

MHS - SCHOOL OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY

FROM A TRADITIONAL CHURCH TO A CELL CHURCH: THE
CHALLENGE OF TRANSITION

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

My interest in cell churches was sparked when my local church, in the city of Lajeado, southern Brazil, started the, so called, process of transition in order to become a cell church. Since I was part of the youth leadership at the time, I was also involved in this process from the very beginning. The transition the community has been through allied with my experience as cell leader were decisive factors in shaping my understanding and practice of church. Since then I learned to see the cell group as the fundamental structure of church life that bears the essential features needed for evangelization, discipleship and edification of the body of Christ.

1.1 Problem Description

The Associação Missionária Evangélica (AME), how it is called, invested great efforts and time in teaching and training its members in order to renew their understanding of church. Since the beginning of the process, approximately eight years ago AME has already experienced big changes. I have had the opportunity to witness that members are far more committed and participative. The church has been able to reach people with the gospel and disciple them more than ever before. Both old church members and newcomers are having the chance to experience life transformation in supportive small groups.

However, the transition has not always been an easy process. As the literature about this subject has extensively shown, as well as our experience in Lajeado, the changes involved in the process are not small ones. Rather, the transition must reach the roots of the ecclesiastic paradigms embedded in our mindsets and only then generate a different church practice. This is not an easy task. The transition to a cell church is far from being a quick fix, or a set of soft adjustments in the church's programme. In fact, total failure or no change at all are very likely to happen when one tries to implement the structure offered by the cell system without working on the proper values first. But once the knowledge and values are in place, they must be lived out in a daily basis in a proper structure.

At AME, as it is in other churches, some cells still have difficulties to generate the natural practice of the cell church values in the life of its members. It seems that, for some members the practice of the cell system values is much more unnatural than they thought it would be in the beginning of the transition. There is an actual gap between discourse and

practice, understanding and life, which, when ignored, might become a hindrance to the true potential of the cell group. This situation, observed during my fieldwork in Lajeado, is what drew my attention and led me to write this work.

1.2 Objectives

In this thesis I will address the issue of transitioning from a traditional, or conventional, church to a cell church. I will explore the differences between these two systems, and identify the challenges aroused when the traditional church decides to become a cell based church. My goal is to understand how the traditional paradigm and practice of church affects the ‘cell life’ of members in transition. By doing that I hope to help the reader to unveil some myths and misunderstandings about the cell church, and add knowledge and helpful insights for conventional/traditional churches in their transition to a cell church. Finally, I will also explain why, despite all the challenges brought by such a transition, I still recommend the cell system as a set of principles and lifestyle that might help churches to change in order to be more faithful and more effective in carrying out the mission given to us by the Lord Jesus.

1.3 Method

In preparation for writing this thesis I sought to combine text studies and fieldwork. My intention was first grasp the philosophy of the cell church studying the literature about the theme, and then see how it worked out in the practice of a traditional church in transition through fieldwork. Both the data collected in text studies and the data collected in the fieldwork were taken into consideration in the development of the present work.

1.3.1 Text Studies

Most books selected for my studies were written by leaders with many years of experience with the cell church. Two of the authors cited in this thesis are especially well-known for opening the way for the cell church in the West, Ralph Neighbour and William B. Beckham. The first is a pioneer of the cells in the United States and founder of the Touch Outreach Ministries, which aims to propagate the cell system and assist churches in transition. Beckham works with the cell church in America as well as in Taiwan, and writer of some of the most influential books about the cell church.

“Church Without Walls: A Global Examination of Cell Church” edited by Michael Green, is another relevant book used in this thesis. This joint effort of cell churches’ pastors and leaders from various parts of the globe reunites articles about many issues related to the

cell church giving the reader a broad perspective about the theme.

The book “The Problem of The Wineskins: church structure in a technological age” written by Howard Snyder, also selected for my text studies, is not essentially a book about the cell church. I decided to use this book because it presents theological reflections and values that are in accordance with the cell system. The author stimulates the reader to rethink church structure according to the theological conception of church as presented in the New Testament.

Joel Comiskey’s PHD Dissertation entitled “Cell-based Ministry: A Positive Factor for Church Growth in Latin America”, another work used in this thesis, was especially useful to me for the elaboration of the second chapter, about cell like structures in church’s history. Comiskey is a pastor and lecturer about the cell church, he is also one the most well-known writers about the theme in the world.

The last book I would like to cite here as part of my main bibliography is Phil Potter’s book “The Challenge of the Cell Church: Getting grips with cell church values”. The relevancy of this book is in the fact it is mainly turned to the actual practice of the cell church. Drawing from his own experience, the Englishman Phil Potter seeks to explain the core values of the cell church, the way they were adapted to fit his reality, and how they were stimulated and put into practice. The book present ways of reorganizing traditional churches around the cells and get the best of it.

The study of the books described above allowed me to identify the core values that make up the cell system and the most common challenges faced during transition. These books were also helpful in broadening my perception to the various types of cell churches.

1.3.2 Fieldwork

In my fieldwork I conducted a series of interviews with members of the Associação Missionária Evangélica in Lajeado, Brazil. At the time, my research question was still in process of definition, but my expectation was that through the interviews I would be able to identify the causes behind the difficulty with the practice of the cell church experienced by the members.

I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with a total of nineteen members. This enabled me to identify which members were facing more problems with the new cell paradigm; understand how they perceive themselves as members of a cell church; and what are the main difficulties with the cell church practice.

The interviews went on according to my expectations and have helped me to

understand better the dynamics of transition. The results of the analysis of the interviews will be explored on chapters four and five. The interviews are summarized in the appendix of this thesis.

I have chosen to conduct my fieldwork at AME for two main reasons: Firstly because this was the church that first enabled me to experience the cells and the transition process. Second, because my relationship with the members of the church would enable me to make good in depth interviews and avoid greater resistances to my presence as researcher. My objective with the fieldwork was to keep the transition at AME as a link between theory and real ecclesiastic life.

It must be said that the transition experience of the AME portrays the reality of a particular Brazilian community that bears characteristics that are unique to its reality. However, I believe that AME's situation might be very similar to those ones experienced by many communities in Brazil and abroad. Therefore, even though AME had been the more natural choice for my fieldwork, and the main source of my reflections and analysis, the reach and relevance of the present work is not limited to that community.

1.4 Chapters Description

In the next chapter, I will present a brief panorama of the cell groups parallels in church's history. My aim is to ensure that we are able understand the cell church not just as another alternative model of doing church among many others, but rather as a restoration and combination of the features that might better express the true nature of the church and that have made it so effective in another times.

In chapter three I will explore the differences between the traditional system and the cell system. In doing that I will also discuss how the ecclesiology behind each system influences the shaping of the church practice.

In chapter four I will describe the context, the history and the transition happening at the Associação Missionária Evangélica. My hope is that the reader might be familiarized with AME's situation in order to understand the challenges that will be unique to this church and those which may appear in other contexts.

In the fifth chapter I will deal with the difficulties involved in the implementation of the cell system. I will seek to identify and analyze the difficulties brought by the conventional understanding and practice in the transition. Using AME as my main example again, I will try to answer how the conventional (or traditional) paradigm and practice of church affects the 'cell life' of members in transition.

In the conclusion of this thesis I will summarize my findings and the contents presented throughout this work. To finalize I will share some thoughts about how the cell system might help churches to promote and empower each member to evangelization, discipleship and edification.

Chapter Two

CELLS IN CHURCH'S HISTORY

In order to understand how the traditional church's mindset and practice affects the experience of those in transition to a cell church we need first to grasp what are the differences between these two systems. Hence, the next two chapters are dedicated to this question.

In this chapter I will present historical parallels of the cell church as we know it today and talk about the origins of the traditional church. My hope is that this historical analysis might help us to find out where the two systems have their roots, understand why we “do church” the way we do it today and perceive the importance of the small groups for church life. In order to achieve that, I will describe the way small groups were used by the people of God in the biblical period and in other moments of history, the reactions they provoked in each of these moments and the similarities they have with the modern cell movement. I will also give special attention to the crisis originated with the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century and talk about how this great change has been a decisive factor in the shaping of traditional church.

2.1 Concepts

Two concepts constantly used in this thesis: ‘traditional (or conventional) church’ and ‘cell church’ will be explored in depth in the end of this chapter, and especially in chapter three. But before entering the historic panorama that follows, I am going to present a brief definition of these concepts so we can better able to identify the differences between them.

When using the concept ‘traditional (or conventional) church’ in this thesis, I am referring specifically to churches found in the Western context that still working under the idea of Christendom, even where society is already shifting to a post-Christendom paradigm. My description of the traditional church may not apply to the Eastern context, especially where Christianity is a minority, and where churches are many times under persecution. Within that context, churches have developed distinctive features, that may or may not have similarities with the traditional church as described here, but they are not the focus of this thesis.

In my description I am highlighting a set of characteristics that are *predominantly* found in traditional churches, but that are not exclusive to them. Hence, when speaking of

traditional or conventional churches I am referring to churches that are predominantly temple/“church” centered, program oriented and pastor dependent: For traditional churches, the church building is considered as essential, and it’s the place where church happens; Even though traditional churches may present differences in style and form, they keep their focus on the service as its main expression; The pastor is expected to perform most of the functions of the church, like preaching, visiting, planning (Beckham 1997, 42-43; Green 2002, ix). The traditional church is not bounded to one denomination, movement or creed in specific. Many of its members, especially in countries or contexts where Christendom is fading, feel themselves to be culturally Christians, and were automatically inserted in the so called folk churches (Hopkins 2002, 44).

When talking about the cell churches I am referring to the kinds of churches based and organized around small groups, known as cells, of five to fifteen believers, that are stimulated to live in fellowship on a daily basis but that also gather themselves usually once a week for the cell meeting. Since the cells are the basic and fundamental units of the church, all the rest of the church’s ministries exist mainly to serve them. Cells are considered to be church, not a program, and are responsible for the works of evangelization, discipleship and mutual ministration. The emphasis and practice of evangelization, the training of new leaders and the multiplication of the group are some of the characteristics that differentiate the cell group from other small group ministries. The various cells of one congregation usually gather in a regular basis for celebration, equipping and instruction given by the church leaders. The main function of the church’s pastoral team is to “prepare God’s people for the works of service” (Beckham 1997, 27; 189; Tay 2002, 8-9; Eph. 4:12).

2.2 Small Groups in the Bible

The cell church does not see itself as a specific denomination, or as being directly linked to any revival current or new theological wave. Rather, the cell church defines itself as being biblical, in the sense that it has sought to shape its system basically from what can be observed in the New Testament church’s practices and ecclesiology (Neighbour 1990, 35; Beckham 1997, 95-113).

In this section I present some biblical reports that confirm the use of small groups and talk about how the cell church has developed its principles based on these evidences. Doubtlessly the New Testament is the place where cell-like structures are best documented in the Bible and the main fount of inspiration for the modern cell movement (Beckham 1997, 37-38). However, the inclusion of the Old Testament in this section was necessary due to the

decisive influence of one of its stories in the development of the cell church structure.

2.2.1 Old Testament

The Old Testament stories convey many of the values also found in the core of the cell ministry. Old Testament themes such as community, relationship and communion have been explored and applied in the small groups' context (Comiskey 1997, 28). However when searching for cell-like structures one story in particular hits the top of the list in popularity. It is the story of Jethro's advice to Moses, found in Exodus 18:

When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" . . . "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear themselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. . . . You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." (Exodus 18:14-23)

In the organizational structure proposed by Jethro, every ten persons were under the leadership of one 'official' (leader) that had the task to oversee this small group helping its members to solve the problems and the conflicts aroused in daily life situations (18:21-22). The leaders were chosen based on certain qualifications and were integrated within a supervision system that "extended down from leaders over thousands to those over ten" (Comiskey 1997, 28). This would lighten the burden of Moses that had no conditions to judge all the cases brought to him, and guarantee the satisfaction of the people that would have their problems solved more quickly and effectively due to the proximity of the leadership (Exod. 18:23). With this structure Moses was able to dedicate himself to the tasks of representing the people before God and equip them by teaching the decrees and laws (18:19-20). He continued as the leader of Israel's people, but the new organizational structure enabled him to delegate tasks and share his leadership with the people (Comiskey 1997, 28).

The strategy introduced by Moses' father-in-law has been an inspiration, and in fact has become the macro organizational structure more used by modern cell churches worldwide (Beckham 1997, 168; 187-189; Neighbour 1990, 194-196). It enables the church to follow members' situation closely, establish good communication lines and to keep the

unity of purpose through the supervision net (Tay 2002, 8).

2.2.2 *Jesus' Small Group*

Whereas in the Old Testament little is said about the use of small groups, with the exception of the example given above, in the New Testament the contrary is true. Small groups, especially in the form of house-churches, are mentioned everywhere. But before looking at the church as portrayed in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, I would like to mention the first example of a small group offered by New Testament, the one chosen by Jesus as related in Mark 3:13-15:

Jesus went up to the mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have the authority to drive out demons.

Jesus' relationship with his disciples is a timeless inspiration for all those involved with the discipleship of new believers. Jesus spent three years of his ministry accompanied by his disciples. They traveled together, ate together and faced problems together. The twelve had the opportunity to see Jesus preaching, healing, casting out demons and operating miracles among the multitudes first hand. They were with Jesus all the time: in his active and intense public life, but also in times of rest, prayer and retreat. Jesus always sought to spend times alone with his disciples. Those were moments of special teachings, evaluations, exhortation and training.

Ralph Neighbour writes about how the kind of discipleship life experienced by the twelve was important for their personal formation:

He created community for his followers. From men who would normally never even *speak* to one another, Jesus shaped twelve disciples ... He lived with them for three years, modeling a lifestyle of love and acceptance. These twelve men discovered that community can be a terrible place to mask limitations, egotism, ignorance, and jealousies. Try as hard as they could, they were unable to hide the selfishness within themselves ... He saw through every one of their manipulations, and kept right on loving them. In true community, men look past warts and pimples to see the potential within one another. (Neighbour 1990, 100)

That was Jesus' strategy for creating community; and community is the main reason for the cells (Neighbour 1990, 94-113). Neighbour continues: "By living with twelve men, God in human flesh had made a clear statement of the way community develops. While thousands pressed him from every side, He chose to be with one cell of life" (Neighbour 1990, 101). Also, from the community life that Jesus modeled with his disciples, cell churches have

learned that the best strategy to prepare members for the work of God is to allow those being trained to observe their leaders closely (Neighbour 1990, 101-102).

The group formed by Jesus had a very special character and a particular dynamic. Jesus was preparing the first leaders of his church. When describing the steps of transition to a cell church, Beckham, writes that the process will also require the formation of a leadership core responsible to oversee the vision (Beckham 1997, 153). He quotes from Robert Raines:

We must train a hard core of committed and growing disciples who shall serve as leaven within the local church. We have ample biblical authority for the training of such a hard core. This is precisely what Jesus did with the twelve disciples. We read in the eight, ninth and tenth chapters of the gospel according to Mark that Jesus took these closest friends apart from the crowds and taught them the conditions of discipleship. He was deliberately training them for leadership after His death. It wasn't the crowds to whom Jesus preached, but this little group of men that became the foundation of the early church. (Beckham 1997, 153)

Finally, it can be said that Jesus' small group was his prototype for the church (Beckham 1997, 159). The prototype's principle has been an important reminder that the cell church doesn't come to exist instantaneously, but that there are essential things, like leadership, that need to be in place before launching it. The called 'prototype period' has the function to assure those things are in place (Beckham 1997, 159).

2.2.3 New Testament Church

If the small group chosen by Jesus is considered to be a model and the prototype for the kind of community life he planned, the church as it is described in the rest of the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, exemplifies the way this lifestyle was multiplied and was now being experienced for all those who have joined his followers. This is the church that has inspired and definitely exerted more influence in the formation of the modern cell church (Beckham 1997, 37).

In its very beginning the church, the community of believers, did not have their own buildings, but they gathered both in Jerusalem's temple and in homes (Acts 2:46; 20:20). However, this daily dynamic of gathering in the temple and in the houses lasted no longer than the early first century. Due to the persecution, larger gatherings only occurred on special occasions and house-church meetings became the norm (Comiskey 1997, 30). It seems that "from the beginning, homes appeared to be the place for the most enduring dimensions of early church life" (Comiskey 1997, 30).

But, more than the social circumstances of their time, the theological understanding of church as presented in the New Testament was the true essence behind the church practice.

Images like the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), the living stones (1 Pet. 2:5) and the God's building (1 Cor. 3:9) all were fundamentals behind the New Testament ecclesiology. Small groups were considered to be real churches, not only a part of the church. This understanding, found especially in the letters Paul, is manifested in the way the church organized itself in its first years (Banks 1980, 47). Graham Tomlin, comments on the New Testament church organization:

It seems clear that the New Testament church was organized along some kind of small-group or house-church lines, as confirmed by the frequent references to meeting in homes in the book of Acts, and the churches that met in houses of such early Christian hosts as Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:35; 1 Cor. 16:19) or Nympha in Laodicea (Col. 4:15). In passing, it's intriguing to note the way Paul refers to these gatherings: he calls them 'the church in their house'. These are not secondary subgroups of the church or a voluntary gathering of the superkeen: they are the church itself. (Tomlin 2002, 97-98)

According to Beckham, Jesus had a design for his church: "They met in homes; the worship was by participation rather than by being spectator; teachings often reflected a small group context; the 'agape meal' (holly supper) was observed from house to house; gifts were exercised in a small group context" (Beckham 1997, 107). This 'design' enabled the New Testament church to practice the kind of community life modeled by Jesus, carrying the Gospel with words and life. That simple structure allowed the church to spread itself quickly and penetrate the cities of the Roman Empire even under persecution.

