In the small church there are no strangers. Everyone knows everyone else. The social situation is predictable and therefore comfortable. Preserving this value by maintaining the status quo becomes a very high priority in the lives of many church members. 10

The small number of people involved in a single-cell church make it more conducive to the development of personal relationships. A larger percentage of the members can be included in the principal primary group, than is possible in a middle-sized or larger church. For example, in a 60-member church you may have as much as 75 percent of the members included in the face-to-face fellowship group, while the church of 200 members would have 50 percent. Schaller writes that "perhaps the clearest evidence on this sense of belonging and acceptance is that, in general, as the size of the membership total increases, the ratio of worship attendance to membership declines." 11

The personal relationships give the individual a great sense of personal worth, both for himself and the others in the church. This is one of the identifying characteristics of the primary group, according to Dobriner:

Hence, the primary relationship involves not only a mutual identification of collective goals by the participants but also a positive feeling about the intrinsic value of the other persons involved in the relationship.

The single-cell church can offer relationships which have

12 Dobriner, Social Structures and Systems, p. 150.
continuity and stability. Since the end of World War II there have been two compelling concerns of Protestant churches in America: growth and change. Situations in our society--such as the population explosion, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War--have brought about many changes in this country. Dudley comments on this situation and how it has affected the small church:

Against the tide of these two issues, the small church stands firm. In a climate of growth or decay, the small church offers stability. In a conflict of conscience, the small church offers the continuity of relationships. In the 1970s, church expansion slowed, the social conflict cooled, and the small church remains unmoved. In the excitement of any given moment, the small church often appears out of phase.13

The small church will not likely experience sudden growth or have much impact on social issues, but it remains, and usually much like it has always been. In a world that is constantly changing, sometimes faster then people can cope with, the small church offers continuity and stability.

The single-cell church develops relationships by giving people a sense of "family." David Ray points out that this is accomplished by meeting three specific needs:

1. Identity - people have a name and are given responsibilities.

2. Security - people feel that they belong and have a voice in the affairs of the church.

3. Empathy - people really care about you.14

Everyone feels important and needed, just like the members of a loving, secure family.

It is necessary to remember that the relationships in a church

13 Dudley, Making the Small Church Effective, p. 23.

14 Ray, Small Churches Are the Right Size, p. 45.
are also subject to the same problems as those in a family. Dudley says
that these relationships can be warm, intimate, spontaneous, and
personally satisfying, but can become hot, cruel, petty, and irra-
tional.\textsuperscript{15} This was also discussed by prominent sociologist Charles
Cooley, in his writings on the primary group, which is the basis for the
single-cell church:

It is not to be supposed that the unity of the primary group is
one of mere harmony and love. It is always a differentiated and
usually a competitive unity.\textsuperscript{16}

The small church is definitely brought into existence and
continues because of these various sociological factors. But, the
church is more than a social organization, so we must also examine the
spiritual reasons for its birth and existence.

Biblical Factors

The term \textit{single-cell church} is not found in the New Testa-
ment, but there is biblical support for the concept. The first factor
is based on the scriptural record that indicates that many of the early
churches came into existence as small groups of believers.

Even before the birth of the first church in Jerusalem on the
day of Pentecost, we can see the importance of small primary groups. In
Mark 9:1-13 we have the account of Christ's transfiguration before His
disciples. Even though the twelve disciples were a primary group, Jesus
chose an even smaller group to witness this significant event. In verse
2 we read that "after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James,
and John, and leadeth them up into a high mountain apart by themselves;

\textsuperscript{15} Dudley, \textit{Making the Small Church Effective}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{16} Charles H. Cooley, \textit{Social Organization} (New York: Charles
and he was transfigured before them." These three men were Jesus' closest companions and are often referred to as the "inner circle."  

Jesus knew the value of small group dynamics, working the closest with His disciples, and even closer with Peter, James, and John. William Lane, a professor of religion at Western Kentucky University, points this out in his commentary on Mark:

The choice of Peter, James, and John to see the transfiguration corresponds to the privileged relationship these three disciples shared with Jesus on other occasions (Chs. 5:37; 13:3; 14:33) and served to qualify them as witnesses to the event after Jesus' resurrection (Ch. 9:9).

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus is teaching His disciples about the use of discipline in the church. In verse 20 He says, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This statement points out the interest Jesus took in small groups, even to the point of being present with them in the Spirit. The context is not referring specifically to single-cell churches, but can be applied to them. Arno Gaebelein, prominent Bible expositor, confirms this application to the church in his comments on this verse:

And still it is true where two or three are gathered unto the Name which is above every name, rejecting all other names, there is an assembly and there is the Lord in the midst of them.

In addition to Christ's teachings on small groups, we can observe from the New Testament that most of the early churches were begun by such groups. The first church, which was established in

Jerusalem, had a core group of about 120 people (Acts 1:15). It did not stay that size long, but it had its beginning as a small church.

As discussed in Chapter Two, many of the early churches met for worship and fellowship in the homes of the members. Some of them grew to incorporate a large number of people, but still continued to meet in cell groups of probably fifteen to thirty members.

One illustration of this pattern of planting single-cell churches can be found in the establishment of the church at Philippi. In Acts 16:11-40, Paul and Silas were used of God to start this church with two groups of people. Their first convert was Lydia, who was followed by those in her household. Following that event, the two men were put in prison and in the course of their stay were able to lead the jailer and his relatives to Christ. These two groups formed the nucleus of the Philippian Church, as can be seen from the passage:

And when he [the prison keeper] had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house (Acts 16:34).

And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed (Acts 16:40).

The second major biblical factor that results in the birth and continued existence of single-cell churches is the most important. In any age, the establishment of a church is ultimately the work of God. Beginning with the Jerusalem Church, the Holy Spirit has been the agent through whom the churches have been established:

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:4).

One author who has dealt with the subject of the theology of church growth, George Peters, is a leading missiologist and theologian. He writes concerning the establishment of churches:
Because the church is the church of God, so church growth, both qualitatively and quantitatively, is the work of God. Our Lord emphatically expresses this truth in the first reference to the church in the New Testament: in Matthew 16:18 he majestically declares, "Upon this rock I will build my church"; then he adds the wonderful prediction, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."20

In a later chapter he comments on the role of the Holy Spirit in growth:

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is central in the Book of Acts. He is the ultimate cause of church growth. Spiritual work can be accomplished only by the Holy Spirit. In the kingdom of God the pronouncement is conclusive: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).21

One of the primary ways that the Holy Spirit works is through the spiritual gifts (Romans 12:4-8; I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:4-13). They are related to the biblical teaching on the church as the body of Christ, one of the major New Testament concepts used to describe the church. John Walvoord, President of Dallas Theological Seminary, comments on the importance of these gifts:

Spiritual gifts are divinely given capacities to perform useful functions for God, especially in the area of spiritual service. Just as the human body has members with different capacities, so individual Christians forming the church as the body of Christ have different capacities. These help them contribute to the welfare of the church as a whole, as well as to bear an effective witness to the world.22

Peter Wagner stresses the need to exercise spiritual gifts, if a church is to be healthy:

Christians are to function as members of Christ's body, and each one has been given a spiritual gift or gifts to do a certain job. Therefore, one of the most important spiritual exercises for a

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21 Ibid., p. 89.
Christian is to discover, develop, and use his or her spiritual gift.\(^{23}\)

This discovery may be easier in a single-cell church. As we have seen previously in this chapter, people in the small church participate more directly in its organizational functions.\(^{24}\) Because of this close involvement, there are probably more opportunities for the members to exercise their gifts as one body.

It is apparent, then, that the teachings of the New Testament indicate at least two major biblical factors that enter into the birth and sustaining of the single-cell church. From the historical record we see that Jesus was interested in small groups and that from such groups came many of the initial assemblies of believers. The Scriptures are also clear in their description of churches as the work of God, particularly through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

**Summary**

In this chapter, our purpose has been to determine those dynamic forces which bring single-cell churches into existence. The first section covered the sociological factors: the homogeneous unit principle, the desire for individual expression, and personal relationships.

