JOHN WESLEY – CELL GROUP PIONEER

Lin Ball

Small group … home group… cell … when would you say the concept was invented?

Many people would guess that they are a fairly modern development in church life. Others might claim that because the first Christian followers met in homes, that small groups must date back to soon after the death of Christ.

But if you’ve ever read the letters and diaries of John and Charles Wesley, you’ll quickly realise that small groups owe much to these pioneering travelling evangelist brothers. They were setting up, developing and using small groups strategically to grow the faith nearly 300 years ago!

In fact, many historians claim that the secret of the Methodist movement founded by the Wesleys was its small groups. The groups were made necessary by the rapid growth, or rather explosion, of those attending John Wesley’s ‘Society’ meetings.

What’s perhaps less well known is that the Wesleys established several different kinds of small groups. This was because of John Wesley’s conviction that conversion was more of a process than an event. This was in line with his personal experience. It was following more than a decade of searching that he dated his ‘awakening’ to the evening of May 24, 1738, when he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’ and realised that he trusted ‘in Christ alone for salvation’.

So how did his different kinds of small groups operate?

There was, to begin with, the ‘trial band’, which was for those sincerely seeking to know God – definitely not for the merely curious. The idea was that the group members were ‘on trial’ to see if they were serious about understanding the faith. If you missed more than three meetings in a quarter, you were out! The group was given guidance and instruction in Christian doctrine.

From the ‘trial band’ you could progress to the ‘class meeting’ which was a group of four to six believers meeting weekly with a leader for prayer and worship. The ‘class meeting’ bears most resemblance to small groups as we know them today. They were based on the idea that grace came before belief. The meetings were aimed at the members experiencing the grace that brings about faith, and that process was expected to take about two years. During that period the members would be experiencing what Tom Albin, an American who researched the Wesleyan groups for his doctorate at Cambridge University, calls ‘small group spiritual direction’. There were opportunities to pray, to sing, to get advice, and to bring up questions.

An important element of the ‘class meeting’ was accountability – accountability at the kind of strict level most of us would find quite uncomfortable today.

December 9, 1741, at Bristol: God humbled us in the evening by the loss of more than thirty of our little company, who I was obliged to exclude, as no longer adorning the gospel of Christ. I believed it best openly to declare both their names and the reasons why they were excluded. We then all cried unto God that this might be for their edification, and not for destruction.

(From Wesley’s Journal)

When an individual had experienced grace, he was ready for the ‘band meeting’. This was a group for true believers – and a rather larger one since it was generally between 12 and 36 people – where the central issues were growth and discipleship. Much was also made of confessing faults to one another (James 5:16) and a high level of confidentiality was required. A distinctive of these ‘band meetings’ was that people were separated by sex and also by marital status.
Questions of biblical lifestyle for the single man or the married woman, for example, were carefully considered at the meeting. Gathering with those of the same marital status was understood to ensure maximum help and opportunity to share.

After this, Christians could progress to the final group, a destination of spiritual maturity – the 'select band'. Interestingly, this group was not same sex or same marital status. The emphasis here was on 'sanctifying grace' – by which members sought to experience Romans 5:5: 'For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.'

There might be many points on which we might argue with this strict system today – and in fact history shows us that the structure hardly continued beyond the lifetime of the Wesleys. But it is challenging to wonder how many of our congregations today would be ready or willing for the levels of commitment and accountability required. After completing his research Tom Albin felt that today's church would benefit from more voluntary accountability. And he felt a concern for the many true seekers in our society and wondered what the church was doing to provide the safe small group environment where conversion and discipleship might be seriously nurtured.

Is your small group such a place? If you want to know more:

www.christianitytoday.com gives the full text of an interview with Tom Albin, a Catholic who is currently Dean of the Upper Room Chapel in the US.

There's also an article on his own experiences of small groups at www.gbod.org/smallgroup/covenant/fall02/formation.html

There's a great deal on the web about the Wesleys. An article called 'John Wesley and House Church' at www.parousianetwork.com is worth looking at for a manageable summary.

And I can recommend a relatively new and accessible edition of a selection from Wesley's writings abridged by Christopher Idle and published by Lion in 2003, called simply: THE JOURNAL OF JOHN WESLEY.