The modern cell church seeks to bring back the features that have made the early church so vigorous and effective in its time, as expressed by Neighbour:

Straight ahead lies yesterday! The first century church has returned to us in a simple, straightforward format. It's composed of deeply committed people who form cell groups. For them, as for the early Christians, this is their "church", their "basic Christian community." (Neighbour 1990, 55)

But, in order to do that, a church needs to allow itself to change by holding on to the same ecclesiology that shaped the New Testament church and transforming its structure in order to promote a renewed practice. This will only happen with a conscious and deliberate decision to go through a transition process that will be explained later.

In the next sections we are going to see how the church changed over the years and how movements and groups of believers have rediscovered small groups as an essential structure of the church.

2.3 Leadership Paradigm Shift in the Early Church

Many factors have led the church to experience changes in its organizational structure from a more spontaneous or charismatic structure to a more institutionalized one. One of the important factors is the shift occurred in the leadership paradigm that as a final result originated the big gap between clergy and lay people promoted by a strong hierarchical institutional system.

2.3.1 New Testament Leadership

With the explosive expansion of Christianity to beyond the Palestinian territory and culture, it was becoming harder and harder for the church to avoid the dilution of the apostolic doctrine into pagan belief systems. The fight against heretic doctrines like Gnosticism is one example that can already be observed in the apostolic letters of the New Testament. The rise of new sects and teachings among the believers has very early led to a search for the authentic church. While in the very beginning it was possible for the Apostles of Jesus to perform this leadership role, the fast expansion of the Christian faith have made impossible for them alone to oversee the many churches that were sprouting everywhere.

By studying the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus we can see that the practice of establishing leaders in the church was already highly advocated and promoted by the apostle Paul himself (1 Tim. 3:1-13; 2 Tim. 2:1-2; Titus 1:5-9). The function of these leaders, the bishops, elders and deacons, was to pastor the churches in each city. It was their responsibility to zeal for the right doctrine and to refute those who oppose it. Other New Testament texts point to the existence of special leadership roles like that of the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor and teachers (Eph. 4:11). All these leadership roles, including those of the bishops, elders and deacons, are related to spiritual gifts as suggested by Acts 20:28; 21:8; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1 and the *Didache* (Snyder 1975, 162). In the New Testament, leadership was fundamentally based on “the exercise of spiritual gifts which were recognized (either formally or informally) by the church” (Snyder 1975, 163).

While the texts cited above suggest the early establishment of a double structure, and some kind of distinction between clergy and lay people, it is important noticing that the function of the leaders was to prepare the whole church (God’s people) for the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ might have been built up. The leaders were not performing all the tasks of the church. Rather, the leadership gifts were especially crucial for their function to awake and prepare the other gifts (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-12; Snyder 1975,

163). A basic idea found throughout the New Testament was that each member, not only the leaders, should employ its gifts for one another, and therefore be an active participant of the church functions (1 Pet. 4:10-11; 1 Cor. 12; 14:26-40).

By seeking to apply the same principles found in the New Testament church, cell churches have experienced that small groups are a perfect environment for the discovery and use of gifts, as well as for leadership formation. The small size of the group facilitates the participation of each member. Each one is stimulated to share with the others and encouraged to use his/her gifts for mutual edification.

Usually when cell churches have the need of another full time worker in the staff they will hire one of its own members. This is because the cell system allows the church leadership to observe the performance of its members from the very beginning, and therefore recognize and hire only the leaders that have already shown to be committed to the work of God, faithful disciples and people of good character.

2.3.2 Leadership Paradigm Shift

Just after the New Testament period, bishops started to exert a much stricter control over their communities “due to the need to point to the true church of Jesus Christ in the face of an increasing number of alternative religions. Since the body of Scripture was still emerging, many voices were clamoring for authority” (Comiskey 1997, 31). Measures had to be taken in order to preserve the faithfulness to the apostolic doctrine. The tracing of the apostolic succession end up being the solution found at the time as a way to distinguish between those who had God’s authority and those who did not. Lists were elaborated in order to establish a historical line of succession of leadership from the eleven apostles to the leaders of that time.

Already by the third century, “This line of succession along with the distinct church offices had become quite developed. In major cities, bishops began to grow in power. Their word was respected and for the most part, obeyed” (Comiskey 1997, 32). At that point the distinction between clergy and laity was becoming more and more evident. The lay became more like receivers and listeners of the word rather than participants of the church. By the time of Cyprian, the understanding of the bishop as a servant-shepherd had already given place to the new understanding of the bishop as an administrative ruler, a role that would reach its full development in the next stage of Christian history, with the legalization of Christianity (Comiskey 1997, 32).

The modern cell church does not deny the need of leadership. On the contrary, the training of a new leader is one of the most important tasks of the cell leaders. This involves

taking a risk that many churches in the West are not willing to take, that is to release the lay people for ministry. Cell leaders don't necessarily need to have great skills of communication, management, persuasion, as popularly expected from a leader. They do need to show a minimal capacity of organization, and specially to sustain relationships, but these are not the most important features. The cell is not just a meeting but rather life in community experienced daily through relationships. Hence, in order to be cell leader one must be first of all a mature 'disciple-making disciple' who sincerely cares about its group and makes sure the group is achieving its goal.

Clearly, some measures have to be taken in order to keep the church protected against the problems brought up by pride and independence tendencies that may arise in a cell group. The servanthood character of leadership, for example, is constantly emphasized by the cell church. The staff exists to serve the cell leaders, and these exist to serve their cell group. The importance of the cell leaders is continually stressed and supported by the church staff, but in order to prevent divisions and independency, they all have to be kept accountable, through a Jethro-like supervision strategy. The main role of the cell church staff is to equip the lay members and encourage them to be actively involved in mutual ministry and edification, and evangelization (Beckham 1997, 188-189; Tay 2002, 12).

2.4 Constantine

As we have seen above, the church has gone through a gradual change in its first three hundred years. In the beginning the church was more like a charismatic organism in which each member was expected to contribute. At that time leaders were recognized according to their gifts and even though they exerted authority in church, their ministry was based on the principle of servanthood (Phi. 2:1-8; 2 Cor. 6:3-13; 11:16-33). Things changed as new missionary challenges arose. The clergy increased in importance and became almost the only ones allowed to minister. The roles assigned to the lay people were that of spectators, listeners of the word and receivers of what was ministered to them by the clergy. The church became more and more hierarchical and institutionalized.

One of the most important developments in church's history was the legalization of Christianity effected by the Roman emperor Constantine in the beginning of the fourth century. The church that was once persecuted was now free to worship in public places. The little sect-like religion that was once looked upon with suspicion by so many now became the religion adopted by the empire. Historians say that by 250 AD Christians in Rome have been 30,000 and already by 340 AD Christianity had grown to some 340,000. For the first time in

history, it was advantage to be a Christian (Comiskey n.d.). With the legalization of Christianity, the church was now allowed and even invited to participate in the shaping of society. It was the birth of Christendom.

This great change led to a paradigm shift that caused deep transformations for church's life and mission. As explained by Bob Hopkins:

As Christian faith permeated Roman society the mission function of the church shifted from making disciples of the pagan majority to discipling the next generations, to sustain Christendom. This function was gradually transferred from the minority sectlike cells in a hostile environment, to the basic block of society – the extended family, into which believers were incorporated. (Hopkins 2002, 41)

The Christian extended family, therefore, became the main agent of mission and embraced the task of discipling the next generations. It supplied the church with the functions that were once performed by the small groups or house churches. When this essential feature of Christendom was weakened, Christians, that were not marginalized anymore, established Sunday schools and small groups, to retain or regain the cell-like functions of the church (Hopkins 2002, 41). Hence, the church that was now operating in the society's mainstream preserved some of the small group functions, even though these were not configured like they used to be. Hopkins makes the point that the church was only able to survive for so many years due the discipling functions that continued to be performed alongside the cathedral services (Hopkins 2002, 41-43). The important difference however, was that the church ceased to see or to talk about the sectors which had cell-like functions as being church (Hopkins 2002, 42). Therefore, the crisis we are facing as church today "is primarily due to the loss of the small wing [cell-like functions] of church in much of the West. But it was not lost in the third and fourth centuries", when Christendom was still ruling over society, "so much as in the nineteenth and twentieth century, for that is when extended family dwindled away and opened the door to rapid secularization" (Hopkins 2002, 42).

What is relevant for the purposes of this study is to understand that the church after Constantine was developed to work within Christendom. That is, as one of the pillars of society, as a welcomed and desired institution. As stated by Hopkins, "When Christendom works, extended family *is* church" (Hopkins 2002, 42). However, we should also bear in mind that there were many moments in history in which Christendom faded away. These are times when the church loses its influence and is relocated to the margin of society, even though it may keep its buildings in the city square. In many contexts today, Christendom is gone and we are challenged to carry on the mission we are called to. These are the moments when the traditional church shows its shortcomings and the cell ministry proves to be so

important.

The legalization of Christianity was not negative in itself. But the laxity that followed from it, constituted a problem for the church. As Christians were becoming increasingly “involved in the ordinary tasks of civil life, including family ties, secular work, and governmental duties” they were gradually being taken by an accommodating attitude (Dulles 1987, 213). Comiskey states:

With the sudden freedom to legally be a Christian and with the great influx of undisciplined people joining the church, a certain complacency and tendency toward secularism began to develop. Prior to Constantine, Christians lived in a hostile world. They were threatened with death. They were on their toes continually. Martyrdom purified the church. To many it was the ultimate test. When Constantine came, everything changed so suddenly. Laxity developed in the church. (Comiskey n.d.)

It wouldn't take too long until the clergy itself began to show signs of secularization. Bishops were growing up in status, influence and amount of goods. It seems that already “in the second half of the fourth century, for the first time, we get hints of public complaints against the wealth of Christian clergy and the splendor of its buildings” (Comiskey n.d.).

With the institutionalization and standardization of the church Christianity became more and more a property of the clergy. The bishops and priests were now elected to their positions and placed under a strict hierarchical system. The lay people slowly accepted a passive role and became spectators of the services performed by the clergymen. Even though the church benefited from its “marriage” with the state, it many times has also become a servant of political powers and institutional religion (Beckham 1997, 33; 42-43).

In situations like the ones described above, of such a strong mundane influence, alternative small groups came back to play a very important role in church's life. Beckham agrees that what he calls the small-wing of the church, that represents the small group community life, in fact never died out. Beside the work meant to be performed by the Christian extended family, small groups were rediscovered in different moments of history as a means to restore discipleship, promote sanctification and stimulate the use of gifts. Beckham states that “a strong case can be made that God has continued to work through a parallel large-group / small-group stream that flowed throughout history alongside the traditional model established by Constantine” (Beckham 2002, 34).

Small groups, therefore, have always demonstrated their importance in church's life, and were especially needed when Christendom has shown signs of decay. However, small groups “became increasingly marginalized down the centuries, particularly after Christianity became the religion of the empire in the fourth century under Constantine” (Green 2002, 123).

Slowly the large group-wing, large gatherings happening in cathedrals, prevailed over the small groups in importance and practice. As the years were passing by, people intuitively began to “see church as something they *go to* rather than something they *are*. And that inevitably leads to formalism, to concentration on buildings, to the prevalence of organization over spontaneity and to clerical control” (Green 2002, 123).

The traditional church, therefore, is the result of a series of changes experienced by the church along its first three hundred years. These changes generated a new paradigm that would model the church of the next seventeen centuries. This church was modeled to work within Christendom. Among other features of this new paradigm we may cite those that are still visible today: the change of the church from a community to an institution; the establishment of professional Old Testament-like priesthood and the consequent passiveness of the lay people; and the centralization of ministry in the temples (Snyder 1975, 58; Beckham 1997, 42-49). This is the paradigm which shapes the traditional church of today. It is so impregnated in the Christian mindset that, especially in the West, is hard to imagine a church organized in another way. However, as we will see in the next sections, throughout history, small groups were rediscovered and used, sometimes even under persecution.

As already mentioned above, Christendom is already gone in many parts of the West. We are living in a different age. The modern cell church movement is exemplifying in a very practical way how we might cope with the challenge of mission in post-Christendom and pre-Christians settings by rescuing the essential features needed for evangelization and discipleship. Even where Christendom still active, the cell churches have been a reminder that the church is a primarily a community of disciples and not the temple or the number of members of an institution (Hopkins 2002, 42-44). It is to these alternative forms of church that I will turn my attention now. In the next sections I will seek to trace historical parallels of the cell church.

2.5 Monastic communities

Despite the absence of documentation about the small groups’ streams we still have some historical testimonies of their important presence. The reasons behind the lack of documentation are many, Beckham list some: Books were rare and books about alternate ways of being church were not high on the ecclesiastical or political publishing list; Persecution to those experiencing alternative models; These streams had to keep secrecy; These movements were considered insignificant; Alternative models were overlooked by historians (Beckham 2002, 34). “But they are there!” states Beckham, “Reading between the

lines of what recorded history we have, one can make a good case that a more New Testament design of the church coexisted in some form with the Constantine cathedral in every century” (Beckham 2002, 34).

One of the first alternative movements to the main-line church was the so called monastic movement. It was formed by lay people who were discontent with the institutional church that was more and more influenced by the patterns of the world (Comiskey 1997, 33-34). Small groups were already applied before them by those among the clergy, like the group of Ambrose, however, as this passage of Latourette quoted by Comiskey explains:

Unlike Ambrose and his colleagues who applied small group principles among the clergy within the visible church, the early monastics, while using many of the same small group structures, were primarily lay persons who separated themselves from the official church structure in order to pursue purity. At first this movement was looked down upon by those in authority. (Comiskey 1997, 34)

These monks sought isolation from the world in order to achieve purity. However things gradually changed. Comiskey quotes Brown:

Gradually some of these hermits discovered that if they grouped together in small communities they experienced spiritual as well as practical benefits. In time many of the features of the Christian community in Acts 2 were reincorporated into monastic life, and yet there was still a separation from the people. (Comiskey 1997, 34)

According to Beckham, “As early as the fifth century in Ireland, Patrick seems to have used a more New Testament approach” (Beckham 2002, 34). Whole communities were organized around the monastery within which it is quite probable that Irish Christians experienced New Testament community (Beckham 2002, 35).

Another experience with cell-like communities is attributed to the Irish missionary Columba. Beckham states that “also in the sixth century the Iona community was established by the great Irish missionary Columba and is one of the best examples of this monastic community life” (Beckham 2002, 35). They sent missionaries to Scotland, England, and Europe and, according to the legend, even North America:

Waves of these small bands of missionaries were sent out all over the continent. A community of monks (ten to twelve) would settle in a non-Christian area in Europe and establish a Christian church. They would preach until a number were converted, and then they would teach the new converts. Once they had established the church they would leave to go to another part of Europe, since the purpose of those evangelistic teams was to establish the monastic community throughout the land. (Comiskey 1997, 35)

The monastic movement rediscovered the possibilities of small groups both as a means for spiritual strengthening and as a missionary strategy. Both features, the internal edification

and the outreach for non-believers, are basic values to the modern cell church constantly emphasized and promoted in the cell-groups (Hopkins 2002, 52-53).

2.6 Early reformers

During the pre-Reformation period, many groups raised their voices claiming for changes within the mainline church. According to Beckham:

Most of the early streams had a small-group community expression in one form or another. Waldo of Lyons (Peter Valdes) founded the Waldesians, one of these early parallel movements in the twelfth century in the Piedmont region of the Alps. The motto of the Waldesians was 'Into darkness, light.' This movement operated first as torch within the Catholic Church and eventually became a guiding light for the Reformation ... the Waldesians were divided into small groups with certain individuals responsible for the care of each group ... John Hus ... was identified by church authorities as a Waldesian when he was martyred in 1415 ... The Moravians also followed the Waldesian model with the desire to return to New Testament community life and in 1457 organized a church called the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Unity of the Brethren, later to be known as the Moravian Church. (Beckham 2002, 35-36)

One of these groups, the Unity of the Brethren, founded by a former monk called Gerard Groote (1340-1384), was "primarily a reform movement for priests and lay people who were willing to live together for the promotion of holiness" (Comiskey 1997, 36). One of the Brethren members has described the group as being "just pious men who chose to meet together in private homes, to share all things in common, and to exhort one another" (Comiskey 1997, 37). Those meetings were in accordance with ideas and practice of Groote himself, who even advised some of its followers to "live together in one house, where they could . . . serve God with greater chance of success" (Comiskey 1997, 37). In the houses they "devoted themselves to sharing property, copying books, praying, and meditating on Scripture" (Comiskey 1997, 37). According to Comiskey, "Thomas a Kempis, who wrote The Imitation of Christ, was both educated by the Brethren of the Common Life and later joined their community. It appears that Martin Luther was instructed by them when he was at Magdeburg around 1497" (Comiskey 1997, 37).