According to the homogeneous unit principle, people form their various social organizations, including churches, based on mutual interests in matters such as language, race, economic status or other factors. Men and women do not like to cross any more social barriers then is necessary to become a Christian.

\(^{23}\)C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), pp. 21-22.

\(^{24}\)Ray, *Small Churches Are the Right Size*, p. 46.
The area of individual expression was the second factor discussed. Our society puts so much emphasis on bigness and is so impersonal, that membership in a single-cell church is very appealing to some people. As individuals, they have a direct voice in the decision-making process and are faced with less competition for leadership positions. They have a greater range for the expression of their personality and are able to avoid the feeling that they are just another faceless person in the crowd.

The strongest sociological factor examined was in the area of personal relationships. In the small church, there are no strangers—everyone knows everyone else. The number of people involved make it easier to develop personal relationships. This results in the people's having a deep sense of personal worth, both for themselves and the other church members.

The single-cell church is like a family to its people. Within its framework they find identity, security, and empathy. This is a two-sided matter, experiencing on the one hand warmth, spontaneity, and intimacy; while at other times facing the petty, irrational, and sometimes cruel treatment of others that can only exist in a family atmosphere.

In the second section, the biblical factors were explored which have a part in the creation of single-cell churches. The first matter to be considered was the historical record of how Christ worked with small groups and the use of such groups by the apostles to establish New Testament churches.

Jesus worked with only twelve apostles and out of these He had an even closer relationship with Peter, James, and John. He also set
forth the principle that wherever two or more gathered together in His name, He was in their midst. Even the smallest church has the promise of the presence of Christ.

It is also apparent from the New Testament that many of the early churches were formed as small churches or single-cell units of larger congregations. The homes of the members served as the first church buildings, probably including from fifteen to thirty people in the congregation. The church at Philippi was an example of such a group, being created initially from the households of Lydia and the prison keeper.

The second biblical factor, but also the most significant, was the fact that all single-cell churches are the work of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Book of Acts we observe the Holy Spirit at work, so much so that it could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit instead of the Acts of the Apostles. From the first church at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, we see the Spirit at work. In Antioch of Syria, when the church sent out Paul and Barnabas to plant churches, it was a result of the moving of the Spirit:

As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them (Acts 13:2).

The Holy Spirit primarily ministers to the church through the spiritual gifts. The gifts are exercised by the individual members, but in the unity which the Bible compares to the functioning of the body. This is probably easier in the single-cell church because the members are so closely involved in its various functions.

As a result of the combination of these dynamic sociological and biblical factors, single-cell churches are born and sustained.
CHAPTER IV

WHAT ARE THE GROWTH-LIMITING FACTORS OF THE SINGLE-CELL CHURCH THAT DEVELOP OUT OF ITS DEFINITION?

In analyzing the single-cell church, it becomes apparent that there are certain inherent factors of this assembly that keep it from progressing to the next stage of growth. In this chapter, several of these factors will be considered under three major headings: Organizational Structure, Emphasis of Ministry, and Attitude of the Members.

Organizational Structure

It is difficult for the small church to offer the type of ministry available in middle-sized or large congregations. They usually do not have the facilities, workers, or finances to carry on specific ministries to children, teenagers, senior citizens or other such groups within the church.

Many of the older single-cell churches began in the days when travel and communication were limited, so each small community had its own churches. They may have had services once a month and paid the pastor whatever they could collect. Don Whitehead, a Southern Baptist pastor, comments on what has happened to these churches in his study on the decline of the rural church:

Today these churches are still there, trying to be "full-time churches," and many are too weak to do it. When the population declined, schools consolidated and country stores closed, but the
churches remained. Too many churches may be just as bad as too few. An overchurched area can have small churches with inadequate programs, just trying to stay alive.\textsuperscript{1}

The lack of adequate programs becomes a barrier to many people, so they seek out a larger church with more to offer.

Another organizational problem concerns the pastors of single-cell churches. Frequently, the man who pastors this type church does not stay very long; according to Schaller, "Relatively few small-membership churches have the leadership of the same pastor for more than three or four years."\textsuperscript{2}

There definitely seems to be a relationship between church growth and the length of the pastor's ministry. Schaller has written the following comments on this subject:

While there is no evidence that long pastorates produce church growth, it is very rare to find a rapidly growing congregation that has sustained its growth and also has had a series of short pastorates. In rapidly growing churches the typical pastorate lasts for at least seven to ten years and frequently for 20 or more. The continuity of predictable ministerial leadership is extremely important in church growth.\textsuperscript{3}

Peter Wagner confirms Schaller's views on this matter, for he has said, "Pastors of growing churches are generally characterized by longevity in the ministry."\textsuperscript{4}


\textsuperscript{4}C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1976), p. 61.
which relates to the number of people he can effectively lead. Any man, regardless of his abilities and talents, is limited as to how many he can minister to. Elmer Towns writes as follows on this issue: "Time and energy limit a pastor from knowing the needs of more than 300 people, much less allowing space in his schedule to talk to them."5

Since the single-cell church usually has only one full-time staff member, the pastor, it can only grow to the size to which he can minister. If the church grows beyond that size, he loses his effectiveness and cannot fulfill his responsibilities. One of his primary areas is spoken of by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:2, "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." When the church is too large for the pastor he cannot commit what he has learned to all the other people under his authority, so his leadership is weakened.

A third problem with the organizational structure of the small church is their tendency to be controlled by laymen. With the frequent change in pastors and the close personal relationships of the congregation, it is difficult for these churches to be minister-directed. Towns comments on this situation, "The small church may not be well organized or financially efficient, but it does belong to the laymen."6

But, does the dominance of lay leadership necessarily have an affect on growth? The evidence gathered by those studying church growth would seem to indicate that it does, as Schaller has stated:


6Ibid., p. 28.
There also is a growing body of evidence that (a) long-established small-membership churches are often "lay owned and operated," rather than ministered-centered, and (b) the greater the lay control in any size congregation, the less likely it is that the congregation will begin and maintain significant numerical growth. This runs counter to conventional ministerial wisdom, but is an accepted fact of life to most lay persons.\(^7\)

The United Presbyterian denomination conducted a study of its churches to determine why they were declining or growing. The results confirmed the positive relationship between pastoral leadership and the growth of a church, as Jackson Carroll states:

In the United Presbyterian study, members of growing congregations were considerably more likely to express satisfaction with pastoral leadership than members of declining churches. Satisfaction included such things as the pastor's preaching, leadership of public worship, sensitivity to people's needs, capacity to generate enthusiasm, ability to deal with conflict, and spiritual authenticity and maturity.\(^8\)

**Emphasis of Ministry**

There are factors built into the single-cell church's ministry emphasis that hinder its growth. As discussed in Chapter Three, the strongest sociological force in this type church is the close personal relationships. According to Schaller this positive factor also has a detrimental affect on a congregation:

Every asset in the life of the worshiping congregation also has a negative aspect, and this generalization applies to the quality of the caring fellowship of the typical small church. Frequently this distinctive aspect in its life is a barrier to church growth.\(^9\)

The small church is considered a primary group and is therefore limited as to how large it can grow and still retain this status. This

\(^{7}\)Schaller, *Growing Plans*, p. 18.


fact is recognized by those who have studied the small church:

The typical small-membership church often resembles an overgrown small group. The face-to-face contact of the members with one another, rather than shared institutional goals, a well-managed organizational structure, or an extensive program, is what draws and holds the people together. There is an obvious limit on the number of people who can be included, and feel included, in any such group.10

When a small group reaches its maximum size, the members have two choices, they either stop growing or they divide so growth can continue. Many times the single cell church will choose to stop growing, as Dudley explains:

Dividing is one activity that the single-cell church refuses to do. A church program with something for everyone is unnecessary when everyone shares in whatever happens. ... Growth by division is subversive to the essential satisfactions of belonging to the whole church.11

Why do these churches resist growth? Because it threatens their most appealing feature, personal relationships:

The small church is already the right size for everyone to know, or know about, everyone else. This intimacy is not an accident. The essential character of the small church is this capacity to care about people personally. The small church cannot grow in membership size without giving up its most precious appeal, its intimacy.12

Attitude of the Members

In reviewing the writings of those who study church growth, one inherent factor of the single-cell church is set forth as the primary reason for a lack of growth. This factor is the attitude of the people within the church, which is usually negative toward growth.

