

CHURCH MODELS

AND HOW THEY MIX (OR NOT) WITH CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENTS

NEILL MIMS

While no one structure is prescribed for Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) or rapid multiplication, adaptation and change is often required to allow CPM-type groups to exist within these structures.

“... and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18, NIV).

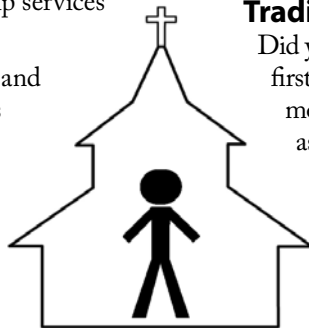
When you hear the word “church” and think of how a church should be organized, what comes to mind? Is it a certain building you pass as you travel? Do you picture people gathered and worshiping inside the church you attend now? Do images of deacons, pastors, Sunday school classes, and worship services fill your thinking?

When you think of starting a new church and what that would eventually look like, does your current church come to mind? Most people tend to think church should be organized like the church in which they grew up or attend now. But actually, there are hundreds of ways to organize and lead church life and structure in this changing world.

In Church-Planting Movements, many people think we advocate only starting house churches.



Since 2009 Neill guides the Missions Strategy Training for the IMB in Southeast Asia Peoples Affinity Group. If you would like to find out more about attending Church Planting Strategy Training offered by the International Mission Board in Southeast Asia or other opportunities, you may contact Neill Mims at: MrNeillM@gmail.com



While the house church model is the most common model around the world, a number of models can be adapted to work along similar CPM principles.

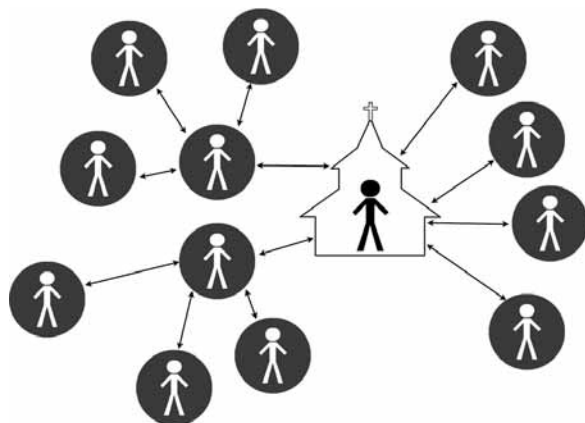
Let’s look at a few current models of church, all the while acknowledging that each model will have strengths and weaknesses. Which models will best accommodate exciting and multiplying kingdom growth, while also being more affordable and possible for average believers to pursue?

Look at this picture (a big building with steeple on top) and ask, “If we give a name to this model, what would it be?”

Traditional or Attractional Church

Did you think, “Traditional Church?” That’s usually the first answer I get from groups I train. This church is most often a traditional or attractional church. I then ask, “If we could summarize the goal of growth for traditional churches, what would it be?” Someone will usually answer: “bring people in” and/or “build bigger buildings.” With attractional churches, I draw arrows pointing into the building to draw people in. I then draw bigger buildings (and more rooms/expansions) on top of the existing picture. Churches like this may have small group meetings, but often they meet onsite. This is a legitimate model of church with specific strengths. An inherent weakness is that it is usually expensive, and most traditional churches do not grow much or build bigger buildings. Many pastors of these churches feel like failures when it comes to growth because they see much larger traditional churches held up as the example. Quite a few churches in the traditional model are actually shrinking.

What would you call this model?



Cell Church

This kind of church has groups that generally meet outside the main church building during the week. The arrows signify (by pointing both ways) that the model is built around encouraging people to attend BOTH celebration/worship at the main church each week and a cell or small group. These smaller gatherings (which have many other names), usually meet weekly at various times in homes or even businesses. Is a cell church a little better in some ways than a traditional church with activities that typically meet only on the church campus at fixed times on Sunday and Wednesday? Quite a few people have thought this is better in allowing for more growth and more participative leadership by members. Thousands of churches have been started this way, and thousands of other existing churches have tried to transition their churches to the cell model over the past forty years. (Sadly, some have almost killed their church trying to transition.) Now, there are only a few mega-churches around the world that do not at least have some of their people meeting in cells or small groups off site.