Again we have core elements of both the New Testament church and the modern cell church, like the small group meeting, the zeal for community life, the sharing of all things and mutual exhortation. Those groups have grown largely in their time, reaching people with their message proclaimed through words and lifestyle.

2.7 Reformation

Another great development in church's history was the Reformation led by Luther in the

sixteenth century. Comiskey states:

The greatest accomplishment of Martin Luther was the rediscovery of the truth of justification by faith alone and the authority of Scripture. His discovery shattered the medieval church and opened up new possibilities for the church, especially for the laity. Luther liberated the church from its Babylonian Captivity. (Comiskey 1997, 37)

According to Beckham, along with church theology, Luther intended to reform church structure (Beckham 1997, 115). In his Preface to The German Mass and Order of Service, Luther wrote about the three kinds of worships. Two of them were the public services of the Latin mass and the German mass, while the third one was more like a small group meeting as can be read in this quotation:

The third kind of service should be a truly evangelical order and should not be held in a public place for all sorts of people. But those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. ... Here one could set up a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer and love. ... In short, if one had the kind of people and persons who wanted to be Christians in earnest, the rules and regulations would soon be ready. But as yet I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it. But if I should be requested to do it and could not refuse with a good conscience, I should gladly do my part and help as best I can. (Beckham 1997, 117)

For several reasons, the idea to have small groups meetings like the one described above was never put into practice. Along the years Luther's stance about small groups has changed. Beckham sums up the process:

In the early days of the Reformation Luther's vision and dream of the church included small-group community. Luther considered changing the Constantinian model because he understood that reformed theology had to be lived out in a reformed structure. ... However, in the end Luther did not complete the Reformation regarding the point of structure, because of personal, practical and political reasons. (Beckham 2002, 36-37)

Some of the reasons behind Luther's change of mind about the small groups were found in one of his letters written in April 14, 1529, but discovered only in 1982, addressed to a fellow priest named Karl Weiss. First, Luther feared that people "would fool themselves about who is an earnest Christian" (Comiskey 1997, 41). There was a risk that pride would lead people to forget or misunderstand the recently rediscovered doctrine of the grace of God. Second, Luther wanted to avoid the separatist spirit caused by elitist spiritualism like he saw in the Anabaptist movement. According to him, all the elements of the true church (word and the sacraments) would be there, and a Pharisaical understanding would have led the group to

form another church (Comiskey 1997, 42). Third, “Luther did not believe that it was Scriptural to separate from the church to set up a pure group of earnest Christians” (Comiskey 1997, 42). Therefore, as stated by Snyder:

The significant thing for our discussion ... is that mainline Reformation was largely limited to the question of personal salvation (soteriology); it hardly touched, in any practical way, the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), although it brought a number of structural modifications. (Snyder 1975, 52)

Even though Luther had decided to abandon the small group idea, it is worth of note that Luther’s disciple, Martin Bucer adopted small groups to fight the carnality and superficiality he observed in his church in Strasbourg. His idea was that small groups would help his church to be more faithful to the primitive and ancient churches, both in doctrine as in practice (Comiskey 1997, 43-44).

Even though Luther had been trained as a theologian according to the tradition of the church, he proposed a return to the roots, a return to the Scriptures. This idea is expressed in one of the four tenets of the Reformation, known as “Sola Scriptura”. In the same way the churches originated from the Reformation have sought to develop their doctrines based on the Scriptures, the cell church seeks to shape its churches according to a Biblical ecclesiology.

2.8 Spener, Zinzendorf

After the Reformation period many renewal movements using small group structures emerged across Europe. In this section I will focus in two of them, the Pietists and the Moravians.

2.8.1 Spener and the Collegia Pietatis

Phillip Jakob Spener, a Lutheran, considered as the father of pietism, “already in 1666 sensed the need to nourish and promote a deeper life among the church members” (Comiskey 1997, 45). In order to do so, “he gathered in his own home a group for the cultivation of the Christian life through the discussion of the Sunday sermons, prayer, and the study of the Bible” (Comiskey 1997, 46). Comiskey states that “this movement spread and the groups became known as *collegia pietatis*” (Comiskey 1997, 46). They sought to live out Christianity in a daily basis and used small groups (Beckham 1997, 117).

Each of these groups should have a qualified leader that would have the functions to zeal for the right doctrine, keep the conversation in focus, facilitate the discussion and show the members how to put this or that rule into practice (Comiskey 1997, 46). Each participant

had the opportunity to contribute in the group meeting according to his or her understanding of the text. This was considered to be an expression of the priesthood of all believers (Comiskey 1997, 46).

In order to avoid Anabaptist tendencies the groups, Spener have taken some safety measures. The small groups were not allowed to call themselves “true church” to avoid doctrinal conflict with the Lutheran theology. All the small groups should come together for service since they were supplementary to the worship service, not substitutes. Small groups were not allowed to minister the sacraments. This was reserved for the entire congregation only (Comiskey 1997, 46).

Cell churches around the world deal with the doctrinarian issue of the sacraments in different ways. Resembling Spener’s practice, the Anglican cell churches in Europe have usually reserved baptisms and communion for the worship service, as reported by Bob Hopkins:

Cell is fully church, but that does not necessarily mean that you have to do everything that is essential to church at the small-group level. Each level of church life can fulfill different roles that complement one another. Thus many cell churches keep baptisms for the Sunday gathering of all cells, but involve a new convert’s cell leader with the minister in the baptism. In the same way, Communion is ideal for Sunday celebrations, and is greatly enriched by being the time when all cells come together to celebrate their shared lives and shared meals through the week. (Hopkins 2002, 44)

However, the cell church does not have specific rules concerning this issue. The context and the particular characteristics of each community play a decisive role in the way churches will develop their practice. The cell church places a great emphasis upon values rather than programmes and structures, what gives churches great flexibility for the churches to work. An important principle though, is the balance between cell and celebration. Members are expected to participate in both. The large gatherings should point to the small groups, and these in turn should point to the large gatherings (Green 2002, 127-128). This balanced approach will help the church to diminish the chance of success of separatist spirits that have also worried Spener. Besides that, the leaders of the cell must always be integrated in an accountability system, as already mentioned before.

The way Spener sought to apply his *collegia pietatis* within the state church has also been an inspiration and a source of ideas for the modern cell church. The modern cell church emphasizes the importance of steady participation in the groups; the cell doesn’t replace the Sunday worship, rather cell churches seek to establish a balance between cell and celebration; the cell group doesn’t mean to substitute members’ personal devotion and private Bible

study; the cells need to have a well trained leader (mature disciple) that is able to lead the group properly and promote the participation of the whole group.

2.8.2 Zinzendorf and the Moravian Communities

Another important renewal group after Reformation was the so called Moravians. They were “refuges from persecutions of Protestants in Bohemia and Moravia that settled on the estate of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf” (Comiskey 1997, 49). Beckham states:

In 1722 Count Zinzendorf began to assemble Bohemian and Moravian Brethren and Pietists on his German Saxony state in a special community called Herrnhut. This Moravian community eventually spread the gospel to five continents and influenced the Methodist revival and Baptist mission movement. (Beckham 2002, 37)

Zinzendorf and the Moravians organized the movement in small groups and bands (Comiskey 1997, 50). The purpose of the bands was to “promote personal growth in grace and fellowship between kindred spirits and free and informal associations of those who felt drawn to each other” (Comiskey 1997, 50). The Moravian church is well known for its missionary efforts, its attractive lifestyle and devotion to God. The Moravian church has also played an important role in the life John Wesley, father of the Methodist church.

2.9 John Wesley’s classes

Beckham states that John Wesley was deeply moved by the New Testament life he observed in the Moravians small groups. “Wesley visited Herrnhut in 1738 and later adopted many of its features and terminology” (Beckham 2002, 37).

Inspired by the Moravians, Wesley sought to develop structures that could promote the practice of the message he was preaching (Snyder 1975, 169-172). The whole Methodist movement was developed upon small groups as this passage of Snyder quoted by Beckham reveals:

The Methodist societies were divided into classes and bands. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say the societies were the sum total of class and band members, since the primary point of belonging was this more intimate level of community and membership in a class was required before one could join the society ... The class meeting was the cornerstone of the whole edifice. The classes were in effect house churches (not classes for instruction, as the term class might suggest), meeting in the various neighborhoods where people lived. ... The classes normally met one another one evening each week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or particular needs or problems, and received support and prayers of the others. “Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels were made up, misunderstanding removed: And after an hour or two spent in this labor of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.” (Beckham 1997, 119)

According to Beckham, the success achieved by Wesley “lies in his understanding of the nature of these ‘classes.’ These small groups (classes) functioned as the church. They did what the church was supposed to do” (Beckham 1997, 120). The groups were supposed to be multiplied, and the creation of new “classes” was the first objective in Wesley’s preaching (Comiskey 1997, 56).

We are told that eventually hundreds of thousands of people participated in the small group system. Snyder reports, “By the time Methodism had reached 100,000 members at the end of the century, the movement must have had over 10,000 class and band leaders with perhaps an equal or larger total of other leaders.” (Comiskey 1997, 58)

After having studied some of the movements which have made use of small groups and accomplished great things, one question remains: How were these movements weakened? According to Beckham, two main reasons might be identified: First, due to resistance to innovation coming from the leaders of the traditional church. The second reason behind the weakening of small groups is the inadequate theological understanding of their nature. Beckham states that “with the exception of Wesley, the leaders failed to teach that these groups were actually the church” (Beckham 1997, 121).

2.10 Modern Cell Church

The modern cell church movement seeks once again to reunite the elements that made up the New Testament church. As stated by Beckham, “The Cell Church Movement emerging in the new twenty-first century is built upon the theological and practical legacy of first-century Christianity that was lived out at great sacrifice in these other periods of history” (Beckham 2002, 37).

The first generation of modern cell churches was pioneered by Dr Paul Yonggi Cho, senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, Korea, the largest church in the world with about 750,000 members currently (Tay 2002, 3-7; Comiskey 1997, 62). His church has been a source of inspiration for many pastors around the world which were seeking to develop a church system able to manifest and promote the spiritual vigor and missionary thrust observed in the New Testament Church. Among the pastors inspired by Cho is Dr Ralph Neighbour, who employed the cell system in the North-American context and end up by becoming one of the greatest propagators of the cells in the West (Neighbour 1990, 78-92).

Looking at the cell church from a historical perspective, Bishop Moses Tay writes:
It is not easy to get a proper perspective of history when we are caught up in the

excitement of the new things God is doing in our day. However, some strategists give us a perspective that while Martin Luther was instrumental in a *reformation of theology*, and the Moravians in a *reformation of spirituality*, God is now touching the wineskins themselves, initiating a Third Reformation, a *reformation of structure*. (Tay 2002, 8-9)

The cell church is a continuation of all the church has achieved so far and at the same time a new way of seeing church: “It is not the building; it is not a ritual on Sunday; nor it is the institution” (Hopkins 2002, 43). Rather, the cell movement seeks to rescue the understanding that the church is basically ‘a community of disciple-making disciples’ (Hopkins 2002, 43).

The modern cell church comes as a practical response to the great changes experienced in Western societies in recent years. Different from what was observed in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Western society is no longer imbued with Christian values. The idea of a Christian family that nurtures and teaches its children in the Christian faith is more and more something from the past (Dulles 1987, 219). The modern church must cope with these challenges. Hopkins states:

The extended family has gone, and Christian nuclear family as a place of prayer, Bible study and assimilating values is also going. Christian schools with a small group ‘discipling’ element have largely disappeared. Some modern Christian nuclear families, while still keeping up family prayers, are clearly a small minority. ... We urgently need to restore the functions of discipleship and forming a Christian worldview as central to the task of the people of God. These functions, which have always been found in the small-group ‘wing’, are re-emerging powerfully in the cell church movement. (Hopkins 2002, 43)

The cell church in its many variations is spreading all over the world. The cell system has the flexibility necessary to be adapted according to the church’s local context. According to Hopkins “the critical point to understand is that at the heart of cell church lie a group of values and principles rather than a clearly defined program and structure” (Hopkins 2002, 44). The English cell network summed up these values by using five small sentences:

1. Jesus at the centre
2. Cells are communities of sacrificial love, with open and honest relationships
3. Every member ministers, using their gifts
4. Every member is maturing in Christ
5. Everyone is involved in friendship evangelism (Hopkins 2002, 49-52)

These values, even though may be expressed in a different way depending on the context, are the fundamental stones upon which cell churches seek to develop their structures. As put by Hopkins: “These values are not found exclusively in cell churches: they are at the very heart of the gospel. Cell church, however, in contrast to many other ways of being church seeks to allow the values decisively to shape the way the church is structured” (Hopkins 2002, 49).

In this chapter we have seen that in each age the experience of cells generated different reactions. Cell-like groups were many times used as a means to revival or church renewal. Usually they were found or considered to be out of the mainline churches as sects or bands of heretics what sometimes has led them to be persecuted. They have proven their efficacy and importance along history even under difficult times. The cell church, therefore, “It is not the latest bandwagon to climb on to. It is nothing less than original Christianity. It was one of the most effective expressions of the New Testament church” (Green 2002, xi).

Through this historical analysis we’ve reached the origins of the two systems being studied in this thesis. In the next chapter we are going to take a closer look at the traditional church and at the cell church and identify the differences between them.

Chapter Three

CONVENTIONAL AND CELL CHURCH SYSTEMS

In the previous chapter we have seen that both the traditional church and the cell church are giving continuation to the legacy of the first century's church, though still are very different from one another. While the first is the result of a series of changes occurred in the church in its first three hundred years and especially after Constantine, when Christianity was adopted as official religion of the empire, the second has developed its system by seeking to rescue those features of the early church that were overshadowed within the traditional church in times when Christendom gave in to secularization and the church lost its influence.

After having traced back the origins of the conventional/traditional system and the cell system, we are ready to explore in depth the differences between them. My hope is that by doing this we will be able to understand how these ecclesiological systems shape the practice and organization of the churches operating them.

In what follows, we are going, first, give a quick look at the criteria established along the ages for the task of defining the 'true church' and differentiate it from the 'false church'. Second, we are going to make a comparative analysis of the two systems studied in this thesis. My goal is to verify how each system integrates some of these criteria that have been accepted as fundamental to the church. The focus here is not on the churches' formal discourse about these criteria, but rather it is on their practical application within church's life.

Due to the delimitations of this thesis, there is no place for an in depth discussion about the nature and functions of the church, nor to expose the whole range of criteria used to define the church along the ages. The set of criteria selected for the comparative analysis that follows is mainly related to the practical issues tackled by the church throughout history as mentioned on chapter two. Evidently, the New Testament church plays an important role here because in practically all the renovation movements within the church there was a yearning to return to a more New Testament-like practice. Along with that I have sought to take into account some of the more historical-traditional insights about the 'true church' as developed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, as well as in the Augsburg Confession and Luther's seven notes found in his tract "On The Councils and Churches".

3.1 The Use of Criteria to Define the True Church

The search for criteria that could define what is the true church, and consequently differ it from the false ones is as old as Christianity itself. According to Dulles, “Since the first century, efforts have been made in every generation to establish criteria for determining the truth of Christianity” (Dulles 1987, 124). Since the Council of Constantinople in 381, the church has been defined by four attributes that have been largely accepted and used throughout history. The church was called “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” (Dulles 1987, 124).

Even though the Reformers have not had any objections against the Constantinopolitan definition, they sought to emphasize the importance of Biblical preaching and properly administered Sacraments (Comiskey 1997, 11). This was the teaching registered on the Augsburg Confession:

Article VII of the *Confessio Augustana* 1530 teaches of the Church: “Similarly it is taught that the one holy Church will always remain. The Church is, however, the community of saints, in which the pure Gospel is preached and the sacraments properly administered”. Here “pure” means according to the Scriptures, and “properly” means in accordance with their institution. This was also the teaching of the Reformed and Anglican Churches (*Confessio Helvetica posterior*, 1562, and Article 19 of the articles of religion of the Church of England, 1562). (Küng 1986, 267)

Later on, in 1539, Martin Luther developed and expanded these two distinguishing signs. In his tract “On the Councils and Churches” Luther demanded seven essential marks:

1. The preaching of the true word of God
2. The proper administration of baptism
3. The correct form of Lord’s Supper
4. The power of the keys
5. The lawful vocation and ordination of ministers
6. Prayer and singing of the psalms in the vernacular
7. Persecutions.

(Dulles 1987, 125)

In his book “Models of the Church” Cardinal Avery Dulles makes a significant contribution to ecclesiology by approaching the church through the use of models. Dulles asserts that the church, as other theological realities, is a mystery, a reality of which we cannot speak directly. He suggests that if we wish to talk about such mysteries we have to make use of analogies. These analogies provide models. According to Dulles, “In order to do justice to the various aspects of the Church, as a complex reality, we must work simultaneously with different models” that illuminate the mystery of the church from different perspectives (Dulles 1987, 10).