12Ibid., p. 49.
There are several reasons for this attitude, beginning with the church's self-image.

Schaller considers low self-esteem a very significant factor in the plateauing or decline of small churches, particularly those urban churches which are a fraction of the size they were in the 1950s and 1960s. He describes them as follows:

Frequently the members of these congregations see themselves as small, weak, unattractive, powerless, and frustrated with a limited future. That self-image often creates a self-perpetuating cycle that produces policies and decisions that inhibit the potential outreach. Their priorities are survival and institutional maintenance, not evangelism.13

Another attitude that hinders growth is a reluctance to change, which is prominent among small church congregations. In Don Whitehead's study of the rural church, he found that many of them have often been slow to change and did not keep up with the society to which they were ministering. In the conclusion of his article on the study, he made the following comments:

Failure to change means that the rural church will die—or worse, it will linger in name only, a shell of a true church, providing no vibrant witness for Jesus Christ in its community. Instead of helping people to grow, such a church may actually stand in the way of the Christian maturity of rural people.14

Lyle Schaller, who has worked with many small churches, has witnessed the reluctance of their members to make changes. He writes that in nearly every congregational discussion on growth one can hear the common plea:

"I would like to see our congregation grow, but I don't want to see it change!" Growth means change, and that may be the key factor in

13 Schaller, Growing Plans, p. 20.

evaluating the potential for growth in a congregation. Are the people willing to accept the changes that are the inevitable consequences of church growth?15

Single-cell churches may also develop an exclusionary attitude. The close personal relationships and sense of "family" may lead to a conscious or subconscious attempt to keep others out of the group. One way this is done is through emphasizing a ministry of building up the saints, while neglecting the need to evangelize others. Arthur Glasser, Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, discussed this in a paper he has written:

Where a church concentrates its training resources on introspection and a continual perfecting, it faces the danger of standing in splendid solitude. The result then may only be "Christian" ghettoism. Insistence that the congregation must first be built up internally, before vigorous evangelism training is undertaken, yields a church where evangelism is only a sideline.16

The church spends all of its time and resources on those people it already has, leaving little or nothing for bringing others into the fellowship.

The small church is somewhat analogous to an extended family and for that reason can be difficult to join. William Willimon and Robert Wilson have written on this type church, which includes the following comments:

It may be difficult or impossible to join. The individual cannot join a family; he or she has to be adopted. The same is true of many small churches; here the individual does not join, but is adopted. Once received into the family, however, the person is an

integral part of it and shares fully in the rights and obligations of the group.17

Although having a family atmosphere can be a positive factor, it also may become a barrier to those outside its relationships.

Another reason for this tendency to keep others out is related to the fact that the single cell church is a primary group that has become supersaturated. A majority of its members feel a sense of "belonging" to the fellowship circle. This can be positive, but it also has its unfavorable aspects, as Schaller describes:

The other side of that picture is that as the years pass the group also becomes exclusionary. It is too large to accept additional new members; indeed, as a supersaturated group it already has more people than the typical group can contain.18

A fourth attitude that prevents growth in the small church is what McGavran calls "remnant theology," and he explains it as follows:

In the history of Israel, they ask, do we not see again and again the crucial importance of the remnant? . . . Did not our Lord say that many are called but few are chosen and ask whether, when he returned, he would find faith on the earth?

Remnant theology proves attractive. A glorification of littleness prevails, in which to be small is to be holy. Slow growth is adjudged good growth.19

This posture is found in many of the books and articles on the small church, promoted by those who believe that church growth is anti-small church. The titles of these writings are indicative of this attitude:

Small Churches Are Beautiful, The Small Church--Valid, Vital, Victorious,


"Small Is Beautiful: Churches as if People Mattered," and Small Churches Are the Right Size.

It is becoming apparent to some of those who hold this view of "small is beautiful," that it can be very detrimental. Browne Barr has written these observations, about churches he classifies as liberal:

Many churches like ours have applauded a theology of nongrowth. Growth has been seen to be as vulgar and plastic as Disneyland and, furthermore, sure evidence that the gospel is not being preached with its radical claims; e.g., "Blessed are you when men shall revile you... (Matt. 5:11). Such defenses seldom recall the text which says, "The common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12:37). Applause for the theology of nongrowth will not last long, however, because it is almost impossible for a drowning community to clap.20

A theology of nongrowth may sound good to some, but if all churches had that attitude, Christianity could become a minor religious influence with few adherents.

Regardless of which of these attitudes is prevalent, or other attitudes not mentioned, this seems to be the primary factor in a church failing to grow. In an interview for Christianity Today, Peter Wagner was asked to give the chief impediment to church growth, and he responded with this answer:

Here in the United States a recent survey made by the largest Presbyterian denomination shows that one of the basic reasons why it has declined (11 percent in the last ten years) is that the churches -- the people, the pastors, the leaders of the local churches -- simply do not want their churches to grow. I think that is the chief impediment to church growth in the United States. The leadership and the people are not highly motivated for growth.21


Summary

In reviewing the literature on the single-cell church it is apparent there are three major categories under which we can group its limiting factors: Organizational Structure, Emphasis of Ministry, and Attitude of the Members.

Under the category of organizational structure, one of the barriers to growth is a lack of an adequate ministry. The small church lacks the leadership, finances, and facilities to provide the types of programs the larger churches offer.

The pastor is also a factor, particularly the problem small churches have in keeping a man for very long. It is common for the pastorate of a small church to last only three or four years, while growing churches usually have a pastor from seven to twenty years or more. The pastor is usually the only staff member, and one man is limited in the number of people he can effectively lead.

Another problem related to the pastor is the tendency for the small church to be controlled by the laity. The evidence gathered by the church growth leaders and those who have investigated growth seems to indicate that the greater the lay control, the less likely the church will grow. The key word here is control, not involvement. The lay people in a growing church are involved in the work, but the pastor and others in leadership positions are directing the ministry.

A second major category concerns the emphasis of the church's ministry. Probably the strongest force that draws people into the small church are the personal relationships, which are so lacking in our society. But, this quality of intimacy also has a negative side.
The church is a primary group and as such it is limited as to how many people it can include. When the group becomes so large that the members find they do not know or know about everyone else, they are faced with a choice, to divide and make two groups or stop growing. Unfortunately they usually choose to stop growing, even though it may only be a subconscious decision. They believe it is more important to maintain their capacity to personally care for each other, even though it means a halt or decline in numerical growth.

The final category to be considered is the attitude of the members, which is the primary reason for a lack of growth. One of these attitudes is the single cell church's poor self-image. The members see themselves as weak, unattractive and powerless to change their situation. This attitude leads to policies and decisions that inhibit their potential to reach other people, so they concentrate on survival instead of evangelism.

Small churches are also faced with the problem of resistance to change. They do not keep up with the community around them or society in general, so their effectiveness in ministry is diminished. Some of the members may want to grow, but only if it does not involve any type of change. The inevitable changes which come with church growth are too high of a price for the congregation to pay.

An exclusionary attitude may also develop because the church is like an extended family. Through the close personal relationships, members and the leaders lose their sense of perspective, concentrating most of their time and resources on a continual perfecting of those who are already a part of the family.
As a primary group, the single-cell church is usually super-saturated with people, unable to accept new members. This also leads to an exclusionary attitude, as the group does not need anyone else and is very content to remain the same. Additional members are actually looked upon as a threat to the type of group life they are enjoying.

A final attitude that hinders growth is referred to as "remnant theology" or a "nongrowth theology." Those who hold this view believe that church growth looks upon the small churches as second-class assemblies, that only the larger churches are important. Instead, they glorify littleness, believing that to be small is somehow more holy or right in God's view. There has always been the faithful few, both in the history of Israel and of the New Testament churches, according to this view.