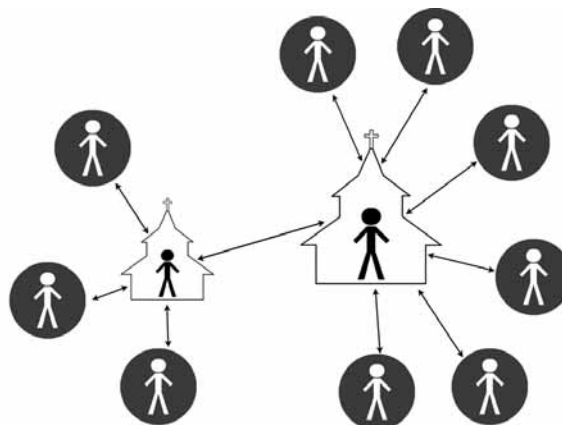
The cell church normally says that the life of the church is in the small groups. If attendees must make a choice between small group or celebration worship, some cell churches would encourage the small group attendance first. In essence, however, many cell churches retain a strong attractational model—“Come to our small group” or “Come to our worship service or outreach event.” And an inherent weakness of cell churches is that they can only grow as large as the administrative capabilities of their staff and senior leadership.

Another inherent weakness in the cell church model is that the leadership of the cell is centered around one strong leader. As the months progress, an apprentice is

raised up to lead the next group that will start when the cell grows large enough to “multiply.” However, growth is limited to the time it takes to develop competent new cell group leaders.

Mixed Model

The third model is the Mixed Model.

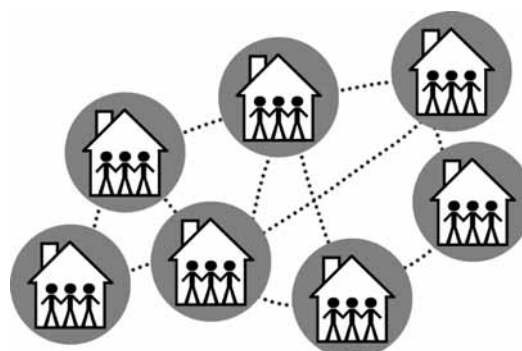


In this model some of the cells become house churches or new traditional or cell churches. This model is seen in several places in Asia where we work, where some of the small groups are too far away for them to come to the main church. In those cases, these new cells or clusters of cells start a new celebration point and start a new church, often connected to the mother church.

An interesting new phenomenon we face in Asia is that many churches using a more CPM approach such as *Training for Trainers (T4T)*, are using the blended approach in empowering new believers to start new groups (or even house churches), but encouraging them to attend new larger celebration points that can multiply around their city. While this model does have growth limitations (e.g. needing to rent new celebration points), it allows these churches to include many CPM elements that allow for more explosive growth.

House Church Network

The next model is a House Church Network.



In a network, house churches or Bible study groups that appear to be on the way to becoming churches meet at least weekly in homes or other convenient locations. The house churches themselves may be their only expression of church meeting. But sometimes these groups or their leaders get together once a month or once a quarter in a joint meeting for celebration or fellowship. Because of their own choice and vision, or because of distance, or because of political or religious restrictions, they cannot all gather weekly in a large celebration worship. When they do meet together in worship times, fellowships or retreats, very small house churches are often encouraged by seeing that they are part of a larger movement. Often the pastors and leaders within these networks have on-going relationships with the individuals who mentored them, so there can be fellowship, training and membership within a larger network of churches.

For each of the previous models, we put one stick figure person in the middle of the main church building, house church or cell group. This symbolizes that the church, house church or cell group is centered around a pastoral leader of some sort. In illustrations of latter church models, the number of figures may be multiple, implying more shared leadership.

Cell leaders are often an extension of the central pastoral staff. In this case they follow instructions as dictated by senior church leadership. There is sometimes a “leadership lid” in cell churches, and cell leaders will sometimes leave the church after a few years because they aren’t allowed to take on more leadership or give more input on how the cells are organized, worship, study or act.

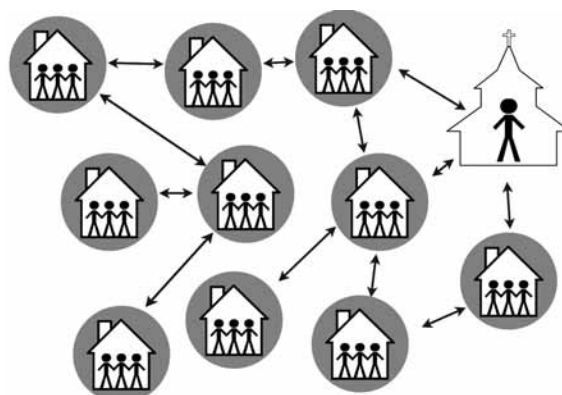
In the diagrams, it looks like the cell leaders and house church leaders are similar in size and function. However, there are key differences between a cell leader and a pastor of a house church. A house church leader will need more preparation in order to be empowered to organize how and what the church studies, and he must provide more shepherding than would a typical cell church leader. House church leaders are normally empowered to administer the ordinances of Lord’s Supper and baptism and collect offerings, whereas cell leaders may not. While house church leaders operate more autonomously, it is great to encourage these leaders to receive continual training and mentoring by others following a similar model, or by a traditional pastor who believes in their ministry.