Dulles presents five distinct models. These are: the institutional model, the community model, the sacramental model, the kerygmatic model, and the servant model. Each model reflects a distinctive mindset that “become manifest in a given theologian’s way of handling all the problems to which he addresses himself, including the doctrine of God, Christ, grace, sacraments, and the like” (Dulles 1987, 12).

When analyzing the variety of interpretations given by each of these five ecclesiastical models to what can be considered the true church Dulles concluded that, “While all Christians distinguish between the ‘true’ Church and its defective sociological realizations, there is no general agreement about what the true Church is or how it is to be recognized” (Dulles 1987, 137). Even though “most would admit that the four attributes signalized in the [Nicene-Constantinopolitan] Creed may be taken as criteria” each model will understand these attributes according to their own perspective (Dulles 1987, 137). Each model adds specific characteristics that express something of the whole nature of the church, a nature that is not fully expressed by any particular model. Dulles comes to the conclusion that the best attitude one could have towards the different models is to attempt combining the valid features of each of them. From that he suggests the idea of the church as “community of disciples”, a variant of model 2 (community model), as a means to harmonize the differences of the five models. This because, according to him:

By its very constitution, the Church is a communion of grace (model 2) structured as a human society (model 1). While sanctifying its own members, it offers praise and worship to God (model 3). It is permanently charged with the responsibility of spreading the good news of the gospel (model 4) and of healing and consolidating the human community (model 5). (Dulles 1987, 204)

By its very paradigms, structure and organization, the cell churches tend to be closer to the community/discipleship model, that seeks to balance the centripetal phase of worship and the centrifugal phase of mission and also “motivates the members of the Church to imitate Jesus in their personal lives ... make them feel at home in the church” (Dulles 1987, 220; 222-223). The cell churches seek to develop structures that promote the practice of the word of God, cultivation of fellowship, and sending of the disciples in mission towards the lost ones. Like in the community of disciples described by Dulles, the cell members are called to experience the kind of communal and missionary existence exemplified by the first disciples of Jesus.

After examining the problems involved in the Catholic and in the Protestants signs, Hans Küng proposes that what is really essential when considering these signs is their living realization in the life of the Church (Küng 1986, 268). He writes:

What use is to a Church to “have” the holy Scriptures if the power and strength of the

Gospel are not heard in it; if it “has” the sacraments only to distort them and choke them with superstition and idolatry; if its oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are firmly rooted in institutions, and yet these institutions are but hollow, lifeless forms? What is truly decisive is not the formal presence of certain characteristics, but their use and practice. The word of Gospel must truly be preached, heard and followed, the sacraments must be lived by living men in a living Church, and the *notae Ecclesiae* must become in one way or another *notae Christianorum*. To bring about the living realization of its own signs is a big enough task for each Church, whichever of them it places most emphasis on. And if every Church strives to realize its own signs in fundamental agreement with the one same New Testament message, it will in time come about that none can exclude the other as the untrue Church. (Küng 1986, 268-269)

This chapter, therefore, is not an attempt to define the real church. As already stated before, my intention is to analyze how certain aspects that were considered important for the life of the church throughout history, and especially in the New Testament, are put into practice by the traditional and the cell systems. Thus, in the analysis below we are going to see how the classical marks of the church, as described above and those characteristics rescued by the alternative church streams described in chapter two, that are considered as essential by the cell church today, are put into practice.

Some of the classical marks, especially some of the seven notes made by Luther as well as his later additional notes, were not addressed, at least in depth, here. The notes on the lawful vocation and ordination of ministers and on the prayer and singing psalms in the vernacular, for example, face no objections in modern day’s western church. We must not deny their importance, though. What for us today is taken as obvious represented a radical change by the time of the Reformation. The modern advances in developing contextualized churches, for instance, are to a certain extent in debt with the change brought by the Reformation, which introduced the language of the people in the masses. The problem of persecutions will be understood differently around the world, and would require another chapter to discuss it. Shortly, it could be said that, in what concerns a practical strategy of preservation in times of persecution, the cell church proves to have a more “prepared” system. Lastly, the issue of the ‘power of the keys’ is not directly approached here because it is included in the topic about communion, which I consider to be the context where the keys of forgiveness are best expressed. In the rest of the chapter I am going to deal with the questions presented below.

As we have seen, in the New Testament church each member was expected to participate actively since God distributed gifts to all believers for the edification of the Body of Christ. How are church members expected to participate within church’s life today?

Also from the New Testament church, we have learned that communicating the Good News was part of their lifestyle. In direct relation with the preaching of the pure Gospel is the task of evangelization, which is considered to be central to the mission of the church. How do the cell and the traditional church perform the task of communicating the Good News?

The church is described as a community of saints in the Apostolic Creed and also in the Confession of Augsburg. The true Christian fellowship is what the Greek New Testament calls *koinonia* (2 Cor. 13:14; Phi. 2:1; Snyder 1975, 89-91). According to Snyder, this fellowship is not a superficial fellowship and not simply a “mystical communion that exists without reference to the structure of the church” (Snyder 1975, 89; 92). How is the church promoting this kind of communion, especially in the current fellowship crisis the church is experiencing?

Another aspect of the church that is central to its mission, and the direct continuation of the evangelism, is the task of discipleship. Since its very beginning the first community of followers of Jesus understood that they had the mission to make disciples (Mat. 28:19). Those who converted by hearing the Gospel were inserted in the community of disciples, which were all expected to learn the teachings of Jesus and put them into practice. Throughout history the church has performed this task with different strategies. How do the traditional and the cell church integrate this basic aspect?

Church leaders are called to carry out the task of teaching as part of the process of discipling (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:2). As we have seen in the previous chapter, throughout history the church has fought to for the sake of the right doctrine. The fight against wrong doctrines was one of the main reasons for the establishment of leadership system in the early church. The traditional church has made use of classes and the pulpit to teach its members. The main source of doctrine still is the sermon of the pastor. Even though cell churches follow the same pattern its democratic structure may lead the church to experience problems with unauthorized teaching. How does the authoritative teaching works at the cell church?

As already mentioned above, each believer was expected to participate actively in the New Testament church. It was fundamental for each believer to exercise the gifts given by God. What is the place of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit in each of the two ecclesiastical systems studied in this thesis?

Even though temples were never considered to be as an essential mark of the church, it is clear, that especially after Constantine, cathedrals and temples acquired a growing importance. How do the cell system and the traditional system relate to their buildings? What is the importance they have? What is the role they play in shaping the church’s practice?

As we have seen in the last chapter, the church has always made use of small groups. First the early church has made use of small groups in the form of house churches, as described in the New Testament; then, during the Christendom era, the functions of the small group were performed by the Christian families and other institutions of society; and in times when the Church or the society failed the task of discipling, the small groups returned as basic communities operating in many of the renovation streams as alternatives to the mainstream churches. Even in modern times, small groups have been discovered and employed by many churches for different purposes. What is the difference between the cell church and the traditional church in the way of integrating the small groups?

3.2 Comparative Analysis between the Conventional and Cell Systems

Below I am going to analyze how the conventional and the cell systems integrate: members' participation, evangelization/preaching, communion (*koinonia*), discipleship, teaching, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, church's building and the place of small groups. While we look at these different aspects we are going to consider the implications brought by them to the life of the church members.

3.2.1 Members' Participation

The first aspect I am going to study is how the two systems integrate member's participation. I start from here, because all the other aspects are dependent on how members are expected to participate in the life of their churches.

As we have seen above, in its first three hundred years the many challenges brought by the missionary advance have led the church to experience a series of transformations. For a number of reasons the church became more rigid and hierarchical in what concerns ministry, especially after Constantine. From a charismatic community where the participation of each member was natural, the church slowly changed into an institution in which a professional clergy was expected to perform most of the church tasks. The lay people end up by assuming the passive role of spectators (Beckham 1997, 42-44).

In great measure, the traditional church continues to operate under the same logic. Many churches expect no more than attendance from its members while a professional staff is paid to perform the liturgical rituals, preach, visit members, advice and develop programs (Neighbour 1990, 47-49). Except for a few volunteers, the majority of the traditional church members, estimated around eighty percent, contribute very little to the life of the church (Beckham 1997, 41). This happens because many times there is no real community in which

members are involved in a functioning manner. Provided that the church pews continue to have reasonable public, the staff will hardly notice when one member among many others stops to show up in the services. Besides, the message transmitted through the church's attitude was understood by the members, and today "many, by their own decision, have chosen to sit on the church bench on the sidelines of the action" (Beckham 1997, 41).

Beckham points out that the problem of members' passiveness is sustained by the traditional system. Without intention the traditional church has developed a "consumerism paradigm" that defines the way traditional members relate to their churches. Many of them have become consumers of what the church has to offer, while only a few have the chance to become producers. According to Beckham the traditional church has no viable context to make members into producers (Beckham 1997, 44).

That doesn't mean that traditional churches have no committed people or devoted Christians. On the contrary, traditional churches usually depend on the good will of the most committed members to be able to run properly a series of programs in order to keep the consumers satisfied. The problem starts right there. Once the traditional church gets volunteers, the potential producing Christians, it seeks to involve them in some kind of "ministry". They are the worship leaders, helpers in the holy supper, leaders of Bible studies, and leaders of senior, children or youth groups. Often, this motivated Christians represent only twenty percent of the regular attendants. Non rare they become overloaded by the variety of activities, meetings and other demands made by the church. Meanwhile the eighty percent left is just enjoying it, getting used to it and becoming more exigent. They like to come to the services and receive what the church has to offer: good music, intellectual preaching, and good coffee, but only a few will decide to take the step of becoming more than consumers.

Often this situation it is not a matter of lack of good will. Many of the passive members feel like doing something, but find no place where they could be helpful. They have other gifts and abilities that will have no use in the worship services, but in some contexts the Sunday service is all a church has. Therefore a cycle of consumerism is established. Approximately twenty percent of the enthusiastic members are neutralized by the church itself, and consequently little can be done to reach out for those that still are without the Gospel (Beckham 1997, 44). This consumerism mentality is reinforced when churches start measuring success only by counting the bodies present on the service (Beckham 1997, 45).

Operating by the traditional system, the church becomes a channel of distribution of resources to members rather than challenging members to become resources (Beckham 1997,

47). Instead of equipping all the members for minister, the organizational structures keep producing consumers (Beckham 1997, 48). Nevertheless, we must avoid falling into the temptation of judging the church members, classifying them into categories of real disciples, or producers, and consumers. Many of these members know no other way to be church. They understand that their presence is all that is expected from them. They were born in a church culture that has extended for centuries. It is just natural to accept things like they are. The problem, therefore, is the system (Beckham 1997, 48).

Beckham makes an analogy of the church's current situation, by using three symbolic characters: Larry, Eddie and Teresa (Beckham 1997, 58). His analogy might be helpful for us to understand how the cell church evaluates the traditional church. Two of the three characters are found within the conventional churches context, these are Larry and Eddie. Larry represents the leadership and the volunteers. With all the best intentions they are continually trying to develop better programs that could bring more people to the church or to hold back those who are feeling like stopping to attend the services. These leaders are distracted by the church activities and have little chance to contribute outside the church walls. Many have no unbeliever friends (Beckham 1997, 33-40).

Eddie represents the rest of the church members. They have assumed the passive role of consumers of the church programs. Instead of helping the church to move forward, they became part of the problem. The need to keep Eddie entertained consumes the energy of the church and ends up neutralizing the committed Christians who could best help with the real mission of the church (Beckham 1997, 41-50).

While Larry and Eddie are trapped in church, Teresa represents those outside the church's community: the hurt, the ones drowning in pain, misery and meaninglessness. They are those that still unreached by the church and therefore left without the Good News (Beckham 1997, 51-58). It is primarily because of Teresa that the cell church proposes a drastic change in the church system:

In order for the church to return to dynamic New Testament Christianity, two things must happen:

1. Get Eddie off the backs of the 20% of church members who are producing Christians so they can penetrate the lost world with the gospel.
2. Change "consumer Christians" into "producing Christians" so they are part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

(Beckham 1997, 48)

The main difference between the conventional church and the cell church in what concerns membership's participation is the shift from a distribution paradigm to a contribution

paradigm. In the cell church each member is expected to participate, “no one is to be passive, powerless recipient but rather an active giver and receiver of care and Christian advice” (Tomlin 2002, 107). Thus, the cell system provides a structure through which members are empowered and sent to carry out the mission assigned to the church (Tay 2002, 8-9). In the cell church, each member must contribute actively for the edification of the other members and for the evangelization of non-Christians. Each member is seen as a potential cell leader and will be trained to be so (Stockstill 1998, 73-97; Potter 2001, 54; 134). Thus when the cell multiplies, a leader should be ready to take charge of the new born cell.

Participation is also the aim of the cell meeting. In each meeting members will have different assignments and are also encouraged contributing spontaneously for the edification of the group. The meetings take place where it is possible, usually not in the church building, since the idea is to meet people where they are. When the cell meetings take place in homes, members usually take turns in the task of hosting the meeting in order to avoid one to be overloaded (Potter 2001, 52-53; Neighbour 1990, 437).

In the cell groups members are stimulated to discover their spiritual gifts and use them for the edification of the others. The understanding is that no gift is given for the edification of the person who received it alone. Rather, everyone is encouraged to take part in the meeting according to the gifts and talents assigned to them by God (Neighbour 1990, 146-159).

Many cell churches will allow only those who attend the cell meetings and the celebrations faithfully to become members of the church. The absence of a cell member will be certainly noticed by the rest of the cell group. Due to their intentionally and level of commitment the cells might well sound exaggerated from a traditional perspective (Hopkins 2002, 44; Green 2002, 126).

When the cells are regarded as being the basic structures of the church, members develop a sense of importance and ownership. Each member is stimulated to be committed and directly involved in pursuing the vision of the church, which is to be achieved through the cells.

Even though cell churches work under the ‘nothing competes with the cell’-value, many still promoting some programs for its members. Church programs don’t necessarily need to be extinct, but they are pruned, and canceled when necessary, in order to make sure the cells have priority (Potter 2001, 28-31). With the increase of active members soon all the ministries of the church will have new integrants, that before had no chance to be known and involved. This will lighten the load of those that have to be constantly involved in the

activities of one specific ministry due to the lack of personnel, and much likely improve the quality of the work being done.

3.2.2 Evangelization and Preaching

According to the Reformers the preaching of the pure Gospel and the correct administration of the sacraments are distinctive marks of the true church. Preaching, in this sense, means the proclamation of the Gospel to the world, being the sacraments an extension of it (Dulles 1987, 135). This task is not assigned only to the pastor of the church; rather, each believer can and must preach the word of God (Küng 1986, 376). In fact, what is popularly known as ‘preaching’, the Sunday sermon, is actually ‘teaching’. The pastor teaches the members, helping them to understand a text from the Scriptures and to apply the received knowledge in their lives. Naturally, preaching also takes place in the service in many forms, and especially through the sacraments, but it is not restricted to that environment.

As we have seen before, the traditional church was developed to work within Christendom as a pillar of society. When Christianity was legalized, the natural assumption was that people would seek the church. The focus on evangelization shifted to discipleship. Cathedrals and temples were built based on the idea that people would come to receive instruction and participate in the sacraments. Meanwhile the Christian extended family, the schools and other institutions should provide what was necessary to mold people’s mind and understanding according to the Christian teaching.

The problem with the traditional system in what concerns evangelization, is that it was not designed for that. The church established under Constantine was meant to instruct the next generation of Christians and it counted with the help of the state to do so (Hopkins 2002, 41). Hence, with the exception of some alternative streams, like the ones mentioned in the previous chapter, the church in general was not primarily concerned in reaching out for non-believers by proclaiming the word of God, but rather with the maintenance of those inside.

From the cell church perspective, the shortcomings of this system are made very clear nowadays. At the one hand we can see that, in many contexts, the church was moved from the center of society to the margin. At the other hand many of the nations to where missionaries are being sent have never been under Christian influence. When we try to plant traditional churches, in these post-Christendom and pre-Christian contexts, we are forcing the church out of its natural environment, the Christian society. Clearly, that does not mean that all missionary efforts done with the traditional system were hopeless. Many wonderful churches were planted around the world operating the traditional system. The problem is that,

many times the traditional churches will prioritize the maintenance of the flock at the expense of evangelization, and within a few years the recent born church stops to grow. With the exception of the children being baptized and few new converts added, the church almost stagnates. As put by Neighbour, “Traditional churches growth came mainly through the baptism of the members’ children, transfers from other churches, or by a sickly and minimal evangelism harvest among people who actually visit worship services” (Neighbour 1990, 84). This happens due to the difficulty to keep a missionary thrust inside the traditional system, which is primarily turned inwards.

Geography is another challenge faced by those operating the traditional system. Many traditional churches still are defining their areas of action according to parishes and districts geographically bounded. The difficulty with this model is that it is basically thought off a rural mind set. It was not meant to be applied in urban contexts. Nowadays more than half of the world population is living in urbanized areas. The population is exploding and moving to the cities, a situation that makes extremely necessary for the church to rethink its way of doing mission. Relationships, work and leisure time are all happening in multiple and complex contexts not limited by geographical bounds. The church therefore lacks flexible structures that might find people where they are (Neighbour 1990, 14-15; 52-53). Disciples are made through relationships. Relationships occur more naturally in rural areas. People have no need to be reminded of the importance of community, because they usually live like one. Generally speaking, when the gospel arrives in rural areas whole families will come to Christ and thus discipleship would happen in the household context. It is mainly in the cities that the church stands as contra-cultural community. In order to build relationships one needs to be intentional about it.