As a result of considering these three categories, organizational structure, ministry emphasis, and membership attitude, we have seen some of the factors which limit the growth of the single-cell church. These factors are woven into the fabric of such churches; inherent limitations that need to be overcome if they are to progress to the next stage of growth.
CHAPTER V

IS THE SINGLE-CELL CHURCH AN ADEQUATE
BIBLICAL OBJECTIVE?

As a result of examining what a single-cell church is, how it comes into existence, and the limiting factors inherent in its size, it is necessary to look at its relationship to church growth. In considering this matter, our goal is to determine if the single-cell church is an adequate biblical objective and whether a church should work to grow beyond this size.

Biblical Objective

In considering any matter related to church growth, as in all other areas of the Christian life, the Word of God is our authority. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus Christ declared, "I will build my church"; it is not the church of the apostles or other believers, but His church. Jesus was speaking corporately of all the believers, who on the local level are assembled together in individual congregations. But, does the New Testament set forth any evidence to indicate a specific size for these local congregations? On this subject there are differing views among the leaders and writers in the church growth field.

Some writers, such as David Ray, believe that the small church is the closest to the biblical objective. He feels the Bible is biased toward certain people, such as the poor, the sick, and other such groups. Ray also sees another bias, which is a special appreciation for things that are small. He relates this to the size of churches as he
comments on Jesus' earthly ministry:

The gospel Jesus preached and practiced stressed intimacy, personal and communal relationships, and attention to individual needs and gifts. He did not build institutions or encourage mass movements. Even the resurrection appearances were not the media events one might expect, but rather encounters in a garden, on a road, and behind closed doors. The Savior of the world was most at home in small groups and had a special affinity for the simple, the unlikely, and the insignificant. Size has nothing to do with the biblical marks of the church.

Ray is correct in his observations that Jesus worked with small groups, but this was not the only focus of his ministry. The New Testament teaches that Christ's goal was to encompass the entire world with his gospel (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). As to his resurrection appearances, many were to small groups and individuals, but Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that at one time "he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; . . ." Size is something that must be considered when examining the biblical objectives of a church.

Other writers use the New Testament house churches as an example of support for the theory that small churches are the most biblical. Curry Mavis expresses this view in his book:

The Christian church itself took root in small groups of believers thoroughly dedicated to Christ. The earliest Christians met, for most part, in the homes of believers and soon these homes came to be known as house churches.

There is no question that early groups of Christians met in homes, as was discussed in Chapter Two (pages 16 and 17). But, church growth leaders do not agree as to the organizational function of these groups. McGavran sees them as individual cells or congregations that

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belong to a larger assembly of believers. There were no buildings available to the early Christians to accommodate large numbers, so they were forced to divide into smaller groups.³

In support of McGavran's view, others see the house churches as a part of a larger congregation. George Hunter takes this position in his writings:

The "small church" is the oldest local structure of the Christian movement. When the apostle Paul was writing his Epistles to the church at Corinth, Rome, or some other city, he was not writing to one large congregation that met in a large parish church or a cathedral with a steeple. He was writing, in each case, to a federation of several or more small congregations that, together, made up the church of that city.⁴

Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, has expressed a similar opinion:

The greatest church that ever graced this earth was at Jerusalem. There have been some great churches in the past, and there are some great churches now, but there has never been a church that approximated the size of the church of Jerusalem.⁵

He continues by describing how this church grew from 120 to 25,000 by the time of the events recorded in Acts chapter four. Falwell comments that in Acts 5:14 the church was bringing in "multitudes" of men and women, which would seem to indicate an even larger number. He concludes with the following statement, "If you're against numbers, you can stop

³Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, How to Grow a Church, 2d ed. (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1977), p. 22.


counting your Sunday school after you pass 25,000 and be scriptural, because now the Bible simply calls the church a multitude.\textsuperscript{6}

Except for the church at Jerusalem, there are no other references in the Bible that indicate the exact numerical size of a church. It can be argued that there were small groups of believers, but no definite conclusions can be made as to whether or not these were individual congregations or cell groups of larger churches. Since the Scriptures do not designate a specific size for a church, the second question must be considered in order to determine whether or not a single cell church is a proper biblical objective.

Importance of Growth

Since there were single cell groups of believers in the New Testament, is it necessary for a church to grow beyond that size? The Bible and church growth authorities seem to answer this question in the affirmative. Let us examine the evidence in support of this view.

One of the major New Testament concepts used to describe the church is that of the body of Christ. This metaphor is used over fifty times, most frequently by the Apostle Paul. In his doctoral dissertation, written for Fuller Theological Seminary, Daniel Reeves comments on this matter with a quotation from Edward Murphy:

\begin{quote}
The symbol of the Body tells us the Church is essentially a living organism, not a religious organization. It grows through the divine life abiding in its members.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p. 35.

\textsuperscript{7}R. Daniel Reeves, "Church Growth American Style: An Introductory Analysis of Ecclesiastical Growth Patterns in the United States" (D.Miss. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980), p. 80.
A church must be considered a living organism and thus it must be growing, regardless of size. This essential factor is discussed by Reeves:

Organic life has a way of dividing in order to multiply. The Church, as the body of Christ, does likewise. It too is an organism. Therefore, multiplication of churches is a normal and natural phenomenon. Where there is life there is growth which eventually follows the pattern of division and multiplication. Thus the real question is not whether a growing church should divide and multiply, but when and how shall it do so.8

It is not the size of a church that is so important, but whether or not it is a growing church. Dr. W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, has stated, "There is nothing wrong with a small church, but there is something wrong with a church that is not growing."9

Jerry Falwell relates this to the growth that is expected of a normal child:

Every church was small at one time. We were small here at Thomas Road Baptist Church; however, if we stopped growing, that would have been a sign of spiritual sickness or sin. A baby who stops growing physically has something wrong with him.10

Most churches will begin small, but if they are spiritually healthy, growth will be a normal ongoing process. If this is not the experience of a congregation, they should try to determine the reasons for the lack of growth.

There is an apparent need for small and large churches, as Peter Wagner confirms in one of his books:

8Ibid., p. 146.


10Towns and Falwell, Church Aflame, p. 34.
As long as there are unsaved people in its community, a church cannot be content with the status quo. Healthy large churches and healthy small churches are evangelistically effective. . . . If smaller churches are growing they eventually will become large churches. Just as every river was once a stream, every large church was once a small church. When this happens, new small churches will continually be needed.11

This appears to be the key factor in the relationship of the single-cell church to church growth, it must continue to grow. Just as a cell divides in order to grow, so the small church must produce new cells if it is healthy.

The principle of growing by adding cells was graphically confirmed with results based on an experiment conducted by Richard Myers, a religious sociologist. A group of cooperating churches were asked to keep close tabs on their attendance and church membership for one year. One half of the pastors were instructed to combine Sunday school classes whenever a teacher resigned, with the merged students forming a larger class. The other half were instructed to increase the number of classes by dividing each existing class and recruiting new teachers for them.

At the close of the year the two groups were astonished when they compared results. Those churches with combined classes, ended up with a decline in Sunday school attendance and in church membership. Charles Mylander comments on the results of the churches that added classes and teachers:

Each of their divided classes grew until they regained their previous size. The new classes expanded too. In addition to the increased Sunday school attendance, the ministers also reported

11C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1976), p. 86.
gains in church membership. . . . One significant secret of church growth is to multiply cells and expand kinship circles.12

Daniel Reeves brought out, in his doctoral dissertation, the importance of cells in church growth. His dissertation was based on a study of three churches in the San Fernando Valley of California, which had experienced significant growth: First Baptist Church of Van Nuys, Grace Community Church, and The Church on the Way. Reeves writes as follows:

Healthy and growing churches like the three we are studying are discovering the power and place of the cell group, for it is at this level that "maximum spiritual growth takes place in close fellowship with other believers" (Richards 1970:32). What the "congregation" initiates in terms of fellowship the cell group cultivates and develops in an even greater dimension. The focus of such a small circle of fellowship is on the individual. Here the church becomes small enough to personalize its ministry to one believer.13

The relationship of single-cell groups to church growth has been dramatically evident at the Central Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. Under the leadership of Pastor Paul Cho, this church has a membership estimated at 350,000 and is growing at a rate of 10,000 members per month. Pastor Cho states, "A cell group is the basic part of our church."14 He is committed to the use of small cell groups and believes they have been used of God to bring about phenomenal growth at Central Gospel Church.

