

## The "Underground" Church

During the 1970s my wife, LaVerne, and I were involved in a youth ministry to the unchurched in northern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. One afternoon in 1978, I took a break from youth ministry duties in order to spend some extra time in prayer. I was startled when I heard the Lord speak to me through His still, small voice. "Are you willing to be involved in the underground church?", He asked. The words that I heard in my spirit were distinct, even piercing! Yet, at first I was baffled by what He was trying to tell me.

My mind raced immediately to the Berlin Wall, and the barbed wire fences that then surrounded the borders of many communist nations. I thought of the persecuted church meeting underground in nations that opposed the gospel. It still didn't make sense, yet I knew I had to respond: I had heard the call of God. "Yes, Lord," I replied as tears formed in my eyes. "I am willing." I chose to obey, even though I didn't understand what it all meant.

Soon after the Lord spoke to me about the underground church, I asked some of my Christian friends if they would be willing to meet with me each week for the purpose of enhancing our own spiritual growth. Two men responded. We began meeting every week for prayer, Bible study, encouragement and mutual accountability. Soon our living room was filled to capacity as this "cell group" grew and expanded. Eventually we multiplied into two groups as more people came to Christ and needed to be nurtured and taught the Word of God.

### New Wineskins For the New Wine

Although we tried to get them involved, the new believers simply didn't fit very well in the established churches in our community. It seemed clear that there was a need for new church structures to relate to converts from a variety of backgrounds. That's why Jesus said we needed to put new wine in new wineskins. "... Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:16-17).

So began our church's adventure into cell groups. We started a new church, DOVE Christian Fellowship, as a new wineskin for the new wine of new believers, in 1980. We met in a large living room on Sunday mornings, and in three small cell groups during the week. We discovered cell groups to be a place where people have the opportunity to experience and demonstrate Christianity built on relationships, not simply on meetings. In the cell groups, people could more readily share their lives with each other and reach out with the healing love of Jesus to a broken world.

### Home Cell Groups Are "Underground"

In time, I began to understand what the Lord had in mind when He asked me if I was willing to be involved in the underground church. An underground church can be compared to a tree: its trunk, branches and leaves are only half of the picture. The unnoticed half, the underground root system, nourishes the whole tree and keeps it healthy.

The underground church, I began to realize, was to consist of believers gathered together through a structure of small groups of believers meeting in homes to pray, evangelize and build relationships with one another. In this way, each believer is made an active and vital part of the body of Christ.

When every believer is nourished and healthy, the whole church is strong. As water and nutrients feed the tree by climbing up through the root system, so the church is nourished and strengthened by what happens in the “underground” (unseen) realm of church life-believers involved in home groups. These small home group relationships are not to be mere appendages of the church; in actuality, they are the church. We have found meeting together in homes and experiencing relationships in cell group life was just as important as meeting together each week in a larger gathering to worship and receive teaching from the Word of God.

Cell Groups Give Everyone An Opportunity to Get Involved

Jesus ministered to the multitudes, but He spent most of His time with twelve men, His disciples. Cell groups give everyone an opportunity to get involved, a place where each person can begin using his or her spiritual gifts. The cell group is the place where he can receive training, instruction and encouragement as he reaches out to his friends and neighbors with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our small fledging cell church of about 25 people began to grow. We met in three small cells during the week. We soon outgrew the living room for our Sunday morning celebration and began to meet in barns, school gymnasiums, anywhere where we could find a place large enough to fit these believers. We met in cell groups during the week, in various celebration locations on weekends, and then on a regular basis, usually monthly or bimonthly, we rented the largest high school auditorium or local park we could find to celebrate Jesus together on a Sunday morning. It was exciting. By 1990, purely by the grace of God, we had grown to more than 2300 believers meeting in cell groups throughout rural south-central Pennsylvania. It was an amazing thing that God had done among us.

We discovered that Christianity is not just sitting in a pew each Sunday morning, looking at the back of someone’s head. Christianity is knowing Jesus intimately, reaching out to the lost and making disciples. This must be the motivation of our hearts in order to fulfill effectively the Lord’s purposes for us as believers in Jesus Christ. And our homes are ideal tools for fulfilling the purposes of God.

Preparing Future Leaders  
A Priority

The church of today should take a lesson from the early church. Often with only minimal success, we cling to traditional church structures that involve trying to reach people for Christ with extravagant church programs and high-tech methodology. Though such methods may have their place, they can never substitute for personal relationships formed in the context of genuine Christian community.

When David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church from Seoul, Korea, was at our church for a pastors' conference, I talked to him about the need to release local leadership in a small group setting. I will never forget his response. "Many pastors are threatened," he said. "They are afraid to release their people."

Moses gave Pharaoh the mandate of the Lord: "Let my people go!" I believe that the Lord is setting every believer free to be an able minister of the new covenant. May every spiritual leader maintain his security in the Lord and take the risk to release the people of God to minister to others.