The inflexibility of the traditional system also limits the capacity of multiplication of the churches, because they are confined in certain areas, leaving the spaces where they are most needed without any hope. Where the disciples of Jesus are totally absent, we start to experience what Beckham calls ‘dystopia’, a phenomenon caused by population explosion, urban implosion, social alienation and church isolation. This combination is reinforced by the fact that, while evil is multiplying, churches still just adding people (Beckham 1997, 53). In order to make difference in society, the cell church seeks to promote a conscious and deliberate movement towards the unreached that mobilizes every single member.

The stagnation experienced by some churches is also caused by the isolation of the church workers. Because they have the agenda full of church activities they have no time to cultivate relationship with non-Christians. They spend all their time working among church

members (Neighbour 1990, 79). Once the church confines its members within the church walls it will surely face difficulties to reach people for Christ (Neighbour 1990, 138). As we have seen before, this is especially the case when instead of being directed outwards to carry out the task of making disciples, volunteers are directed inwards in order to keep the programs of the church. The excessive preoccupation with its routines and this inward focus end up by making traditional churches “little insulated islands of Christians, who didn’t even try to relate to the totally unchurched in the community” (Neighbour 1990, 81). When we isolate ourselves from the world we fail to live out the incarnation paradigm. The most precious message is covered up in irrelevant forms and archaic language (Beckham 1997, 58-60). As a result, people are leaving the church because “the church has been unable to make God vital to them down in real life” (Beckham 1997, 129).

The cell group is designed for both the edification of its members and the practice of evangelization. Even though cell churches might make use of evangelization programs like the Alpha course, its main evangelization strategy is the cell itself. Many cells churches will depend totally on the disposition of its members to lead its web of contacts to Christ. Each member is expected to be directly involved with the evangelization of their friends and acquaintances. Within the cell church evangelization is to be considered the occupation and the lifestyle of its members (Lings 2002, 57; Comiskey 1997 13-14).

The way the cell church depends on its members for evangelizing might be both the strength and the weakness of its evangelization strategy. If members are committed with evangelization and seeking to reach others for Christ, the cell will multiply and will be the perfect environment for nurturing the new converts. However, if members have difficulty to evangelize, the cell will stagnate, and might end up becoming a disease (Neighbour 1990, 238; 435-440). Due to that situation, cell church pastors need to emphasize over and over again the need of prioritizing the Kingdom of God over many other activities. The cell members are expected to live the Kingdom of God and to live for the cause of God. Larry Stockstill defines the cell as a group of people who have laid down their personal agendas to work together as a team (Stockstill 1998, 35). Reaching for unbelievers and make them disciples of Christ is a fundamental task of the cell. Ralph Neighbour States:

Reaching out the unbeliever is as important to the life of the effective Shepherd group [cell group] as is edification. No true discipleship or spiritual growth will occur among Christians who are not involved in ministry to a broken world.

Since the Christian life is caught, not taught, imagine the impact made in a environment where even the newest Christians are reaching out others. In a traditional church, it’s quite difficult for a newcomer to actually observe others involved in evangelism. In a cell group, the focus is placed on personal growth with a *motive* –

winning the lost! (Neighbour 1990, 239)

The cell is directed and trained to reach out for both those who are closed to the Gospel and those who are open to the Gospel. The literature about the cell presents strategies to reach both groups (Neighbour 1990, 239-253). This persistent and emphatic outward-focus is what makes the cell group different from many of the more traditional small groups that are predominantly inward-focused.

3.2.3 *Koinonia*

One of the marks of the New Testament church is the fellowship experienced by its members, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which is known as *koinonia* (Snyder 1975, 89-99; 2 Cor. 13:14). Ralph Neighbour advocates that this kind of New Testament community is the main reason for the cells (Neighbour 1990, 94-113). Snyder says that in order to provide a proper environment for *koinonia* the church must:

1. Make sufficient provision to be gathered together.
2. Meet together in a way that permits and encourages communication among the members (and with God).
3. Provide structures which are sufficiently informal and intimate to permit freedom of the Spirit (to speak the truth in love).
4. Study the Bible in the context of community (seeking for life changing results).

(Snyder 1975, 95-99)

To promote this kind of fellowship, cell churches and many traditional churches are investing in small groups. Both churches have realized that the worship service was not enough for the members to develop community. Churches that only have large group activities or social meetings have no conditions to develop the “*koinonia*, or ‘fellowship,’ needed to create true community lifestyles where people build one another” (Neighbour 1990, 51).

The difference between the traditional and the cell church in what concerns *koinonia* is the intentionality observed in the cell church. According to Beckham, it is precisely the life within the cell that what makes it essential for the church (Beckham 1997, 61). The primary assignment of a cell group church is to develop a “Basic Christian Community” in which people feel themselves, loved, supported, encouraged and connected to other Christians. Cells therefore should be able to develop a quality of relationship that goes beyond a social event. The kind of community the cells crave for is developed upon interpersonal commitment, sense of belonging, honest communication, deep relationship and empathy (Neighbour 1990,

94). However, these qualities can not be successfully cultivated by the cell meeting alone. Rather such community should be a daily basis experience.

3.2.4 Discipleship

The Great Commission, is alongside the Great Commandments of loving God above all things and the neighbour as oneself, one of the clearest orders given by Jesus to his followers (Mat. 22:37-40; 28:18-20). In the Great Commission, those who were already disciples were commanded to make disciples for Jesus from all the nations. Since then, this has been considered the primary task of the church.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the Christendom era, discipling was carried out by the Christian family. The household was the context in which the Christian values were taught and molded. When secularization struck and families were weakened by its influence, the official church had to take charge of the discipleship alone.

Throughout the centuries the traditional church has usually performed the task of discipleship through classes and courses. It seeks to transmit the Christian faith to its membership through Sunday schools, membership courses, confirmation classes and weekly sermons. The conventional discipleship dynamic rarely breaks out of the classroom style. The progress of the members is verified through tests, exams and public confessions. Naturally both the traditional church and the cell church encourage their members to live a life consistent with the message proclaimed. However the traditional structure provides no means for measuring how much of its teaching is actually lived out by its members. Consequently, the traditional church is likely to face difficulties to lead its members to a renewed practice.

The cell church, at the other hand, is especially concerned in developing a structure through which the application of the Christian values might be stimulated and verified. Within the cell context members must hold themselves accountable to one another. Sins must be confessed and abandoned, and new practices must be developed. Members fight together to overcome personal struggles. In such environment, the values of Gospel are not only taught but also lived out. The progress of the members is verified by the way they live.

For the cell church, discipleship is closely related to *koinonia* and it will occur within the cell group context. According to Dulles, “it is highly important for the neophyte to find a welcoming community with responsible leaders who are mature disciples, formed in the ways of the Lord” if the church is to transmit the Christian faith successfully (Dulles 1987, 218). Snyder states that a proper transmission of the Christian faith will demand more than the classroom dynamic:

Faith includes, to be sure, a dimension of intellectual assent, but this element follows from a more general commitment to the community and its corporate vision. For this reason, faith cannot be adequately transmitted in the cold atmosphere of the classroom or lecture hall. It is most successfully passed on by masters in a network of interpersonal relations resembling the community life of Jesus with the Twelve. (Snyder 1975, 218)

Within the cell church each new member will be connected to a more mature Christian to follow a discipleship and training track (Neighbour 1990, 211). Usually the new Christian will be discipled by the same person who has led him/her to faith. The discipleship will happen in a one-to-one relationship that allows intimacy for sharing. In many cell churches members are expected to follow a discipleship track designed to guide them in spiritual growing from their very initial stages until they have reached the conditions to become a cell leader. Within the cell context, the new convert will have the chance to learn by following the example of the other members, be trained on-the-job, employ his/her gifts, clarify doubts and heal personal wounds.

3.2.5 Teaching

The task of teaching in both the traditional and the cell system is normally delegated to the pastor, or those who have undergone some kind of theological training. For the sake of the right doctrine both the cell and the traditional churches will have the care to select only those which have proven to be mature Christians trained in the Bible for teaching functions.

One of the problems likely to happen in the cell churches is the problem of unapproved teaching (Stockstill 1998, 115). Since the cells are considered to be church, it is possible that poorly trained leaders, especially those out of a close supervision net, will give place to independent and sectarian thoughts and then, motivated by pride, end up by causing division (Green 2002, 125-127). In order to avoid situations like this, it is vital for the cell church that each cell leader is included in the supervision net. Churches that have a weekly service have fewer chances to have problems with that. These churches have less need to offer Bible teaching in the cell meetings since a solid Biblical instruction is given by the pastor in the services.

Clearly, cell members are strongly motivated by the church to know the Bible and learn the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. For that, many cell churches have developed training materials that guide the members through an ongoing Bible study (Neighbour 1990, 444-446). Any questions aroused by the cell member might be discussed with his/her discipleship partner. If that is not enough, the cell leader or someone from the staff might be

contacted. For the cell church, the most important thing in what concerns Bible knowledge is the personal application of the word of God in the lives of its members. This is more important than knowing by heart the whole content of the Bible.

The teaching of the cell church pastor is authoritative. When the sermon is discussed in the cell meeting, the main objective of the cell members is to help each other with the practical implications it has for their lives. As we will see below, the cell group is not the same as a Bible study group. The role of the leader is not that of a preacher or a lecturer. Rather, the leader is trained to be a facilitator in the cell meeting, stimulating each member to participate while keeping the focus of the conversation, and to ensure that the cell members are developing healthy relationships among themselves and reaching out for non believers. Since the leader function is neither to elaborate sermons for the cell meeting nor to conduct Bible studies, the main source of doctrine and teaching is still the pastor's sermon and the materials used by the church.

In general, the services of a cell church are focused on celebration and teaching. The function of the pastor in the service is to teach and give direction to the church. As we have seen before, all believers are called to preach, in the widest sense of the word, however not all believers are called, or gifted, to preach in the narrow sense of the word, or to teach (Küng 1986, 375-377). The cell church seeks to do exactly that. While the transmission of the gospel and of the basics of Christian faith is entrusted to all the members, pastors included, the task of teaching, which requires exegesis and deep theological reflection, is assigned to the trained theologians, pastors and leaders under supervision.

The main difference between the cell church and the traditional church in what concerns the teaching is not as much about content, as it is about the matter of personal application of the word of God. While the traditional church tends to focus more on the knowledge members have about the Bible and the church doctrine, the cell church seeks to verify how this knowledge is applied in daily life. It is not that the traditional church has no interest in seeing changes in the life of its members. The problem is that the traditional church will hardly manage to develop structures where these changes might be promoted and monitored like the cell church. Many cell church pastors have used the reports given by the cell leaders in the leadership meetings, as well as their own experience in the cell group, when elaborating their sermons. This enables them to contextualize their teaching and tackle the problems of the church with accuracy. Within the cell church pastors notice the change occurred in the life of the people regularly, something that would take many years to happen in the traditional system.

3.2.6 The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

As we have seen on the first point exposed above, one of the marks of the New Testament church was the idea that every member was expected to contribute. Resembling the dynamic existing between the different organs of the human body, each believer was assigned with different task according to the gifts given to him/her by the Holy Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7).

According to Snyder, understanding what the New Testament teaches about the gifts is basic when one is seeking to understand the church itself. This is because gifts are primarily a matter of the corporate life of the church, and not an individual Christian experience (Snyder 1975, 129). Misunderstanding the place of gifts has led the church to take wrong stances towards them. Some churches have wrongly fed the idea that the pastor is there to do most of the tasks of the church. In some cases the pastor does everything, even though each one of the pastor's talents is equaled or surpassed by someone in the membership. And as a consequence of this thinking a wealth of gifts lies buried because these talents are seemingly not needed in the church (Snyder 1975, 82). Another mistake occurs when gifts are denied or "replaced by aptitude, education and technique, and thus become superfluous" (Snyder 1975, 130). In the worst case scenario we find churches that don't need gifts to function. Snyder points out five tendencies observed in the traditional churches, regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit, these are:

1. Denial or discredit of spiritual gifts;
2. Over-individualization of spiritual gifts;
3. Confusion of spiritual gifts with native abilities;
4. Exaggeration of some gifts and depreciation of others.

(Snyder 1975, 130-135)

Cells are the perfect environment for testing and perfecting the spiritual gifts. The small group's personalized and positive atmosphere comprise a natural antidote against the spiritual exhibitionism. There is no need to fake gifts when each member is respected, valued and recognized by who he/she is (Neighbour 1990, 139-159).

3.2.7 Church building

The first evidences that the church was using some kind of temple to gather are from the year 200 A.D (Snyder 1975, 66). From that time on the church, which was spreading around the Mediterranean Sea, have developed a more structured liturgy and Old Testament like priests.

These changes increased especially after the legalization of Christianity, when the church adopted temples as its main place of meeting.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the beginning of the Christendom era people attended the masses where they received instruction and the sacraments, and the Christian household took over the functions of the small groups. However, as time passed by the Christian family ceased to be called church. This designation was more and more used to refer to the clergy or to the cathedral itself. These changes occurred after Constantine are the source of the current understanding that church is something we go to than something we are (Green 2002, 123).

Many cell churches don't even have a temple, but they rent a place periodically in order to gather all its cells for celebrations. Other cell churches prefer to have their own facilities, where besides the celebrations they have leadership trainings and meetings and other programs. In some contexts, the need to have a building arises from the difficulty to find a place big enough to accommodate the congregation for celebrations (Neighbour 1990, 206-207). In any case the building is not considered as sacred. The facilities are there to be used, and to serve the church.

In order to make sure members understand that the church is made of people, cell churches avoid calling its facilities of 'church'. The church is the people of God, the disciples of Jesus.

The problem is not the temple itself, but the way how members relate to it. Even though the temple is a legitimate expression of worship to God, and a place that inspires devotion and awe, and that, as such, serves very well the purpose of communitarian worship, it may also bring risks to the spirituality of its members when it is misunderstood. By considering the temple as being holier than other places such as the home, the work environment, the school and so forth, members may easily develop a double behavior: being one person in the worship services, and a completely different person in other environments. In fact, the discrepancy observed in the life of the members, which is caused by such logic, is one of the problems faced by the modern church. Naturally, this is a problem that both the cell church and the traditional church have to deal with. The cell church, however, through the small groups, has a way of promoting accountability and integrity in the everyday life of its members. This practice is based on the understanding that Christianity has no holy places, only holy people (Snyder 1975, 66). Even though the church throughout history has made use of temples and especial days to gather, Christians, as temples of the Spirit, are called to offer their whole lives as worship to God, not only in certain places, nor only in certain days (Rom.

12:1-2).

Theologically speaking the church does not need temples. So, according to Snyder “if church buildings have any justification is to be practical – simply a place to meet and carry on essential functions, as necessary” (Snyder 1975, 67). According to Snyder, the problem with the church buildings is what he calls “edifice complex” when church life revolves only around the temple (Snyder 1975, 77-78). In such situation, church buildings are a witness to our immobility, inflexibility, lack of fellowship, witness to our pride and witness to our class divisions (Snyder 1975, 73).

A problem that may arise from the cell church understanding is the neglect of the maintenance of the church building, what is also a bad testimony. Even though this may happen once members have realized that more than attending the services and more than a building, church is about being, it doesn't need to be so. The church building will be used regularly for the church's larger meetings, and a committee may be formed to take care of this specific task of maintenance, decoration and cleaning (Green 2002, 125).

Many traditional churches that own old Cathedrals are transitioning into a cell church. Certainly they don't need to abandon these buildings, but they have to change the way they relate to them if the cell church is to work properly. Cell church members need to understand what has already been mentioned a few times in this thesis: church is about being, not about a building. The building may still serve as good testimony, a place where the arts point to the majesty of God, where the architecture may inspire awe and devotion, where traditional, but meaningful, liturgy may still being performed. These are good things. However, what will really count if the church is to be faithful to its Lord are the quality of life and the level of commitment to God's Kingdom cause members show on their daily routines. This is what best expresses the nature of the church as God's called people.

3.2.8 Role of the small groups

Small groups are not exclusive to the cell church. In recent years many small group ministries have been adopted by a variety of churches. Home Bible study groups, Alpha course, fellowship groups and discipleship groups are being employed in many different contexts. What makes the cell church different though is that it is basically defined at the cell level (Beckham 1997, 31). Bishop Moses Tay states that “Basically, in the philosophy of cell church, the cell is the church, which is radically different from a church with cells” (Ed. Green 2002, 8).