This leads us to a weakness inherent in the pure house church model: Most house churches are still centered around one strong leader. When these churches start new churches, often the same church leader leads those new churches. Some house church leaders may lead 5-8

church meetings in a week. The resulting leadership overload is inevitable. We coach these leaders to raise up more leaders, but they often enjoy the leadership role too much to hand it off to others, or they are not good at helping build leadership in others.

Church-Planting Movement Model

The fifth model is the most common CPM model, and is typified by the *Training for Trainers (T4T)* movement. This primarily allows for churches to be built around *oikos* lines as average believers reach other people for Christ and group them into small groups and sometimes house churches. It is also a typical model pursued in the *Discovery Bible Study* CPM approach.



The arrows in this picture signify that key leaders in this model are part of two groups... one they are attending where they are fed and mentored, and another group which they are leading. This mentoring can go on for quite some time (hopefully at least 9-18 months but the relationships will continue longer). The several stick figures in each group signify that each group can sometimes raise up several lay people who may start other new Bible study groups that may become churches.

This model is built around individuals being formed into Bible studies or training groups and then each one being challenged to go out and start their own Bible study or training group with people they reach with the gospel. Every person in subsequent groups is encouraged to go start their own groups. Each Bible study/worship group can be organized into a church as they study together and are guided by leadership to become covenanted together and have all the characteristics of a healthy church. Several trainers are using Acts 2:36-47 as a model Scripture to show most of what a church will practice. (For more information, see the book *T4T: a Discipleship Re-Revolution*, by Steve Smith with Ying Kai, WIGTake Publishing, 2011).

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Clearly this is what Paul was getting after in Philippians 2:6-11 when describing the attitude of Jesus as taking on the attitude of a servant, willing to sacrifice all acclaim and equality with God. It was a willingness to set aside and sacrifice celebrity, consumerism and competition at the altar of the incarnation.

Will we have the courage to sacrifice as Christ sacrificed? Will we do the things that cost us so that his Kingdom may advance? **f**

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This model stays focused on discipling members to be obedient to what they learn from scripture and the on-going starting of new generations of groups that may become churches. Because the focus is on training all members of the group, the number of leaders in a group tends to multiply quickly, especially as they prove faithful to start their own groups. These leaders typically attend both the group where they are discipled and the group(s) they are discipling.

Many CPM groups continue to meet in homes or convenient locations as house churches. But some small groups go on to become a part of traditional churches or other models of churches. Sometimes several T4T groups will meet together as a larger church for worship while retaining their own small groups. Overall, CPM models tend to increase the number of new house churches while at the same time channeling some new believers into other models of churches.

Another strength of house church and CPM models is that they possess within their DNA very few limiting factors to expand endlessly through a society.

A weakness of the CPM model is that because they are not attractational, these small groups may remain too small at times (lacking some of the basic spiritual gifts needed to be healthy). However, our experience is that despite our best efforts to keep them from becoming attractational, if members are evangelistic, most of these groups will grow both in size and start new groups.

There are many other models of churches. You could probably take some of the drawings and pictures above and using other symbols draw a picture of what your church or network of churches looks like.

Choosing a Model to Fit the End-vision

Ideally, the model of church you use should be dictated by the end-vision you are trying to reach, not simply because it is the default model you know or have been given. Do you know what the end-vision is that God has for reaching your community?

Recognizing that most pastors default to the model they know, many of our missionaries and coaches work with them to make gradual changes to their model to fit the end-vision better. We call this the +1 model—helping them take one step forward at a time rather than a drastic overhaul. By helping churches improve their evangelism and discipleship we can help them adjust their model as needed to allow for growth among more people or more communities. Which model they choose can be tailored to better suit who they are as a church and what is needed to reach their current community. Changing is hard work, but often without change there is little growth.

Sometimes a church that wants to grow can only take one step at a time (+1), but sometimes a pastor or a church may jump several steps. Maybe a church will not change its own meeting style and model, but they can greatly benefit the kingdom of God by releasing some of their members or leaders to pursue a very new and different model. The existing church is able to provide spiritual support and a protective covering for these members who pursue a different, cost-effective and people-empowering model. In this situation, a new blended network can develop for the good of reaching the lost.

In church planting we usually are not talking about radically changing an existing church's model. That is very hard work indeed. We tend to focus on those people who want to start new churches or movements. Understanding these different models can clarify what model, or variant of the model they will choose to pursue. Vital to every model is the key person(s) God is calling, who is sold out to the vision and who knows it is what God is leading them to do. Without that clarity there can be confusion, and the leader and followers will often flounder.

Now that you have seen a few different models, think about what cost or expenses are involved in each model. How many years will it take to multiply each model? What are the difficulties in pursuing each model?

What is God's vision for your community? What model will best serve that vision? **Choose your model carefully so it will allow for ever-expanding Kingdom growth. f**