There are others who attribute a lack of growth to the absence of churches with cell groups. Roy Johnson writes concerning this problem in his denomination:

Why isn't the Church of the Brethren growing? The thesis of this article is that the reason for our lack of growth lies not so much in our not being "evangelistic," but in a series of decisions which were made over the past few decades which have led our churches very largely to become what Lyle Schaller calls "single-cell churches."

In my opinion what has happened is that the multicell churches of the past were influenced to modify their programs in such a way that they would become single cells. This change took place over a period of time by removing the characteristics which make a strong sub-cell healthy.15

Johnson believes that the development of strong sub-cells is part of what is needed in a growing church:

The sub-cell exists primarily as a source of strength for current members and as a point of entry for new members. It does not guarantee growth, but its absence will guarantee that the church will be limited to single-cell size.

The multicell church also has the advantage of offering a larger variety of programs, and it would seem a greater chance for growth in comparison with the tendency of a single-cell church to become ingrown and interrelated.16

The Bible also clearly teaches that growth is a natural part of the life of a local church. Alan Tippett comments on the biblical basis of church growth:

The attitude that we must sometimes expect slow growth or non-growth distresses me. It is foreign to the spirit of the New Testament, which has a rich range of imagery showing growth is to be expected—both physical, numerical, and spiritual growth within. New Testament nouns and verbs leave no room for static causes.

Jesus himself used quantitative imagery, like the man with the net catching fish (Matt. 13:47, 48), the call of fishermen to become fishers of men (Mark 1:17), and the increasing bulk of the loaf by leavening (Matt. 13:33). He used the imagery of opportunity, like "fields white unto harvest" (John 4:35, a specific case), the term

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16 Ibid., p. 244.
"Lord of the harvest" (Matt. 9:28, Luke 10:2), and direct commission to pray for harvesters (Matt. 9:37, 38).17

One of the criticisms against the study of church growth has been an alleged overemphasis on numbers. As Tippett pointed out, there is a need for numerical and spiritual growth, and the Scriptures attest to this fact. Some believe that being concerned over numbers is not important, it's quality that counts not quantity. J. Robertson McQuilkin, President of Columbia Bible College, has written a book in which he examines the church growth movement in light of biblical teaching. One of the five presuppositions of the movement he examines is their concern with numerical growth. As a result of his study he came to the following conclusion:

True biblical evangelism has as its goal that new members be born into the family of God; that new parts be added to the body of Christ; that the number of Christians in the church increases. Numerical church growth is a startling but useful summary of this ultimate goal of evangelism.

This first, great principle of the church growth movement is not, then, merely permitted by Scripture. It is commanded. Again, it is not an incidental command. It is the crucial command which indicates God's will for the church in His great purpose of redemption.18

It is apparent from the Scriptures and those who are authorities in the field of church growth, that there is a place for the single-cell church. But, in most cases, this size is the infancy stage, and to remain healthy the church must continue to grow.


Among the leaders and writers on the subject of church growth, there appear to be two major views on what type of biblical objective is reached in the establishment of a single-cell church. The first group adheres to the idea that a small church is probably the closest to the New Testament pattern, with its emphasis on intimacy and personal relationships.

The proponents of this view emphasize Jesus' work with small groups and individuals as an argument in favor of the single-cell church. To some of them, a concern about numbers is unspiritual and they feel the most important aspect of a church is the quality of life the members experience.

The church leaders and others concerned with the emphasis on growth also point to the New Testament house church concept in support of their ideas. They believe these groups were individual congregations and set the pattern which justifies the present existence of small churches.

Donald McGavran, who is often referred to as "the founder of the modern church growth movement," represents those who take the other major view on the single-cell church as a biblical objective. Instead of this type being the goal, he considers it to be only the first stage in the growing process of a healthy congregation.

In McGavran's opinion the house churches mentioned in the New Testament were necessary as an accommodation to the times. There were no large assembly areas available to the early Christians, so they had to meet in small groups. But, each group was an integral part of a larger assembly, such as at Corinth. There may have been twenty or
thirty house churches in Corinth, but they were not individual churches. It was one church that met in many different locations.\textsuperscript{19}

This perspective on the house church leads us to another basic principle of McGavran and those who hold his views. It concerns the New Testament teaching on the church as a living organism and the importance of growing by the division of cells.

Just as the human body grows by the division of cells, so a single-cell church must move on to the next stage of growth by adding new cells. This principle of cellular growth has been confirmed by research, such as the year long study conducted by religious sociologist Richard Myers, the study of three large southern California churches in Daniel Reeves' dissertation, and Roy Johnson's examination of the Church of the Brethren.

In the final section of this chapter we reviewed a few of the biblical passages which teach the necessity of church growth. There is an attitude prevalent among some church leaders that is anti-growth. The emphasis is upon the quality of spiritual life being experienced by those who are already in the churches of our nation. These leaders feel an interest in numerical increase is not important and may reflect an unspiritual attitude.

It is true that there needs to be quality in a church, but that needs to be balanced out with a concern for the number of people being reached. The New Testament is replete with imagery showing that growth is to be expected. In Jesus' commission to the disciples, His command was, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"

\textsuperscript{19}Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, How to Grow a Church, 2d ed. (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1977), pp. 35-36.
(Mark 16:15). Certainly if Christ was interested in numbers, then His disciples should be.

As a result of surveying the views of writers and various leaders in church growth, as well as the biblical teachings on this subject, we have seen the relationship of the single-cell church to growth. It appears that the most appropriate way to view it is as the beginning stage of a church. The single-cell would be a proper biblical objective for a new church, but not one that had been in existence for several years.

In a few instances there are churches that cannot keep on growing because of their particular circumstances, as George Hunter points out:

Occasional situations, where most of the people have moved out and those remaining are already churched, do exist in isolated instances. But such circumstances do not exist nearly as frequently as local church leaders believe.20

Most churches should work to grow beyond the single-cell stage if they expect to remain healthy. Just as a child is considered unhealthy if he stops growing before reaching maturity, so it appears that a church which is not growing may be ill and in need of treatment. A healthy church should be multiplying its cells and experiencing physical and spiritual growth.

20McGavran and Hunter, Church Growth Strategies That Work, p. 86.
CHAPTER VI

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PRINCIPLES THAT WILL ASSIST A SINGLE-CELL CHURCH TO OVERCOME ITS INHERENT LIMITATIONS AND GROW TO ITS MAXIMUM POTENTIAL?

This concluding chapter examines some of the major principles drawn from the study of the single-cell church. These principles will be considered under two categories: (1) Principles for internal growth of a single-cell church to assist it in reaching its maximum potential, and (2) Principles to assist a single-cell church in overcoming its inherent limitations in order to grow beyond this stage. The final section will include questions for additional research that have developed as a result of this study.

Principles for Internal Growth

The dynamics of the single-cell church (Chapter Three) must be utilized to their fullest extent in order for internal growth to develop. These are the factors that attract people to this type of church, and can continue to have a positive influence as growth occurs. They shall be examined under two major categories: sociological and biblical.

Sociological

Within this first category, there are three principles to be considered:

1. The homogeneity of the congregation must be evaluated.
2. The desire for individual expression must be satisfied.

3. Personal relationships must be maintained.

As Donald McGavran has stated, "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."¹ This is a result of the homogeneous principle and it must be considered when church leaders are seeking growth. Most single-cell churches are made up of one homogeneous group, so they need to emphasize reaching people that will feel comfortable with the type of members in their congregation.