Even though the cell carries characteristics also found in the traditional home groups,

it is essentially different. The table presented below might help us to understand:

Differences between home groups and cells (Green 2002, 124)

<i>Traditional Home group</i>	<i>Cell Groups</i>
Usually stays much the same in numbers and membership	The cell church business to divide and multiply
The home group leader is not a pastor (That's the work of the professional staff)	The cell leader is the pastor
Exists for companionship, prayer and instruction from the Bible	So do cells, but they evangelize enthusiastically and they take seriously mutual ministry and accountability
Normally exists for the enthusiasts, a small percentage of the church is involved	In a cell church everyone is a member of a cell
Exists alongside all the other programmes and organizations in the church	The cell is everything; the aim is first win the members, then to build them up into leaders and missionaries

The cell has two main functions, these are: edification and evangelization. This double dynamic is what defines the cell meeting programme. Ralph Neighbour, with the help of other cell church practitioners, developed a basic cell meeting outline that mirrors this inward-outward dynamic. This outline is made up of four distinct moments, usually referred to as “the four W’s”: Welcome, Worship, Word and Witness (or Works) (Potter 2001, 31-36; Hopkins 2002, 52-53; Neighbour 1990, 225).

The way cell churches plan their cell meetings nowadays varies greatly. Some churches have added more moments to it, while others have discarded the four W’s completely. Since the cell system is primarily value-oriented, local churches have the freedom to structure their cells according to their needs. This seems to be the case of the churches that have already completed the transition and internalized the cell values.

The four W’s, however, still being a tool used by many cell churches and especially those beginning the transition. In the “welcome moment” members are focused on getting to know each other better. Ice-breakers dynamics are employed in order to make the members more comfortable to share. The “worship moment” is when the cell seeks to generate the awareness of the presence of God. It is also a moment to express gratitude and devotion to God in creative ways. The “word moment” is when members talk about a specific theme (usually the last sermon preached by the pastor). The idea is not to have a theoretical discussion, but rather mutual ministrations. People are encouraged to share the difficulties they have to apply this or that aspect mentioned in the preaching, and to advise each other

and pray for each other. The last moment, when “witness” is emphasized is turned outwards. The cell will pray for unbeliever friends, elaborate strategies for reaching these friends and plan how to stretch their web of relationships.

Different from traditional churches, in the cell church no program should compete with the cells. The cell is the basic community. People usually join the congregation through the cells. Those who are visiting the church services are also stimulated to join a cell. The cell is meant for everybody, not only the enthusiasts of the church. George Lings states: “Nothing competes with cell... It is a usefully equivocal phrase. It gives priority to cell over any competing church demand; and it acts as a slogan that testifies to cell as daily bread, not cream cake, in the Christian life” (Lings 2002, 64).

Chapter Four

ASSOCIAÇÃO MISSIONÁRIA EVANGÉLICA, A CASE STUDY

Now we are going to turn our attention to the Associação Missionária Evangélica (AME), the church in which I conducted my fieldwork. In this chapter I will describe the context and history of AME, and the process of transition by which this church is going through. By doing that, I wish to help the reader to verify what in the AME's situation is exclusive to its reality, and what could be used to understand the dynamics of transition in general. I hope this chapter might also help us to understand how the transition from a traditional church to a cell church works in practice.

The information presented below is based on three main sources: First, on my own experience as a resident of Lajeado and participant of the AME and of the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, to which AME is historically related; second, on the knowledge acquired through the interviews I have conducted with the church members, especially the elderly; third, on the official websites of the City of Lajeado and of the denomination of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil.

4.1 Context

The AME is located in the city of Lajeado, southern Brazil, a city of approximately eighty thousand inhabitants largely influenced by Germanic and Italian cultures. There is a considerable part of the population that still speaking the Germanic or Italian languages within the household context (Prefeitura de Lajeado 2011).

Following the pattern found in the rest of Brazil, the majority of its population is Catholic. The old cathedral located in the city's main square makes the Catholic presence easily recognizable. The Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, a Lutheran church that was part of the AME's history, is also very well known by the locals since its temple and the old bell tower are located in the city's central area (Prefeitura de Lajeado 2011). There are still several other denominations represented: another Lutheran denomination founded by North-American missionaries, several small Baptist denominations, at least one large community from the Assembly of God, several smaller Pentecostal churches, Adventists, and at least two Neo-Pentecostal denominations.

Even though the majority of Lajeado's population declares itself as being Christian, there are several other religions that have found space. Some of the non-Christian religions

and philosophies found in the city are: the *Espiritismo* (Kardecist-Spiritualism), the *Umbanda*, a blend of Spiritualism and African and Indian rituals, the *Candomblé*, a blend of African religions and Catholicism, Mormonism, Freemasonry and several smaller esoteric centers. Like in the rest of Brazil, many people will declare themselves as Catholics or Lutherans but will also participate in other religions, mixing a little of everything.

The members of the AME come from the most varied religious backgrounds. At the one hand, you have people with more than fifty years of participation in a conventional Lutheran church, now participating, some as leaders, of this new independent Church. At the other hand, you have the newborn Christians coming from Lutheran, Catholic, Kardecist and/or Afro-religions backgrounds joining the congregation. One of the most noticeable features of the AME is its ability to gather people from different cultural, familiar and economic backgrounds.

4.2 History

The Associação Missionária Evangélica was originally created as a department, or society, within the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, a church that belongs to the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, the largest Lutheran denomination in the country. Its original purpose was to promote a deeper commitment to the practice of mission and evangelization within that church. However, after a series of problems that end up by splitting the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, AME became an independent church for those who left that church. The AME, as a church, was officially founded in July the 13th of 2007 by this group of ex members and pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado.

Even though in its four years of activity as church AME has managed to reach out for many un-churched people, a large part of its members still is composed by those who left the Lutheran community, what consequently influences the way they understand and practice church. Still, it is clear that the independence from the traditional church has facilitated the paradigm shift necessary for the transition desired by the church and promoted a greater sense of commitment. However, the influence of the traditional worldview and its consequent practice still is noticed within the community. In order for us to have a proper understanding of the challenges faced by AME in its transition to a cell church we are going to give a closer look at its origins within the Evangelical Community of Lajeado.

4.2.1 *The Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado*

The Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado has more than one hundred and fifteen years of activity (IECLB 2011). Like most communities established by the Lutheran church in southern Brazil, the vast majority of its members comes from families descendent of German immigrants. Nowadays, the Evangelical Community of Lajeado has approximately one 1500 families enrolled, summing up a total of more than 3000 people baptized (IECLB 2011). This considerable number of members shows the strong influence tradition continues to exert over Lutheran families in the area.

The majority of the members of the city's Lutheran church has a more cultural, or traditional, relationship with the church. Only a few of all the members attend the services regularly and an even lower number participates actively in the life of the church helping voluntarily in some of the church's ministries. The average attendance in the services, by 2007, was that of fifty in the Sunday mornings service, and one hundred and seventy in the Sunday evenings service, a number that is already above the average when considering the traditional church reality in the area.

The cultural (family tradition-bounded) relationship members have with the church becomes evident by the occasion of the holy feasts, like Easter and especially Christmas, when the temple's capacity of sitting 450 people is surpassed. The church tradition is also preserved in the celebrations of the rites of passage. Parents are expected to take their children to be baptized and confirmed. Members will seek the church for the wedding ceremony. Funerals are normally performed by the pastor, and the bereaved families are mentioned in prayers in the services.

Even though in its hundred and sixteen years of existence, the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado had been predominantly traditional, it experienced the influence of revival groups, like itinerant evangelistic groups and charismatic ministries, which were operating also within the Lutheran church, several times. Sometimes the influence of these evangelical and charismatic streams was felt only for a short period, or affected only a few people, having no implications for the church structure. In other occasions, it has led the church to experience more long lasting effects.

In years of 1997 and 1998 two new pastors and a catechist were hired by the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado. All the integrants of the recent hired staff were members of a renovation movement originated within the Lutheran denomination in southern Brazil in the eighties, known as Movimento Encontro. This movement was deeply influenced by the *Evangelical* theology and to some extent by the pietism (Movimento

Encontro 2011). The new staff placed a renewed and strong emphasis on the Word of God. Many Bible studies were organized and members were constantly challenged to live out what they were learning.

From that time on, the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado experienced significant changes. The number of people (children and youth included) attending the services, especially the evening services, increased, as well as the number of Bible study groups. The church got a huge number of voluntaries. At certain point, the Sunday school ministry alone had about eighty volunteers. Through the promotion of several Alpha courses the church managed to reach out for un-churched people and several inactive members began to participate regularly in the services. A good number of leaders was trained and then joined forces with the church staff to lead varied ministries and Bible study groups.

A big part of those attending the services and other programs regularly, including the pastors, the presbyters and the elders of the parish, were also participants in the annual events promoted by the Movimento Encontro. The Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado was the only church of the synod officially linked to this movement. The other communities of the synod were divided mainly between other two big streams present in the Lutheran denomination, the Comunhão Martim Lutero and the Pastoral Popular Luterana.

In 2003, a new pastor joined the staff to work with the youth of the church. This pastor had the opportunity of getting to know the cell church ministry during a study year in the USA and since then he had the will to try the cell system. He introduced the cell church model to the other pastors and leaders of the congregation.

The cell structure pleased the church leadership. It would enable the church to involve more members, train more leaders, disciple new-comers and consequently “close the backdoor” of the church. Besides, the proposal was considered to be theologically and biblically correct, what was considered an essential aspect by the church leadership.

After many conversations and discussions about it, the pastors, presbyters and leaders decided to attend the so called ‘modules of transition’ offered by the Cell Church Ministry in Brazil (www.celulas.com.br) and start the process of transition from a program-based conventional church to a relationship-based cell church. According to one of the elderly people involved in the church leadership, the cells arrived as an apex of the long history of this community.

4.2.2 The Birth of the Associação Missionária Evangélica

In 2005, while the transition was already in progress, a series of conflicts involving a group

of members and the leadership in exercise at that time began to happen. The conflict was not, at least directly, related to cells. Many other factors, that don't need to be mentioned here, were involved. This opposition group got the attention of the regional instances of the denomination. After a while the problem was taken to national instances of the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil. The situation extended for two years of tensions, discussions and trials with the Lutheran denomination board. The final decision of the Lutheran denomination juridical-doctrinaire commission was to dismiss one the members of the staff, the pastor responsible for the parish's ministerial coordination, and remove from charge two presbyters, the president and vice president of the community. Since this decision was against the will of the community and parish councils, the rest of the church staff, the presbyters, the leaders and a great number of the active members decided to leave the Lutheran denomination and start an independent congregation.

The Associação Missionária Evangélica, as a church, began with approximately one hundred members, most coming from the Lutheran church. Since its very beginning in 2007 the AME has operated as a cell church, giving continuation to the transition initiated in the Lutheran community. Many of AME's first cell groups were formed before the split and were already active within the Lutheran church structure. For those who left the Lutheran church, many things continued the same since they continued to gather with the same people, both in the services and in the cells.

At AME the cell groups are considered the church's basic units. The only way to become a member of the church is through joining a cell group. The cell leaders are responsible to verify the level of commitment of those willing to become members. In order to become a member, a person needs to have made a personal decision to follow Christ and participate both in cell meetings and services assiduously.

Currently the church has approximately 300 members organized in 25 cells. The cell members gather for the cell meeting once a week and all the cells come together to celebrate, worship and listen to the preaching every Sunday evening.

So far the church has rented a place to gather for the worship services. However, in its second year, the church managed to buy a plot of land where it has started to build a pavilion with a capacity to accommodate 1200 people that is currently in final phase of construction. The new building will be inaugurated in the church's forth anniversary in July of 2011.

4.3 Transition

Now, I am going to focus on the transition process itself and describe the steps taken by the

church in this enterprise. I am also going to mention some of the practical issues the church has faced in its experience. This description will serve as basis for the next chapter where I am going to analyze in depth the problems that need to be overcome so that the cell system can function properly.

4.3.1 Before the Transition

As mentioned earlier, the transition has started in 2003, when those who later would become members of the AME still were members of the Evangelical Community of Lajeado. At that time the church was already experiencing things that made it quite different from the more traditional/conventional churches. In response to the heavy emphasis placed on the Word of God, a large part of the regular participants was bringing their Bibles to the service and several members were participating of the Bible courses offered by the pastor. It was a time when many acquired a good biblical knowledge.

In that same year a series of sermons that covered the whole book of Acts, stimulated the members to rethink their church practice. The idea was to lead the members in rediscovering the way how the early church lived out its faith and use this knowledge about the early church as a source of inspiration for the reshaping of their own church life.

This was also the moment in which the church slowly began to reach for people outside the church environment. The several editions of Alpha course promoted by the church managed to bring new people for the services, but the most noticeable effect was the awakening of several inactive members. Together with the coming of new people, the church also started to have different spiritual experiences, especially in the Bible study groups' context.

Since the beginning of his ministry, in 1997, the pastor and ministerial-coordinator of the church has placed strong emphasis on the need of knowing and practicing what the Bible tells the church to do. Therefore, several of the cell church values were already in place when the leadership started the transition in 2003. Besides, members of the church already had some experience with small groups. Some of them were participating in Bible study groups and others have attended the Alpha courses as participants or leaders of the discussion small groups. The small group environment was not strange or intimidating to these members, and due to their experience many were able to organize a small group meeting without difficulty.

Before the actual transition a series of conversations between the pastors, presbyters and leaders took place. It was necessary to consider what such transition would require, what were the risks involved and what were pros and cons.

4.3.2 The Transition Process

In the first phase of the transition the pastors and leaders of the church participated of the so called ‘modules of transition’ offered by the Cell Church Ministry in Brazil. The church staff was aware that the transition into a cell church requires total commitment to the vision by the leadership, including the pastors (Tay 2002, 10). There were four modules carried out on weekends, two happening in the first semester and two in the second. The objective of these modules was to present the values and structure of the cell church and train the pastors and leaders to conduct the transition in their respective churches. The Cell Church Ministry also offered an ongoing support for churches in transition.

Throughout the ‘transition year’ the main task of the leaders and pastors was to lay down the fundamentals of the cell system. Great effort has been made in this phase. Members were invited to participate in a ‘recycling course’ entitled “Restoring the Vision” which objective was to transmit the theology and the values behind the cell church and promote the first experiences of the cell church. By completing the course the member should be able to understand the differences between the traditional and the cell systems, and have the basic preparation to participate in a cell group. The aim of the staff was to involve all the regular participants of the congregation in the cells, including the children and the elderly, but before that, the regular participants had to be trained and prepared to live out this new church lifestyle. The idea was that from this group of leaders the church would be able to mold a new church practice based on the cell churches.

According to the Cell Church Ministry in Brazil, usually eighty percent of all efforts demanded by the transition process are invested only in reshaping the old concepts and understandings about church life. There is a specific order to be followed: starting from the shift of paradigms (or worldviews) and then moving to a renewed practice of the communitarian life, and not the other way around. At AME the staff sought to follow this pattern.

After a number of members was ready with the basic training given in the recycling course, there were established a few prototype cells. These were cells in which the whole theory transmitted so far was to be tested and where problems should be identified and tackled. The majority of the prototype cell members were leaders that have gone through the recycling. As the cells started to function properly, other regular participants of the church were invited to come. The cell groups were open to reach out for unreached people, but in this first moment the idea was to involve the regular members of the church. Those who finished the Alpha course were also encouraged to participate in the recycling course and join

a cell group.

When the first cell group reached the number of approximately fourteen members it was split into two groups. The two groups were expected to grow and then split into two new groups again. This process, which should be repeated time after time in each cell, is called multiplication.

In order to keep a constant multiplication dynamic, each cell leader was responsible for training one or two “interns” that would be in charge of the cell originated with the multiplication. Each member was expected to follow a discipleship track material that the church acquired from the Cell Church Ministry in Brazil. This training material was developed to enable each member to have enough training to keep a devotional life and to have basic conditions to one day lead a cell group.

The cell meetings took place in the house of the members. Usually the members would take turns to host the cell. In the beginning the cell groups gathered on Thursdays’ evenings or Saturdays’ evenings. The church was running many programs at the time, but these two days were dedicated to the cell meetings. As time passed by some of the programs were pruned and the cells were free to have their meetings at the day and time that was most convenient for its members.

The cell meeting followed the dynamic described in chapter three, known as the four W’s (Welcome, Worship, Word and Witness). For each week the pastor in charge of preaching on Sunday was responsible for elaborating an outline for the cell meeting based on the sermon. This outline should include basic directions for the meeting: A question or dynamic for ice-breaker (welcome); a suggestion of a psalm, or a song (worship); questions of personal application based on the sermon (word); an encouragement for evangelization or a letter about the church’s future plans (witness). The cell leader, in its turn, had the task to distribute the responsibility for these four moments among the cell members. Each cell member would sometime be responsible for one of these moments. Even though each cell had to follow the four W’s every time it gathered, the way it would do it could vary according to the creativity of its members.

As I said before, many members already had experience with small groups. This made the transition sometimes easier and sometimes harder. It was easier because member were somewhat used to small groups. The difficulty though was to establish a proper differentiation between the Bible study groups and the cells. As we will see in detail later on, even though many members had no problem to grasp the whole theory about the cells, they faced difficulties to establish the renewed small group practice proposed by the cell system.

Since the start of the transition, the cells, with some exceptions, have multiplied several times. However, the multiplication was not as fast as it was expected. Besides the difficulties brought by the transition itself that can shake even the more mature leaders, the problems with the opposition and the consequent division experienced by the community have made the whole process much more complicated.

