

Topic: Growing Stronger by Growing Smaller (Pr Wendy Chiang-Cheong)

Text: Acts 17:1-15

Big Idea: Being in a small group community is God's idea to grow us. But a healthy community is not a given. Acts 17:1-15 takes us through two communities with contrasting responses to the reception of God's Word. Which is characteristics of your cell group?

Introduction

There is always room in our lives to be transformed by Christ. But first, we must be willing to be changed. Changes could be welcomed by some but rejected by others. We read so, from the missionary journeys of Silas and Paul. In summary, the same activity of proclaiming and proving the Gospel of Jesus Christ solicited two reactions:

Thessalonians	Bereans
1. Greatly disturbed by the message	1. Composed and rational
2. Organised mob of protest	2. Listened to message with eagerness
3. Set the city on uproar	3. Examined message with Scripture for alignment
4. Rejected the message and set out to arrest the messengers	4. Believed the message and were converted

This means:

Thessalonians	Bereans
1. Listened only casually with the ears	1. Listened attentively with their ears and hearts
2. Argumentative and critical because of personal and political bias. No need to listen more. No need for further dialogue.	2. Receptive. Did not go into panic mode. There is always room for dialogue, for discovery.
3. Emotionally charged, but unmoved by Scripture. A few loud people influenced the city.	3. Rational and restrained. Practice group discernment. Messenger's interpretation will always be subjected to Scripture's revelation. Yield to God when both align.

[Answer this: what good qualities do you see in the Thessalonians? In what ways were the Bereans noble? What happened to those who studied the Word? Which group would your small group associate with? Why?]

Big Idea

The big idea is this: From the response of the Bereans, we see that it is essential to receive God's Word with humble receptivity and proactive engagement. Luke the author highlights the contrast to lead us into the story and think about our response.

From The Word To Our World

Everyone worships something. If not Jesus Christ, then perhaps man-made philosophies, new age spirituality and alternate realities. Why? Because humans are religious by our nature. We are made for God and created for worship. If God is not in our lives, something else will occupy the void.

At Aldersgate, we desire King Jesus and the Kingdom of God. We want to encounter the King and be engaged in His Kingship. We are not here to play church. We desire to be responsive like the Bereans.

It is not enough to be concerned with personal conversion and bible knowledge download, good as these are. Beyond conversion, we should be serious about discipleship and transformation in our faith community . To be changed by Jesus and to grow deeper is not a solo journey. We must build a culture for community.

Community is God's Idea

Community is God's idea. It is the relationship of the Godhead, seen in the oneness of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17, John 10:30, 1 John 5:7-8). The Godhead is an image of community. Made in His image, we are called to mirror Him.

The New Testament churches mirrored this. They meet in homes as a people of God. By necessity, they were small and interactive. But modern churches are big in membership. People get lost in big groups. One pathway to help people get into community is through small groups.

Benefits of a Christian Community

The Christian tradition affirms several truths. It is in a community of people that the Holy Spirit works and Jesus is revealed. God uses community:

- to help us become clearer of who we are and what we believe in
- to shape our values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are often individualistic
- to transmit the Christian faith (you may share Christ alone but the new believer needs a community sooner or later to discover what genuine faith is)
- to help us practice theology (ie from pulpit to conversation and action)

Surely 1.5 hour of church weekly does not make community. There is a place for spiritual growth that changes us individually and as a whole. There is something powerfully unique about an intimate gathering around a living room, a dining table or a small classroom that forces us to think differently than when we are in this sanctuary or the PAS.

Our History

- We launched Pastoral Care Groups (PCG) in 2004
- PCGs strengthened groups in worship and word. But were weak in works and witness.
- Subsequently, groups struggled. PCGLs articulated that we are losing momentum in purpose, training, group involvement, missional focus and churchwide alignment.
- Caring is not the “be all and end all” of small groups.
- This year, small group leaders met 4 times to calibrate what we are all about and to articulate the reason for our existence.