It is not easy for some people to recognize the importance of this principle, as Peter Wagner explains:

Unfortunately, many Americans find the homogeneous unit principle very difficult to accept. Although there are exceptions, Americans seem to have a strong, inherent resistance to approving of churches of just one kind of people. Yet missionaries and Christian leaders from other countries generally accept it almost as a matter of course.²

In order for a church to grow, the members and the leadership must be willing to put aside any resistance to concentrating on homogeneous groups. They need to determine what kind of people would be attracted to their church and then develop programs and ministries to reach them.

The second principle involves the importance of satisfying the desire people have to express themselves as individuals. Many people are initially drawn to a small church because of this factor. It has been stated by sociologists such as William Dobriner, that "there is a


²C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1976), p. 111.
greater range for personality to express itself in the primary group and consequently a freedom and spontaneity of response between the participants which does not occur in more formally organized groups.\(^3\)

The single-cell church is a primary group and therefore offers more opportunities for individual expression. The competition for leadership is not as great as in a larger church. These opportunities must be expanded as the church grows, so that people will still feel they are important. Peter Wagner expresses how important this is:

Pastors of growing churches, whether they be large or small, know how to motivate their laypeople, how to create structures which permit them to be active and productive and how to guide them into meaningful avenues of Christian service.\(^4\)

The final sociological principle emphasizes the importance of maintaining personal relationships. This is the strongest force in establishing small churches, as Carl Dudley has stated, "personal relationships lie at the heart of the small-church experience."\(^5\)

As a single-cell church develops, it will lose some of the intimacy associated with the small group. This cannot be avoided, but an effort must be made to give people opportunities for maintaining personal relationships. One way to accomplish this task is to shift the emphasis from developing personal relationships within the congregation as a whole, to creating relationships in cell groups (Sunday school, youth groups, or other such groups). This matter will be dealt with further under Emphasis of Ministry in the next major section.

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\(^4\)Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, p. 69.

A church does not have to lose all of its intimacy in order to grow. Elmer Towns addresses this issue in *Church Aflame*:

A study done by students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School revealed that the average church member was on speaking basis (called people by their first names) with sixty individuals, whether the church had sixty, 600 or a thousand members. Therefore, it is wrong to accuse the large church of being impersonal. The average person will speak to approximately sixty people no matter what the size of the church.6

**Biblical**

This section will consider two principles: the biblical basis of small groups and the establishment of churches as the work of God. Beginning with the biblical teaching on small groups, it was determined in Chapter Three that many of the early churches began with small groups of believers.

Jesus set the example during His earthly ministry when He worked closely with the twelve apostles and the inner circle of three. Eleven of these men formed the foundation upon which the first church was established in Acts chapter two. But, even though it began as a small group of 120 members, some historians believe that it grew to 100,000 in the first seven years.7 Probably the other churches in large cities such as Rome and Corinth were established in a similar fashion.

As discussed in Chapter Five of this study, many of the first churches did begin as small groups, which frequently met in homes. The healthy churches did not stay small, but grew in both quality and quantity. Even though there were usually no appropriate places for the Christians to assemble in very large groups, they did overcome


7 Ibid., p. 35.
this difficulty by meeting in small groups. Each group was a cell of the larger congregation, so that they were referred to corporately as the church in that city.

From this principle it can be seen that the single-cell church should be growing if it is healthy. Beginning as a small group is very normal and represents the first stage in growth. But the small church is not intended to stay that way, but should be growing.

The second principle to be examined in the Bible is the most important, for it teaches that church growth is the work of God. Christians are often guilty of turning to methods and other means to accomplish God's work, while forgetting to turn to Him. They need to be reminded that God is ultimately responsible for the growth of a church, as Luke states in Acts 2:47b: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

A single-cell church must set its priorities if biblical growth is to be experienced. In The Complete Book of Church Growth, the authors set forth the first priority:

The priority for every church and for every Christian is to give Christ first place in everything! In Colossians 1:16-18 the reason for this priority is cited: (1) he produced all things for himself (Col. 1:16); (2) he preceded all things (Col. 1:17); (3) he preserves all things (Col. 1:17b); and (4) he purposes to be first in all things (Col. 1:18). As the head is the center of our lives, so Christ must be given preeminence. The head is always the one who gives directions; the body or the members are those who must willingly receive the orders. The growing church today must know how to listen to her head and how to respond when direction is given. It seems reasonable and biblical to assume that if the church would only follow her Lord's instructions, both quantitative and qualitative growth would follow.8

In order to know what Christ's instructions are, the leaders and members of a church must have good communication with him. The writers in *The Complete Book of Church Growth* point out how this is accomplished:

The primary way for us to communicate to our leader is through prayer. The primary way for him to communicate to us is through his revealed Word. Great emphasis is placed in growing churches upon these "basics." . . . Prayer is not just enlisting God's blessings and assistance as we make decisions. Prayer is our communication system by which we ask him, the Lord of the church, what he wants us to do. It is the means of determining the ministries and methods that the body will engage in.\(^9\)

The importance of prayer cannot be stressed too much, for it is a vital element, as others in the field of church growth have recognized. Melvin Hodges, a professor in the Assemblies of God Graduate School of Theology and Missions, and noted authority in church planting has stated:

The importance of prayer in establishing a church and maintaining its spiritual life can scarcely be overestimated. Prayer links pastor and people with the living Head of the church. We are colaborers together with God. Prayer makes this partnership a reality and releases the resources of God to enable the church to carry out its ministry.\(^10\)

Gene Getz, a former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, has written on this subject as follows:

At the time the church was born, one of the most predominant experiences of those who were waiting in the upper room was corporate prayer. In the spirit of unity and "one mindedness," the one hundred and twenty believers "were continually devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14) as they waited for the Holy Spirit to come as Jesus had promised.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Ibid., p. 227.


In addition to putting Christ first and communicating with Him through prayer and the Scriptures, the church must rely upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Peter Wagner expresses the significance of the ministry of the Spirit:

There are many different ways of approaching the task of discovering what God is doing in today's world. And one of them--as we are doing here--is to look around the country at the churches that seem to be doing something unusual and, consequently, are maintaining a steady pattern of growth. And while we look at them, we ask again our original question: Just what is it that makes churches like these grow? Of course, it is, in the final analysis, God at work through His Holy Spirit.  

The sociological and biblical principles reviewed are some of the most important ones needed to assist a church with internal growth. The second major section of principles must now be examined. These can be used to overcome the inherent limitations of the single-cell church.

**Overcoming Limitations**

In Chapter Four the factors that limit the growth of the single-cell church were considered. This section will examine three areas a church needs to consider in order to overcome its barriers: Organizational Structure, Emphasis of Ministry, and the Attitude of Its Members.

**Organizational Structure**

One of the barriers within the organizational structure is the limited ministry of the smaller church. Carl Dudley advocates the use of new cells to correct this problem:

When a group attracts so many members that it becomes unwieldy, the group subdivides to provide space for more members. Like cells of

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the human body, the church body has grown by division of large cells into two or more smaller cells.\textsuperscript{13}

This principle was illustrated in the experiment conducted by Richard Myers, referred to in Chapter Five (pp. 52, 53). The churches which divided their existing Sunday school classes into two classes, ended up with an increase in attendance and also added to the overall church membership.

Another way to achieve significant growth through multiplication of cells is by cellular reproduction. This method is distinct from cellular division, as George Hunter explains:

This strategy advocates the creation of essentially new cells as ports of entry for undiscipled people. This strategy does not divide old cells, but leaves them intact. For instance, one or more key members of the old cell help start a new cell for outreach. They "fertilize" the new cell, and after several months of recruiting members for it, they return to their former cell involvement and/or move out to help start still another new cell. The recruited new members become a cell with new leaders.\textsuperscript{14}

Elmer Towns views the creation of new cells as one of the best ways for a pastor to help a single-cell church to grow. Some of the new points of entry he mentions are all-day seminars, sports programs, and youth programs such as the AWANA Clubs. These cells are particularly useful in attracting people who do not see themselves as part of the "inner circle" of the church.\textsuperscript{15}

The next principle is concerned with the importance of leadership. Harold Cook has written a book on historical patterns of church

\textsuperscript{13}Carl S. Dudley, Making the Small Church Effective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 52.