The transition is a process that takes time. According to the Cell Church Ministry in Brazil, a pastor must be prepared to stay at least ten years in a community if he/she wills to start the transition. The AME continues the transition process started in the Lutheran congregation. The vast majority of its members are already engaged in a cell group and they are already familiar with the new set of concepts and terminology of the cell system. There are still many challenges to be overcome. It is to these challenges we are going to turn our attention now.

Chapter Five

THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITION

So far we have seen how cell-like groups were used by the church along history, some of the differences between the traditional system and the cell system, and how the Associação Missionária Evangélica, my case study, is conducting its transition to a cell church. In this chapter we are going to focus on the challenges experienced by traditional church members in their transition to a cell church. By doing this, I hope we might be able to understand how the conventional understanding and practice of church influences the transition to a cell church.

5.1 Main Difficulties with the Transition faced by the Members of the AME

One of my objectives with the interviews I conducted in my fieldwork at AME was to identify the areas in which the members were facing more difficulties with the transition. In my analysis of the data collected in the interviews four areas stood out as the main obstacles for the transition being carried at AME. These are: the inherited paradigms, the inherited church practice, the new level of commitment required by the cell church, and the traditionalism.

5.1.1 Inherited paradigms

One of the most fundamental processes for traditional churches willing to make the transition to a cell church is the process of paradigm change. The literature about the cell church repeats again and again that becoming a cell church is more than promoting changes in the methods of church organization. Rather, as put by Albert Vun, “Cell church is a new way of seeing, experiencing and working out the life of the local church” (Vun 2002, 86). Therefore, what is being proposed is not a mere adding of a new program or ministry in the church. The cell church aims much more than a transition of doing, rather it insists on a fundamental transition of being. This means developing a new mindset that will shape the whole life of the church around the small communities of the cells.

This paradigm shift is not an easy process. One should not think that such transition happens from night to day. Those implementing the cell system must be prevented against what Beckham calls the “Instant Cell Church Syndrome”, caused by the lack of patience, good planning and sensitivity towards the members (Beckham 1997, 158). Those who suffer

from this syndrome, even though they may have the best of the intentions, usually cause more damage than good to their churches and may end up by ruining completely the chances of a transition. Michael Green describes the right attitude of those willing to venture into such enterprise, he writes:

It [the transition] requires a whole hearted acceptance by the pastor, the lay leaders and the members of the church if they are to move in this direction. That is not easy to achieve. It will require much prayer, loving discussions, often one to one. It will require the patience of Job if the traditional mindset is to be changed. And it will require sacrifice by the pastor as he transfers many of his traditional functions into the hands of cell leaders who may well do much worse. (Green 2002, 125)

The transition at AME is an example of the complexity of such process. Even though this church has begun its transition approximately eight years ago, the presence of the paradigms inherited from the traditional church still is noticed. Naturally this is not a surprise if we consider the fact that most part of the AME members was raised within a church tradition of many centuries. Interesting though, is that all the interviewees were aware that the system being implemented in the church is very different from what they were used to in the traditional church. However, although positive towards the cell system and its different way to see and be church, the members interviewed recognize that many times they still caught themselves thinking with the mindset of the traditional church. The great majority of the interviewees acknowledge that there are still things to be changed.

The presence of the old paradigms is perceived in the way the members connect church life with day-to-day life and in the way they relate to the activities of the church. At the same time that paradigms exert influence over the way one experiences church life, one's attitudes towards the church reveal something about the paradigms that motivate them.

One of the difficulties experienced by the AME members with the transition is related to the old conception of church, which is now being challenged by the cell church. Some of the interviewees have expressed their concern that, due to the traditional conception that defines church life by the events that take place in the church property, some cells could end up by going astray of their original purpose. As stated by Chris Neal, "The focus on congregation ... is the received model from centuries of experience; it is hard to break into a new model. This is as true for those deeply committed to the process as for those who are wary" (Neal 2002, 81). Some of the interviewees who were not used to participate actively in a church before, report that it was hard to understand the purpose of the cell group; for some of them the cell group even sounded suspicious or unnecessary. The exceptions were those members who joined the church through a cell or that became part of a cell almost immediately after

starting to attend the services; these members have not shown any resistances to the cell groups. The members who already were active participants in the church, on the other hand, acknowledge a tendency to interpret the cell as just another meeting or another program like the others already promoted by the church. By thinking like that, although very happy with the cell meetings, the members run the risk of missing the point that the cell is meant to be a small community of disciples who care for each other and interact with each other even when the group is not gathered (Neighbour 1990, 94). A mere social event happening once a week will soon lead the group to miss the focus on discipleship and evangelization, the tasks the church is called to carry out. The cell that reduces all it is to a regular cell meeting is very likely to stagnate. A basic idea behind the cell system is that church is about being.

A second difficulty faced by the AME members, which is also related with the presence of old paradigms, concerns the participation of the members in the church ministry. As we have seen in chapter three, usually within the traditional system the pastor is the only one allowed or expected to perform the tasks of preaching, counselling, evangelizing, teaching, planning, and so forth (Neighbour 1990, 47-48). In the cell church, on the other hand, members are expected to take part in the ministries of the church. Members are commissioned and expected to carry out together the mission of the church.

The cell church also emphasizes that all Christians have gifts which can be used to build up and empower the church to carry out its mission. And the small group is the environment in which these gifts should be discovered, perfected and used (Neighbour 1990, 143; 146-159). Since members are released to minister, the role of the pastor, or church staff, is that of a leader/equiper. He/she will train and equip the members for ministry, rather than perform all the tasks of the church. Counselling, sharing, confession of sins and mutual ministration are all moved from the pastor's office to the cell groups, to be carried on according to the gifts of its members. In practice this means that the cell group is the member's primary support system in times of need and distress and the church's main agent of evangelization. The cell should be able to provide the basics necessary for the holistic health of its members. Only when cell groups face situations they are not able to handle alone, they are encouraged to seek for the help of the supervisors or pastors in charge.

At AME many of the ministerial functions mentioned above are already taking place within the cell context. The interviewees consider this participation in ministry, what some of them refer to as "priesthood of all believers in practice", as one of the greatest differences between the cell church and the traditional church. However, some of the interviewees have expressed that the 'every member a ministry' idea has not been fully understood or accepted

by all the members yet. I was able to identify two main reasons behind this difficulty. The first reason is that during most of the years of traditional church the pastor was the only one performing the ministerial tasks and the members were not used to think as themselves as ministers. Their role in the church life was rather uncertain. Second, some of the members see the pastor as being in a “higher level”. To use the example given to me during the interviews: if a member is sick in the hospital and could choose between the pastor and a fellow cell group member to come pray for him/her, the natural choice would be the pastor. Clearly, this is not something wrong, since the pastor should be the one who inspires and models the Christian life of the community. The risk though, is to transform the pastor in a kind of pagan priest that has powers not granted to other human beings. The consequence brought by this understanding is the unconscious denial of the so highly esteemed priesthood of all believers.

5.1.2 Inherited Church Practice

A second area of difficulty experienced by the members of AME is related to the inherited church practice. In my analysis of the interviews I have noticed that many values of the more traditional churches are in complete agreement with the values of the cell church. The problem though, is that for many traditional members these values have never been more than a theory.

The interviews have shown that in general members with a traditional church background have more difficulties to put the cell church values into practice than newcomers, even though the former have more knowledge than the latter. However, there were some exceptions among the interviewees. Those members that were active in the tasks of evangelization, ministering to other people and counseling already in the traditional church context have shown to have none or, at least, fewer difficulties with the cell church. These members have had no difficulties with the transition because, for them, the transition was no more than the intentional reshaping of the church with the objective to promote a life-style they were already living.

The majority of the interviewees acknowledge that things like the general priesthood (which is understood as participation in the ministry of the church), Christian fellowship and evangelization are being put into practice for the first time in their lives. This lack of practice with ministries, like evangelization, represents a barrier for these traditional members that are now being challenged to take responsibility for it. Even though traditional members acknowledge the primacy of mission and evangelism, they have hardly been able to connect

it to their lives. The cell, at the other hand, challenges this divide between theory and practice and encourages members to see life as a whole (Neal 2002, 81). In fact, as described by one of the members coming from a traditional background, the cell church is a complete new culture to be learned.

5.1.3 New Level of Commitment

The third area where members of the AME are experiencing difficulties concerns the level of commitment required by the church. As stated by one of the interviewees, the cell group will work depending on whether its members are really living out the values that make up the cell church.

Many of the members of the AME were used to attend services once a week and participate in other programmes and courses promoted by the church occasionally. Some of them were already very active in the church. Since the transition has begun, the church sought to prune great part of its programs in order to release members to live 'cell life'. However, the level of commitment required now is even higher than before. Members are being encouraged to be even more intentional in cultivating relationship with their cell group members, more devoted to prayer and more willing to improve their leadership skills. The transition process especially, demands good training and preparation, and all these things take time and require that the members learn to define priorities in their lives.

The lack of time still is a problem for some members. Several have said it was hard to find place in the agenda for another weekly meeting, when they were about to join a cell group. Besides, those who are cell leaders have to participate in supervision meetings, be accountable to their supervisors, read training materials and participate in special retreats.

For those used to attend the church services once a month, the life in a cell church sounds quite hectic. That is why pruning the programs is really important; by doing this the church avoids that members end up "trapped" in the church facilities and allows the cell to have priority. The experience at AME has shown that getting the members to prioritize their cell meetings over other things is already a big challenge for a church to overcome. But an even bigger challenge is to get church members to live out the cell-life on a daily basis and not only in the cell meetings; and that is what a cell should be like. The cells in which members are not taking part in the mission of the church, offering support to fellow cell group mates, having relationship with each other out of the cell meeting, making disciples and being accountable to one another are more susceptible to stagnation. The efficacy of a cell is directly proportional to the level of commitment of its members.

5.1.4 Traditionalism

Traditionalism was pointed out by the interviewees as something that hinders the transition to a cell church. Some of the interviewees have criticized heavily the traditional church due to the rigidity of its forms and the church practice of its members. Some of the aspects mentioned by the interviewees as being bad characteristics of the traditional church were the “cold environment” of the traditional church services, the kinds of preoccupation traditional members have, the cultural religiosity, and the lack of commitment with the revival (understood as the freedom for more charismatic expressions).

It is clear that such criticism is related to the history of the AME, a church that was born as a result of a hard split with a Lutheran denomination. And even though the cells have not been the primary cause of this conflict, the way the community was organizing itself and promoting church life may well have offended the “traditionalists” of the community that initiated the conflict.

The problem, however, doesn't seem to be the tradition itself, but rather the place it stands for some members of the community. As argued by Albert Vun, “Often churches exalt the traditions to such a position that they dominate the life of the church” (Vun 2002, 86). When this happens the church becomes unable to listen to the culture around, and ends up alienated from society.

Even though the cell church doesn't necessarily stands against the traditions of the churches, it may represent a challenge for churches which focus is mainly on preserving the forms. The cell church is people oriented and relationship oriented, and therefore the forms and liturgy are developed by the members that make up the church, rather than an established rule to which people should adapt. That doesn't mean that cell churches are not worried in conserving traditions, but rather that they are free to express themselves in the way its members are more identified with. The worship services of the cell churches vary according to different traditions and contexts.

5.2 Overcoming the Challenge of Transition

After having traced the presence of cell like structures in the history of the church, examined the difference between the traditional church and the cell church, presented the history of the transition going on at AME, and explained how the traditional church mindset affects a church in transition, I would like to suggest three guiding principles for churches willing to be more effective in carrying out the mission assigned to them by Jesus, whether as a cell church or not. I believe that by holding on to these three principles churches will be led to

seek for structures that better reflect their nature, keep them on track when developing such structures, and avoid fossilization after this process is completed. Therefore, these principles should guide the church before, during and after transitioning into a cell church.

5.2.1 Authority of the Bible

The first guiding principle is to make sure that the Bible has authority over the church. When related to theme addressed in this thesis, the authority of the Bible implies that besides teaching the right doctrine about Creation, Sin, salvation in Christ and the Kingdom of God we should also teach what the Scriptures have to say about the church. The church should be defined biblically; other definitions should be considered as heresy.

As heirs of the Reformation we should make sure that *Sola Scriptura* is also defining the way we understand church. Giving continuity to the work of Luther and his disciple Martin Bucer, we should rescue both a biblical understanding and a biblical practice of church. If we want to be faithful to the Scriptures we should use more time on discovering the church as the New Testament presents it - its nature, its function, its practice - and then embrace it with all its consequences. This focus on the Bible will allow us to see what is really essential to the church and what is negotiable. That will also grant us flexibility in the way we organize our churches.

Biblically speaking the church is about people, the people of God, the community of disciples. Church, therefore, is something we *are* all the time and everywhere. The understanding that Christian life is bounded to certain places and programs is strange to the Bible. We can not find in the New Testament any order about making, or planting, churches and even less about building temples. Even though temples or facilities are a possibility and may serve well the purpose of the church, they are not essential, nor necessary. The church comes to existence when disciples are made and it only achieves its purpose while it is making disciples.

From the Bible we understand that the church was entrusted with a mission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to practice what Jesus has commanded (Mat. 28:18-20). This mission has to be made clear. Every believer must know that he/she is summoned to take part in this mission. The mission is common to every single follower of Christ. This function should be the decisive guiding line in everything the church is about to do. The first question we should make ourselves when evaluating our churches is: Are we achieving our goal? Or, in other words: Are we making disciples that obey all that Jesus has commanded us, including the command of making disciples? The answer to this

question is what should define our plan of action as church. Only when we allow ourselves to be discontent with our status quo is that change is possible (Neal 2002, 73). Dissatisfaction is what gave birth to the rich expressions of church we have seen in chapter two. However such transformation is only possible when the Biblical-shaped values are in place. As put by Phil Potter, “If people don’t really value the need to grow up in Christ, grow together in love and grow out in witness, then the introduction of a cell church will be a disaster” (Potter 2001, 128).

5.2.2 Practice

A second principle that should orient our churches is: to care about as much practice as we care about preaching and teaching. Once the Biblical conception of church is in place, the church must promote a practice that mirrors its essence. We must recognize that since the Christian family gave in to secularization we have learned to content ourselves with theory. We enjoy the teaching, the rhetoric, the philosophical thinking; every Sunday we preach the Word of God and teach people how to live in response to it, but we don’t care about verifying if this teaching is really being applied in every day life of the members. When we care, we don’t have the means to do it.

While the commission of Jesus sends us to teach new disciples to *obey*, or to *practice*, all the things he has commanded us, we content ourselves with *teaching* what he has commanded (Mat. 28:20). But the Bible makes it very clear: we are only successful in our mission if we have disciples that obey, or practice, what Jesus has taught (Mat. 7:24-27; 28:20; Jam 1:22).

When we start to think about promoting the practice of the word of God, we can see the value of cell like structures. They function like the early Christian family that not only teaches the commandments of Jesus, but makes sure these commandments are obeyed by holding each member accountable. The Early Church, the Monastic Communities, the Valdesians, the Unity of Brethren, Martin Bucer, Spener, Zinzendorf, Wesley and so many cell churches nowadays have all experienced the benefits of having a small community of believers that are accountable to one another while promoting the practice of the Christian faith.

Making disciples, loving God and loving our neighbour are a matter of obedience. Each disciple of Jesus is sent to make more disciples, love God with all its heart, and love his/her neighbour. Cell-like structures provide the proper environment in which members may encourage one another to carry out this task (Heb. 10:24-25).

5.2.3 Teaching by Example

Directly related to the previous is the principle of teaching by example. As we have seen above, one of the difficulties members experience with the transition is practicing what they already acknowledge as right, or necessary. I believe one of the causes of this difficulty is the lack of models which members can follow. For many years, traditional members were used to attend the services and listen to the sermon but had no model to follow in real life situations, nor a community to support them in their personal struggles. If the church really wants to make disciples, that not only know the word, but practice it, and are capable of making disciples themselves, it should embrace the principle of teaching by example.

Clearly, this is the most challenging of the three principles. It requires people willing to invest their lives in other people's lives. And it also requires leaders that are practicing the word of God themselves. But this is the way the Bible shows us how to make disciples: new born Christians learn from the model offered by more mature Christians. We can see that Jesus had his small group of disciples that have learned from him; the early church gathered in small groups of disciples; the same principle is observed by Paul, which has taught Timothy that in turn had to teach others, and so forth. In the early church, even when multitudes were converted to Christ, each person was connected to a church in which he/she was able to learn how to follow Jesus in community. The same pattern was followed by John Wesley and the Methodist movement. Cell like structures make possible for new members to have contact with more mature Christians that can teach them "on the job" by applying the acquired knowledge in real life situations.

This principle will not bring fast church growth in the beginning, but it will have long lasting effects. However, as disciples start to multiply, the church will be able to have both long lasting effects and explosive growing. The goal of the church leadership should be developing a culture of discipleship where every member is made a disciple that makes disciples. The best way of doing it would be by modeling out a lifestyle to be followed. Once we achieve that we will see an Early-church- like church completing the task given by Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have talked about the process of transition from a traditional/conventional church into a cell church. My goal was to understand how the traditional church understanding and practice influences members in transition to a cell church. In order to achieve that I have studied the history and discourse of the cell church, analyzed the differences between the cell church and the traditional church, conducted a fieldwork in a church in transition, and analyzed the data I have gathered in the field in the light of the literature about the theme.