My prayer for those I am responsible to disciple and train is that they may be used of God in a much greater way than I have been used. Jesus told His disciples that those who believe in Him would do the works He does and even greater works (John 14:12). And John the Baptist, a type of New Testament Elijah, stated clearly, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). John's whole life was consumed with preparing the way for Jesus. The Lord has called us as home group leaders, pastors and Christian leaders to do the same - to see Jesus and others increase as we decrease. This must be our motivation. We are preparing servant leaders for the next generation.

A few years ago, in 1996, I turned over the leadership and ministry of our church to eight pastors, twenty-one elders, and a whole host of cell leaders as our church decentralized and became eight cell-based churches. Our new pastoral leaders were disciplined at the grassroots level, in our cell groups. I now am able to focus my attention on training Christian leaders and being a spiritual father to church leaders and church planters. During the past five years, as new churches continue to be planted, the Lord, by His grace, has enabled our family of churches to grow to 80 cell-based churches located in five continents of the world.

### The Need for New Wineskins Once Again

A few months ago, I turned 50. It has been twenty-three years since the Lord spoke to me about the "underground church." During the past few years, I have watched and listened to the next generation, Generation X, those 18-35 years of age. I love to talk to these young men and women from all over America and the world as I travel and teach week after week. Many are feeling what I felt more than 20 years ago. They want a new wineskin, a new type of church that meets the needs of their generation. We have come to the conclusion that it is again

time for a new model of church in America that will be built mostly by the next generation. Many of those from my generation are being called by God to be the spiritual fathers and mothers who encourage and support this next generation as they experience church in a way that is different from what we have experienced.

Generation Xer's are looking for a church experience that focuses on (1) relationships, (2) authenticity, (3) the freedom to be creative, and (4) intergenerational connection. They want spiritual fathers and mothers. Thousands of their generation are convinced that they can experience Christ best in the new wineskin of a "house church" that is not an island to itself. These new churches can meet in a variety of places including homes, places of business, school classrooms, skate parks, shopping malls, anywhere that people meet. They seem to understand that each "house church" must be committed to network together with other house churches in their city or region to keep them from pride, exclusiveness, and heresy.

### House Churches As True Churches

Generation Xer's tell me they believe these new house churches in their area will meet together once every month or so for corporate worship and teaching. But this monthly celebration is not the church. The house churches are true churches, not just Bible studies or cell groups. They have elders, they collect tithes and offerings, and the leadership is responsible before the Lord for the souls of the people in the house church (Hebrews 13:17). Additionally, these young leaders are intent on the rapid reproduction of these house churches. These new churches remind me of a shopping mall. Most of the little specialized stores in a shopping mall would go out of business within a year if they were left on their own and not linked to the other stores in their mall. But together, they prosper. House churches that learn to network together in a practical way in their city will experience great blessing from the Lord. Those who do not will have a tendency to become ingrown, stagnant, stop evangelizing, and become critical of the rest of the church. We must love our Lord's bride, the church. She is far from perfect, but He loves her and so must we.

I believe in cell ministry in the local church more than ever. But right alongside cell churches and other types of churches, the Lord will raise up house churches as vessels for His harvest. Many of these house churches will have small cells for training new leaders and to give every believer the opportunity to minister. Only instead of constructing a church building, when the house or place where they are meeting in is outgrown, a new house church is planted. Sounds a bit like the book of Acts, doesn't it?

### House Church Networks-A Wave of the Future

Thirty years ago, home schooling was almost unheard of in America. But today, it is commonplace. All across America, I meet parents who are very comfortable

with some of their children being home-schooled, some being educated in a public school, while others are learning in a Christian school. These three types of educational training exist together in nearly every community in America. There is no competition. All three options are legitimate. Ten years from now, I believe thousands of house churches will have emerged all across America in our cities and regions. They will network with one another, but they will also serve together with the hundreds of community churches of many flavors and varieties. And both house churches networking together and those who meet in church buildings every Sunday will serve alongside the mega-churches, the spiritual Wal-Mart Superstores of our communities. And guess what? God will bless all three - the house church, the community church, and the mega-church! He is raising up His church in every region. Some will worship Him as a part of a mega-church, others as a part of a smaller church in their community, while others will be involved in house churches networking together.

I have two concerns as house church movements emerge among us: pride and persecution. As thousands of new house churches spring up in communities all over our nation, there may be a tendency for those involved to be filled with pride, feeling they are on the “cutting edge” while those not in house churches are “missing it.” This must be guarded against. Pride always comes before a fall. God is much more concerned about the attitude of our hearts than our church structure.

Secondly, historically nearly every former move of God has persecuted the next move of God. May the church of our generation resist the temptation to criticize the next generation as they pursue the new wine of the Holy Spirit and the new wineskins they discern are needed to experience New Testament Christianity!

Larry Kreider serves as International Director of DOVE Christian Fellowship International, a worldwide network of cell-based churches. Larry has written several books, including *House to House*, and *The Cry For Spiritual Fathers & Mothers*. He and his wife, LaVerne, have four children, two grandchildren, and live in Lititz, Pennsylvania.