\textsuperscript{15}Elmer L. Towns, Church Growth II lecture, Liberty Baptist College, Lynchburg, Virginia, 31 January 1984.
growth, in which he makes general observations on the great growth that was experienced by the Armenians, the Irish, the Karens of Burma, the Hawaiians, and the Bataks of Sumatra. One of his observations is the importance of dominant personalities:

It is not too much to say that rarely does outstanding church growth come spontaneously without some strong personality to take the lead. That person may or may not be the originator of the work. He may serve principally as a catalyst. Or he may be just a strong figure around whom the others can rally. But the role he plays is a crucial one.\[^{16}\]

As Cook has stated, the role of leaders in church growth is very crucial, so the church needs to evaluate this area.

There are many types of churches in the United States, but there are some factors common to most of those that are growing. Five of these types are dealt with by Dan Baumann, California pastor who is a graduate of Wheaton College, Fuller Seminary, and Boston University. He comments as follows on the principle of leadership:

Any church, regardless of its size, location, or tradition will flourish better with enthusiastic, involved leaders. At Thomas Road Baptist Church the pastor sets the pace. This is the usual pattern because churches ultimately become a lengthened shadow of the pastor's vision. . . . No church, anywhere, can overcome a lack of vision on the part of its leadership if it intends to move out for God.\[^{17}\]

It is easy for a pastor to put the blame on the congregation if the church is not experiencing growth, but the church growth authorities believe the responsibility is his, as Peter Wagner has stated:

In America, the primary catalytic factor for growth in a local church is the pastor. This may not be equally true in some other countries, especially where churches are multiplying much more


rapidly than professional pastors can be trained and ordained. But here in America, there is in every growing, dynamic church a key person whom God is using to make it happen.\(^{18}\)

He considers the number one vital sign of a healthy, growing church to be "a pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth."\(^{19}\)

The pastor needs to begin with himself and try to determine what he can do to be a better leader. He may need additional education or training at leadership seminars offered at some church conferences. Whatever it takes, he must be the best leader he can, according to the gifts God has given him, if he expects the church to grow.

Lyle Schaller sets forth the idea that a pastor may have to completely change his style of leadership. In the small church he is looked upon as a faithful shepherd, tending to every need of his flock. But, in order to achieve growth in his church, the pastor may have to become a "rancher." Schaller explains, "Ranchers are very much concerned about the welfare of every animal on the premises, but their basic responsibility is to manage the total situation, not to be directly involved with the care of every animal."\(^{20}\)

The pastor must also make a commitment to stay with the church long enough to see it grow. As discussed in Chapter Four, the normal tenure for a pastor in a small church is usually only three or four years. This makes it difficult for a church to grow, because there is always an adjustment period involved with each new pastor. Any type

\(^{18}\) Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, p. 55.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 57.

of growth program would be stifled by a frequent change in pastors.

Peter Wagner points out that growing churches usually do not have to confront this turnover problem:

One of the reasons why growing churches do not have to spend much time worrying about what will happen when their pastor goes is that a substantial number of pastors of growing churches have considered their particular parish to be a lifetime calling. They are not looking around for greener pastures.21

Lyle Schaller, in commenting on pastoral longevity, has said, "In rapidly growing churches the typical pastorate lasts for at least seven to ten years and frequently for 20 or more."22 An examination of some of America's largest churches confirms what Schaller has stated. In Elmer Town's list of the 100 Largest Churches for 1979 to 1980, based on church attendance, the top four have had the same pastor for twenty or more years: Jack Hyles, of First Baptist Church in Hammond, Indiana; Jerry Falwell, of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia; Lee Roberson, of Highland Park Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and W. A. Criswell, of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.23

Any pastor who starts a church or assumes an already existing church, must be willing to make a long-term commitment if he expects to see the church grow. The stability and continuity a church experiences by having a pastor for ten or more years is vital for its development.

Another organizational principle to be considered is the need to increase the church staff. Peter Wagner explains that this factor is often ignored by those who want their church to grow:

21 Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, p. 61.


Most churches are understaffed for growth. They are staffed for maintenance and survival, but not for growth. If your church is to sustain growth momentum, staffing must become a high priority. Wagner believes that a church that plans to move past the 200 barrier should ideally start with a senior pastor and one staff member. He comments concerning the importance of this factor, "At this stage of growth, investment in staff is much wiser than investment in facilities." Towns proposes the following guidelines for determining when to add staff members:

Approximately one new staff member is needed for each 100 new people attending the church. There are approximately twenty giving units in the church for each 100 persons. Ten new giving units supply enough money to support an additional staff member. Each staff member should live at the level of the congregation, not below or above the average income of the church members.

Adding staff members may require a change in the pastor's concept of his role in the church. According to Towns, the pastor must change from an open door policy to a closed door policy. He cannot be as accessible to the people because of the greater demands upon his time, for he is now an executive and must work through other people. But, this is not always easy to do, as Towns points out:

A pastor cannot build a large and aggressive work without competent help. Many pastors are unwilling to delegate responsibility. Others are unwilling to trust responsibility and authority in the hands of other people.

25 Ibid.
26 Towns and Falwell, Church Aflame, p. 185.
27 Towns, Church Growth II lecture.
28 Towns and Falwell, Church Aflame, pp. 184-185.
Emphasis of Ministry

The second major area concerns the emphasis of the church's ministry. Single-cell churches usually emphasize personal relationships, which tends to make them introverted. They stress the edification of the believers and lose their zeal for evangelism. They need to establish the proper balance between evangelism and edification. Both these functions are included in Christ's Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (New King James Version).

The first priority of the church is to "make disciples," this involves evangelism of the unbelievers. Many small churches have been built upon this foundation, resulting in phenomenal growth. Jerry Falwell started with thirty-five charter members and now has over 21,000 members, and he explains how this was accomplished:

The superaggressive local church that is getting the job done has one goal, one purpose, one obsession: winning its city for the Lord. If your church is in the country, you should have as an objective the winning of every farmer and every county around you for the Lord.

You should learn how to use the principle of saturation, which is preaching the gospel to every available person at every available time by every available means.29

The late John R. Rice, founder of The Sword of the Lord and a prolific Fundamentalist writer, expressed the same view of evangelism:

The first aim of every preacher called of God should be to win souls. A minister may say, as an alibi for his powerlessness and

fruitlessness; "I am called to be a teaching pastor." But that, I insist, is an alibi for outright disobedience to the plain command of God. The Great Commission is still binding on preachers. The Gospel is to be preached to every creature. We are to teach those already converted to go win others. 30

The second part of the Great Commission involves "teaching them" once they have been saved and baptized. This is referred to as edification and, according to Gene Getz, it is the second major function of a local church:

The church therefore exists to carry out two functions—evangelism (to make disciples) and edification (to teach them). These two functions in turn answer two questions: First, Why does the church exist in the world? and second, Why does the church exist as a gathered community? 31

In his definitive exposition of the church growth philosophy, Understanding Church Growth, Donald McGavran addresses the issue of the need to have evangelism and edification in balance:

Church growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost. It is not enough to search for lost sheep. The Master Shepherd is not pleased with a token search; He wants His sheep found. . . .

Church growth follows where the lost are not merely found but restored to normal life in the fold—though it may be a life they have never consciously known. Faithfulness in "folding and feeding"—which unfortunately has come to be called by such a dry, superficial term as follow-up—is essential to lasting church expansion. . . . Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful aftercare. 32

There is a tendency for churches to be imbalanced in their approach to these two functions. Some churches place so much emphasis on reaching the lost, that the spiritual growth of the believers is


31 Getz, Sharpening the Focus of the Church, p. 22.

almost completely ignored. Other pastors and congregations spend so much time edifying one another, that they lose their evangelistic zeal and allow many of the unsaved in their community to go unreached. A single-cell church needs to strive for a proper balance between the two.