In chapter two we have seen that even though the first generation of modern cell churches came to being approximately thirty years ago having Paul Yonggy Cho as its main representative, cell like structures are not something new. They were a fundamental structure of the New Testament church. With the birth of Christendom under Emperor Constantine the functions of the cells were relocated to the basic block of society, the extended family. As time passed by small groups ceased to be called or understood as church. When the official church and society in general gave in to secularization, cell groups came back in different moments of history as a means for renovation, revival, discipleship and mission.

In chapter three we have seen how the traditional church and the cell church integrate different features that have historically being considered as fundamental to the church. These two different systems have a different understanding and practice in regard to members' participation, evangelization/preaching, communion (*koinonia*), discipleship, teaching, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, church's building and the place of small groups. The biggest difference though, is not so much a difference of values or content, but rather of practice. The cell church seeks to allow the values decisively to shape its structure.

In chapter four we have met the reality of the Associação Missionária Evangélica. I described the process of transition this church has been through, the steps taken by the church so far, and where the church stands today.

Finally, in chapter five we have been presented to the main areas of difficulty experienced by the members of the AME. Four main areas stood out, these were: the presence of old paradigms inherited from the traditional church, the inherited church practice, the new level of commitment required by the cell church and the traditionalism.

Each one of these four areas influences the members in transition in a different way. The traditional paradigms make difficult for the members to understand church as something

different from a place, an event or a program. The concept of church as something we are in our day to day life is easily forgotten. The understanding that each member is a minister of God also enters in conflict with the traditional paradigm that the pastor is the only who ministers.

The inherited church practice hardens the practice of the cell church in the daily life of the members. Even when members finally accept the paradigms brought by the cell system, they find it difficult to integrate them in their daily practice because they haven't done anything like it before and because they had no models to follow in real life situations.

The new level of commitment demanded by the cell church is also strange to some. Members are expected to participate assiduously of the cell meetings and in the services, but even more than that, they are expected to be missionaries, disciple makers and good leaders. The church, therefore is not an activity on Sundays, but is something that encompasses all one's life.

Tradionalism has made the transition especially difficult at AME. The eagerness of some members to preserve forms and traditions at any cost was strong enough to split a community that was reshaping itself to be more people and relationship oriented.

After analyzing the areas of difficulty described above, I have suggested three principles that may help churches in their transition to a cell church, these are: the authority of the Bible, the promotion of practice, and teaching by example. Even though this thesis is mainly focused on the cell church, I believe such principles may be applied by any church seeking to be more effective in the mission of making disciples.

The criticism on the traditional church presented in this thesis is not a mere matter of taste. The question is that, while the traditional church in the West may have had its golden years, when some nations were shaped according to Christian values and the state was a helper of the church, it is nowadays offering little help in the task of evangelizing the post-Christendom generation, and offering little resistance to the gigantic influence that secularism is exerting upon the Christian families. The modern cell church comes as a response to this crisis seeking to rescue the features that have made the church so effective in its mission in different ages.

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APPENDIX

The Experience of the Members of the AME with the Transition

Below I present the feedback given by members of the AME regarding the transition going on in this church. This data was collected through the interviews I have conducted during my fieldwork in Brazil. For these interviews, I have sought to select persons that could represent the different kinds of members found in that church. By doing that I was able to identify what are the difficulties experienced by the members and which members face more problems with the transition.

Interview 1

The first interviewee is between fifty and sixty years old and was born in a Lutheran family. He used to attend the Sunday services at the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado regularly since his childhood. He continued as a member of that church until the schism that has originated AME. According to him, the members coming from the Lutheran tradition experience more difficulties with the transition than the new-comers and those coming from a non-religious or non-Christian background. He has stated that these difficulties would be mainly due to the lack of practice of the traditional members with evangelization and discipleship, a task that is brought to evidence in the cell church. Besides, this interviewee has reported that one of the cells in which he has participated in has experienced difficulties in promoting life sharing because some members have failed to keep secrecy. Another situation he has observed is that the men were less committed with discipleship than the women.

Interview 2

The second interviewee is between fifty and sixty years old and was also born in a Lutheran family. However, he says that for several reasons he was never totally satisfied with his church, which is located in a city nearby Lajeado. Even in his Bible-study group he always felt that the group should be something more than just a regular meeting with the same participants. He would like to see the group reaching out for more people and growing. However he wasn't able to think of a structure that would enable the group to do this. When he and some other people were elected as the board of that church they began to work more intensively towards a transformation. However, this board was dismissed after two years of

work with the intervention of the church's regional instances. Since then he felt he had no place in that church anymore and end up, together with some other members, joining the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, and then the AME in which he is currently a leader.

For him, the cell church was exactly the kind of organization he was looking for. He says he hasn't had difficulties with the transition. He acknowledges though, that the old paradigms inherited from the traditional church are very strong and hard to change. According to him, AME faced two main difficulties in its transition into a cell church: the first was changing the mentality of a traditional church to that of a new born church; the second difficulty was dealing with the inherited paradigms of the past. The interviewee states that this is noticed in the cell groups in which people are happy to have meetings at their homes but still don't have the mentality of a cell-church. He says that even after two years of work as AME people had not developed a mentality for discipleship yet. The interviewee recognizes that the transition was even harder within the traditional church context, in which, according to him, people are much more concerned with traditions and customs than with the real life in Jesus. Another issue mentioned by the interviewee, particular to one of the cells he supervises, is that there are still some people who have not decided for a church.

Interview 3

The third interviewee is between seventy and eighty years old. He was born in Lutheran family. He was an active participant of the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado, and one of the founding members of the youth group of that community. He is a member at AME since its foundation. For him, the cell church is the apex of a process of change that has been in progress for many years. The interviewee points out that the practice of the "priesthood of all believers", the personal responsibility to evangelize, the emphasis on relationships, the stimulus to live church not only on Sundays and the transformation of members into disciples as some of the distinctive features of the cell church. He says the transition has challenged the conventional assumption that the pastor is the only one responsible for the work of preaching, counselling and missions. However, he acknowledges it is very hard to break with old customs. The connection with the old church still is strong. The interviewee recognizes that the task of evangelization as a personal task still is a challenge to be won, but that the church is moving forward.

Interview 4

This interviewee is between thirty and forty years old. She was raised in a Catholic family and attended the masses regularly until adolescence. However, the church was not meaningful to her, what led her to quit attending the masses. Even when her husband started to attend the Lutheran church, she remained resistant to the idea of participating in the church due to the conceptions she has developed about the church when she was younger. Only later, by the occasion of the foundation of the AME, she joined the church and a cell group.

Regarding the cell groups, she was suspicious in the beginning. She says she had difficulties to understand the meaning behind it. In her view each one has a personal spirituality, and that doesn't require meeting with a group. Only after attending some services and having met more people in the church she felt more comfortable with the idea.

She says that now she has found her place in the church. According to the interviewee, this new church experience has led her both to receive help and to be a helper: a 'giving-receiving' dynamic. She says that the practice of what is learned in the church is what makes this church experience different from what she had before.

Interview 5

This couple is between eighty and ninety years old. Both were raised in families where at least one of the parents was Lutheran. Since they got married they have participated in the Lutheran church. Approximately 28 years ago they answered to a public appeal to accept Jesus as Saviour in a revival meeting. They say they have faced opposition from members who were not related to this revival movement, but that the pastor in exercise at the time supported them. The couple was very active in the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado; they have founded three points of preaching in different neighbourhoods in the city. They were part of the first generation of cell leaders in the IECLB church and continue as cell leaders at AME.

For them, the transition sounded like a continuation. According to them, the transition has not caused many changes in their personal lives, because they were living a life with God already. They felt they have continued to live the revived community that they had. These interviewees have not considered the transition as a hard process, because they had the pastor guiding them very well. According to the interviewees, what the church should avoid is to become a traditional church again.

Interview 6

This interviewee is between fifty and sixty years old. He is a former member of another Lutheran denomination, in which he was not an active participant. He has tried to join different churches, but he hasn't felt welcomed in these churches. The interviewee was brought to AME by another member. By the time of this interview the interviewee was completing one year of participation at AME.

Regarding the transition and the cells, he hasn't had any resistances. From the very beginning he found it very positive. According to the interviewee, he considered the cell group as being his church; something of which he likes to participate.

This interviewee says he is ready to become a cell leader. He is also involved in the task of evangelizing the people he meets always when it is possible.

Interview 7

This couple is between twenty five to thirty five years old. She was a non practicing Catholic. When she was on the university she joined a Baptist church. He was also Catholic but he was never an active participant in the church. He was brought to the Baptist church by his wife. When they moved from their hometown to Lajeado, they have not adapted in the Baptist church. They got involved with the Lutheran church in Lajeado through the Alpha course. The interviewees joined AME since its foundation.

The interviewees say that in the beginning they didn't understand the purpose of the cell-group although they liked to attend the meetings. After having participated in a cell group for a while they came to understand it as being more than a social meeting. According to them, the cell is an environment for a fellowship based on Christ.

They have started to understand the cell-group better when they became cell co-leaders. Through the supervision meeting they had more opportunity to grasp the vision. According to the interviewees, the reading of training books was important; the discipleship books presented the cell-group as normal part of the church life.

The interviewees mention that the cell faces the risk of becoming a mere social meeting. They say they have noticed this tendency. Two problems are mentioned by the interviews regarding the experience with cells so far. One is the problem of side conversations that divert the focus the concentration of the group. Another problem mentioned in this interview is the lack of time people have to be involved with discipleship.

This couple states that the AME should avoid becoming a church of mere religious people. According to them, the way the pastor is leading the church helps the church to avoid

“tradionalism”.

Interview 8

This interviewee is between twenty and thirty years old. She has participated in the Lutheran church since he was a child. She decided to follow Jesus in a revival meeting approximately fifteen years ago. She was an active participant in the youth group. She and her parents are members of AME since its foundation. The interviewee says that the cell church sounded as something natural to her; she liked the idea. However, she says that in all the cell groups she has participated she has not experienced something different from a Bible study. According to her, she has not seen life-transformation and evangelization happening so far.

This interviewee says she disliked the methods of leadership training, which were mainly based on reading, what is something she doesn't like. She also thinks there were too many training courses. According to her, they were too repetitive. Even so, she says that she understands it is hard for people to grasp the new idea. The interviewee also disagrees with what she understands to be some rules at AME concerning assiduity and conditions to bring new people to the cells.

She mentioned that some members are having difficulties to understand the role of the of the cell group's leader. According to her, they still focus too much in the pastor. She points out that members still prefer the pastor of the church to the cell leader.

One of the problems often mentioned during this interview is the lack of discipleship. According to her, the cell members say they lack time to meet with other people to follow a discipleship track.

Interview 9

This interviewee is between twenty-five and thirty-five years old. He was raised in a Lutheran family, but he has never returned to the church after the confirmation. He was brought to AME by his wife, who got to know the church through another member. By the time this interview was conducted, the interviewee was participating at AME for approximately one year.

The interviewee says he had no resistance against the cell church. He has never heard about cell church until he joined AME. According to him, he has found fellowship and company at AME. The interviewee says he and his wife are not participating at AME in order to receive something back; rather they are trying to live out what they learn. He describes the church as a new family to him; the older members are examples to be followed.

Interview 10

This interviewee is between fifty and sixty years old. He was raised in a Catholic family that used to attend the masses every now and then, but especially in the Christian feasts. However, he and his wife decided to join the Lutheran church where the Bible had prominence. He is currently member of the AME.

According to him, there is a great difference between the cultural religion found in Lajeado and the life he has experienced in a cell church. In his opinion the conventional church is focused on the services, traditions and culture. The cell-church, at the other hand, is synonymous of commitment with God and deep relationship with Jesus.

Regarding the transition, the interviewee has said that each cell member experienced this process in a different way. According to him, the way one sees and experiences the cell church depends much on one's background. He says he is just beginning to walk in his faith, but his cell group also has people that have a lot experience with God and even others that are newcomers; each one has a different experience.

Interview 11

This interviewee is between twenty five and thirty five years old. She was raised in a Catholic family. In her teens she became involved with Kardecist Spiritism. Later on, she joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lajeado through the Alpha course. She became a cell leader in the Lutheran church in the last years before the split.

The interviewee says it has taken sometime until she was able to understand her role as a member of the church. In the transition, she experienced difficulties with the high level of commitment required. According to her, it was hard to find space in the agenda where the cell meeting could fit.

One of the difficulties she faced as a cell leader was delegating tasks for the other cell members. With time she managed to it.

The interviewee says she feels that the newcomers from her cell, which have come from a Catholic context, had more difficulties to understand the cell church than those members with Protestant background.

Interview 12

This interviewee is between forty and fifty years old. She was raised in a Lutheran family. According to her, the participation in the monthly services of the Lutheran church was part of

the local culture of the place she was raised. She and her husband started to participate at the IECLB since they got married. They got really involved as volunteers at the Lutheran church in Lajeado in the last years before the split. They became cell leaders already in the IECLB Lajeado, and for some time they continued as cell leaders at AME.

The interviewee said she and her husband felt they were not well prepared to be cell leaders. Only after some frustrating experiences, they had the chance to experience a cell group that was functioning properly and have learned many principles of the cell church. Based on this experience, she emphasized several times during the interview that the cell leaders have to have a good preparation. She has also emphasized that the multiplication of a cell group has to be a well thought and well planned process.

According to her, AME faces difficulties with the transition due to the presence of religious people that are not ready to experience the cell church. She says that people still too dependent on the pastor due to the inherited paradigms of the traditional church practice. In her opinion, it is much easier to work with newcomers than with people from traditional backgrounds. She states that some members coming from a more traditional are still linked with institutional things and worried about having a place in the cemetery, and so forth.

Interview 13

This interviewee is between forty and fifty years old. He is a former member of the IECLB. He was used to attend the services approximately once a month. His family used to attend the services mainly in the Christian feasts. He became more active in the Lutheran church a few years before the split. He participates at AME since its foundation.

The interviewee recognizes he was a little resistant to the idea of participating in an extra-meeting once a week. According to him, in the IECLB to attend a service once a month was more than enough. The interviewee says that the cell church is a new culture we have to learn. The world goes to the opposite direction.

The interviewee says that currently he feels very happy to be part of a cell-group. According to this interviewee the cell is a meeting in which we study the Bible, worship with songs and help each other. The interviewee states that he feels very welcomed in his cell group.

Interview 14

This couple is between forty and fifty years old. She was born in a Lutheran family and he was born in a Catholic family. When they got married they decided to become members in

the Lutheran church. When they moved from their hometown to Lajeado they joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lajeado. The couple participated in one of the editions of the Alpha Course promoted by the church. After the Alpha course they have joined a Bible study group that later on was reconfigured as a cell group.

The interviewees describe the transition as a process of acquiring knowledge and then practicing what they have learned. According to them, it was when they decided to follow Jesus that things started to make more sense. They understand the life in a cell-group demands one to be different; there are rules to be followed. For the interviewees the cell church complements their daily spiritual feeding and gives them the chance to have fellowship with brothers in faith. The conventional church at the other hand is nothing but a religious institution providing religious products.

The interviewees argue that the cell church will be successful depending on the proper functioning of each of its cell groups and that these, in turn, depend on each of its members. The interviewees recognize they have much to improve, but they are willing to learn and change.

Interview 15

This interviewee is between fifty and sixty years. She was born in a Lutheran family. She says she has always had faith in God, but she got more involved with the church after answering an evangelistic appeal in an evangelistic event. She was a member of Evangelical Lutheran Community of Lajeado; currently, she is a cell leader at AME.

She says, she observes that there is a lot of tradition that still being carried and that we should put aside. She acknowledges that it is difficult to changer people's mindsets, but states that this happens with time.

The interviewee reports that her cell group has accepted new-converts and participants of other churches without having introduced the basics of the Christian faith. According to her, these new participants of the cell group she is leading will need more time until their paradigms and actions are changed.

The interviewee mentions that the general priesthood (as a participation in the tasks of the church) is still not clear for the members. She doesn't exactly the reason. The interviewee points out that maybe this is caused by the traditions inherited. She believes it is easier for the member coming to the church without having other religious experiences to change their church practice.

Interview 16

This interviewee is between twenty and thirty years old. He was raised in a Lutheran family. He attended the services occasionally together with his parents. His parents became very participative in the church. He was invited by his mother to join cell group she in which she was and he accepted the invitation.

This interviewee states that the cell church is leading a revolution on Earth. According to him, we are going to be more like Jesus visiting the houses and making disciples.

The lack of time is mentioned as a hindrance to the participation in the cell group meetings. The interviewee also mentions that be involved in a cell group is not an easy thing. According to him, there are things one should stop doing if one wants to follow this path. He says that one can't be part of a cell church without discipleship; the cell members must not be passive receivers, but they have to be committed to improve themselves and participate in the group.