Pastoral Care Group Ministry Renamed As Cell Group Ministry

The Bible tells us that the church is the Body of Christ. Every member is connected to the Head, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:27). As the physical body is made up of systems, organs, tissues and cells, we now call our small groups “cell groups” to articulate that each group is part of a larger whole, part of each other (Eph 4:16). We are connected to the Head and we are connected to one another. We listen, discern, move and act together as a whole. We do not just do our own things in small groups.

I have seen a dichotomy between what was preached on Sunday and what was discussed in small groups. When the pulpit does not invite discussion, the pulpit becomes a monologue with the congregation. When the pulpit does not rally people into small groups for discussion, we weaken accountability and action. The pulpit loses its power and the Word is not allowed its maximum influence to transform lives.

Now every group receives and examines the same sermon text. From youths to elderly, from male to female, from english congregation to the chinese congregation, from a young believer to a mature multiplier. Discern its interpretation with the Word of God. Talk about the integrity of your faith based on sermon text. Dialogue in safe spaces any discrepancies between your beliefs and behavior from the sermon. Practice the sermon together. Collaborate with other cell groups to be better, fitter and stronger together.

Think of the word “care group” and our own needs might become priority. Think of the word “cell”, and we would think beyond our needs. We think of our allegiance to the Head, our Lord Jesus Christ who meet our needs and send us out to serve the needs of the world.

“Cell” groups, is first and foremost:

- NOT an organisational theory
- NOT a church growth model
- NOT a practical solution to get things done around AMC
- But a valid and visual reminder to members: that parts are connected to the supreme HEAD

God’s idea is for us to move **FROM ROWS TO CIRCLES**. Get into circles so that we enter into mutual relationship to participate, relate and contribute towards the faith community.

So, What Makes A Healthy Cell Group

[Answer this: in the following 5 areas, where has your group done well in. What needs to be improved]

1. Purposes to grow deep in Christ and in faith together

- It is an intentional journey
- Block out time, examine sermon with Scripture, prepare homework, come ready to contribute, willing to share life together.
- Sees the group as God’s training ground to skill them in Word; and a support group to school them in character.

2. Prioritizes its relationship with one another.

- Involves a covenant commitment to one another, ie. even if one is unable to turn up, I will be there for the others.
- Being in community means having regular contact apart from meetings.
- Community cannot exist without relational depth.
- To build relational depth, what about a 1-3-1 rhythm:
 - 1 social activity
 - 3 discussion activities
 - 1 service activity

3. Participates in group life actively

- Know the necessity of division of labor
- Cell leader cannot be all and do all; too exhausting
- Everyone uses a spiritual gift or a natural talent to serve the group

4. Prepares to divide and multiply in due time.

- Healthy family raises children who grow up to raise their own. They come back and visit, and eventually the parents might move in with the kids.
- Small groups should function in the same way: divide and multiply in due time.
- An authentic community requires us to stick together. But sticking together for too long can be detrimental:
 - Deny others from experiencing this authentic community
 - Since cell leader leads all the time, no one in the group is developed as leader and multiplier (2 Tim 2:2)
 - Members can get too comfortable and hide behind group size
 - Forget the importance of welcoming and loving new people
 - Lose the opportunity to hear fresh perspectives on God's Word from new people
- All healthy things grow. Divide and multiple does not kill relationships and community.
- There are a lot of different ways to multiply a group:
 - Divide a large group into 2 smaller groups in same space
 - Invite potential cell leaders to understudy your group and send them off with 50% of your members to start new group
 - View offshoots as "subsidiaries", have reunions.

5. Proceeds to live out the Gospel.

- A holistic cell group should NOT be solely a bible study group. Neither should it be a social club.
- Cell groups should be a place to examine God's Word and discuss practical application.
- Cell members gather regularly to share the presence, power and purpose of Christ in their lives.

There is always room in our lives to be transformed by Christ. And one of the pathways that God has provided for transformation to happen is through small group community. It's time to move from rows to circles.