Attitude of the Members

The third major area involves the barrier of the members' attitude. As discussed in Chapter Four, some single-cell churches have a poor self-image. Often in the struggle to survive, feelings of inferiority develop. These may be caused by the single-cell church's limited size, lack of resources, lack of impressive buildings or lack of status in the community.

Curry Mavis believes that inferiority complexes are as damaging to churches as they are to people:

They hinder vision and obscure challenging opportunities for service. They undercut self-confidence, and no captivating program is launched. They diminish enthusiasm and activities are carried on in an unimaginative manner. . . . Churches with inferiority complexes are usually timid and overly cautious, lacking a spirit of adventure.33

The pastor of a church that has a poor self-image must work to improve it. He needs to be positive about the church, encouraging and challenging the people to recognize their place in God's plan. The people should be reminded of how much they are worth to God, as Paul reminds us in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto your selves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."

God was willing to allow Jesus to suffer and die to purchase the

salvation of his children, so any assembly of believers is precious to
him, regardless of size.

The Scriptures also exhort us that it is not wise for individ-
uals or churches to compare themselves to others, "For we dare not
make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that
commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and
comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12).
Single-cell churches should not concern themselves with how they compare
to other churches, but concentrate on what God wants to do through them.

A lack of self-esteem is a form of introversion, a common
problem in small churches. Mavis points out that one of the best ways
to overcome this attitude is to serve others:

The way for the struggling church to overcome its introversion
is by effective service. Let it rally its members and take the
gospel to every unevangelized home in its community. Let it
deliberately recruit the unreached children and youth and faithfully
 teach them the Word of God. Let its members visit the sick, bear
the burdens of the weak, and minister to the brokenhearted.34

The second attitude that needs to be corrected is the reluc-
tance to change. The pastor must be convinced by God and His Word that
growth is to be expected in a normal church. He then must transfer that
conviction to the congregation through prayer, preaching, and teaching.

J. Robertson McQuilkin believes that a positive approach toward
the possibility of growth is essential:

Expectancy of response does not always bring results, because
sometimes in our humanity we confound presumption with faith.
However, nonexpectancy is a euphemism for unbelief. One thing
growing churches have in common and little else. Growing churches

34 Ibid., p. 41.
are characterized by a great confidence that they can—no, that they will grow. They are churches that work in faith.\textsuperscript{35}

The members of a single-cell church enjoy the intimacy of knowing everyone else and resist giving up that experience. But, as George Hunter points out, they must be helped to perceive the limited outreach that their single-cell structure imposes:

The leader's greater opportunity is to help the people perceive that if they go multicell, each believer can still be meaningfully related to as many people as in a single-cell congregation, and that, for the most part, the long-standing members will still relate to one another.\textsuperscript{36}

This becomes the pastor's primary means of motivating the people toward church growth, through changing their perceptions. If they can be assisted in understanding that growth will not destroy intimate relationships, a major barrier has been overcome.

The members of single-cell churches also need to overcome a third attitude barrier, that of being exclusionary. They are reluctant to admit new people to the group and develop a "remnant theology," by which they glory in their littleness. This attitude must be changed before growth can occur. The "family church" must break through this barrier and adopt new members into the family.

Since the single-cell church is like an extended family, there are two ways it can grow, either by those children born to the existing members or through adoption. Because biological growth is such a slow way to increase the size of a church, they must adopt people who are outside of the group.


\textsuperscript{36}McGavran and Hunter, \textit{Church Growth Strategies That Work}, p. 90.
Adoption of members involves identifying receptive people, as Charles Mylander explains:

Pockets of responsiveness lie undiscovered in almost every community. How can pastors find the most receptive non-Christians within their reach? ... receptivity appears wherever people are "in transition." Those who make a major change in life—residence, occupation, marriage, first baby, for example—are often open to new ideas. 37

Many times these people may have no one to turn to for help. This is where the members of the single-cell church can step in and fill the gap. In all probability, the people they assist will eventually unite with their church.

In addition to individuals who are in transition, there are other needs in the community that the church needs to identify. Dan Baumann stresses the importance of this factor:

If you are genuinely willing to seek advice and counsel from your community, you will begin to identify some direction for an enlarged ministry. Meet the needs of your community, and it will beat a path to your door. ... If you want the unchurched and non-Christians to visit your church, you must take the initiative to discover what will bring them to you. Be bold enough to inquire. It will be a valuable revelation upon which you can build a growing church. 38

He also believes that the preaching and teaching of God's Word in the church needs to be applied to some clearly defined contemporary life situation. A balance must exist between evangelism and social action, as Baumann states, "Biblical truth without application to where people live is irrelevancy; whereas a study of contemporary need without the clear direction of the Bible lacks authority." 39

38 Baumann, All Originality Makes a Dull Church, p. 67.
39 Ibid.
The method that will probably result in the adoption of more members then any other involves using the "bridges-of-God." This is a term created by Donald McGavran, to describe the various social groups people are a part of, which can be used to reach the unsaved. The social web of relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow employees can be a great source of new members.

George Hunter strongly advocates the use of these contacts as a means to achieve growth:

It is possible for a small congregation to reach out within the social networks of its members and experience significant growth without experiencing loss of their sense of unified fellowship. This is the heart of the way forward for small congregations that want to be faithful to Christ's outreach mandate. The bridges-of-God principle can operate as a much greater strategy than most small church leaders have perceived. And it can be the church's ongoing strategy.\textsuperscript{40}

Various studies have proven that the best source for new members are the friends and relatives of the current members. Lyle Schaller has summarized the results of these studies into six major categories. The statistics show that from 60 to 90 percent of new members are brought by a friend or relative.\textsuperscript{41}

Some churches' vision of what God wants is very limited by their attitude, but if they will examine the Scriptures, the message comes through loud and clear that He wants them to grow:

\textit{The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness, but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).}

Since it is God's desire that as many people be saved as possible, then

\textsuperscript{40} McGavran and Hunter, \textit{Church Growth Strategies That Work}, p. 94.

a single-cell church should want to grow. If they base all their methods and programs on biblical principles, God will bless their efforts. By putting Christ first, getting on their knees before God, and trusting the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people, growth will come.

Questions for Additional Research

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine the single-cell church and its relationship to church growth. Due to the nature of the subject, other questions, closely linked to this matter of growth have been left unanswered. The limited scope of the paper did not allow for the study of these additional questions, which would warrant further research:

1. What is a single stretched-cell church and how does it relate to church growth?

2. Should the next step in the growth of a healthy, New Testament church be from the single-cell to the single stretched-cell or to the multicell church?

3. Is there any sequential or logical step in growth from a single-cell church into a multicell church?

4. Of those churches which have gone from a single-cell to a multicell, what factors are the most important, according to a statistical analysis?

Conclusion

The number of single-cell churches and the people influenced by them is significant enough to justify the concern of the authorities in the field of church growth. Although there is disagreement over the
exact role of the small church in God's program, all would agree that they are needed.

Those leaders who favor the "small is beautiful" philosophy, look upon the single-cell church as the final product. Donald McGavran, referred to by some as "the father of the modern church growth movement," and other church growth authorities, consider the small church to be only the first stage. Every church begins small, but they believe a healthy church that follows the New Testament model will not stay small.

Those authorities who view the single-cell church as the first stage, have set forth many principles and methods for these churches. Their purpose is to assist them in breaking the barriers that keep them from growing qualitatively and quantitatively.

It has been the purpose of this thesis to bring together a representative portion of the data currently available on the single-cell church. This research has examined some of the current attitudes and teachings regarding this important type of church and how it fits into God's plan for church growth.

In the fast-paced and technological age in which we live, it is necessary for those interested in church growth to study subjects such as anthropology, sociology, electronic communication systems, and others. But, the primary source of information must always be the Bible and the principles we learn from it through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Luke's record of the early church has left us with a message about growth that is applicable in all ages:

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:46, 47).
The pastors and laymen in the local churches have a command from God to do all they can to reach as many people as possible with the Gospel (Matt. 28:19-20). Their labors must be linked with God Himself through the salvation provided by Christ, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God. It is ultimately the Lord who brings about church growth in a single-cell church or any other New Testament church.
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