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WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE CHILDREN IN A CELL CHURCH?

By Holly Allen

“Dad, aren’t you glad we went to our cell group tonight? We got blessed! I *like* getting blessings over me!”

These are the words of Brent, one of the spiritual “bricks” in our church. (Our spiritual bricks are those nine to thirteen-year-old boys who draw or make airplanes through church and ask every five minutes when it will be over.) Randall, the dad in this story, described to me what had happened that night in their cell meeting to prompt such a spiritual response from his son. When the children prepared to go to their cell group time, the men and women of the cell were about to divide for prayer. They decided to ask the older children to stay with them. Randall’s son, Brent, age ten, stayed with the men. After several men requested and received prayers, Randall asked for prayers for his relationship with Brent.

Randall told me that his relationship with Brent had never been what he had envisioned. Brent had been somewhat difficult to raise. And though Randall had spent both quality and quantity time with Brent over the years, he felt his efforts had yielded little fruit. Randall said he felt successful in much of what he had attempted in life, but that parenting was humbling him—even asking for prayer in this most important part of his life was humbling. He realized he could not be the kind of parent he wanted to be.

After several men prayed over Randall and Brent, the best moment of the evening came when Brent began to pray—for his dad and for their relationship. And on the way home, Brent expressed his delight with the evening of blessing. Randall’s heart was full.

What happens in a cell church to create opportunities for children to grow spiritually? How is the children’s ministry in a cell church different from one in a traditional church? What is an intergenerational cell? What is a children’s cell? Who leads the children’s cells? What about curriculum? What about babies? What about teens? In addressing these questions in this article, I will speak from my experiences with Abilene Mission Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas. Abilene Mission Church has been meeting as a cell church since September of 1993. We have learned about cell churches through the pioneering work of Howard Snyder, Ralph Neighbor, and Bill Beckham. We have learned about children in cell-based churches from Dr. Lorna Jenkins, who wrote her dissertation on children’s ministry in the cell church and has worked with a large cell church in Singapore.

Philosophical Shift

Listening to Lorna Jenkins has inspired a profound re-orientation in my approach to teaching children. I have taught Sunday school for twenty-five years and have tended to view children as receptacles into which I pour knowledge about God and the Bible. Though I still view information about God and scripture as essential to growing children of faith, I am beginning to recognize the spiritual nature of our children and to understand that teachers must also create opportunities for children to encounter and experience God.

Most foundationally, I have come to see children as spiritual beings. God longs for their praise (Ps 8:2 and Matt 21:16), and he desires their attention and service (1

Sam 3:1–21). Indeed, God views them as full participants in his kingdom. Jesus did not say, “Children belong to the kingdom”; he said, “The kingdom belongs to the children” (Luke 18:15–17). They are not merely the church of tomorrow; they are the church of today. We adults may be older in earthly years, but our praise is no higher than our children’s praise to the Father. Our prayers are no more holy. Our ministry to others is no more blessed. In God’s eyes we are all children. We all have a father/child relationship with our Father in heaven.

This new understanding has prompted us to move away from the developmental approach to religious education that had caused us to view the spirituality of our children as a future possibility but not a present reality. We want our children to be children of faith now. Beyond that, we want our children to have an *empowered* faith. We want them to have more than a belief that God *is*; we want them to believe that he is active and alive and working in their lives, empowering them to live for him.

Growing out of this new understanding was the realization that our children will develop empowered faith when they have opportunities to see God at work today. Thus we began to seek ways to create these opportunities. In studying John Westerhoff’s spiritual formation ideas for building faith in children,⁰ we realized that our intergenerational cells, in combination with children’s cells, could be excellent vehicles for developing this empowered faith in our children. Let me explain how intergenerational and children’s cells have created opportunities for our children to experience God.

What is an intergenerational cell?

Ideally, an intergenerational cell consists of children, their parents, single adults, young married couples, and senior couples or singles. At Abilene Mission Church (AMC) our goal is that all of our cells be intergenerational. Because we have relatively few older members, many of our cells have no “grandparents.” But most of our cells have children, parents, and single and married young adults. A few cells have no children.

What happens when intergenerational cell groups meet? When our cells meet, the adults and children stay together for about half of the cell time. During this time the children participate with the parents in the icebreaker, worship, prayer, and the Lord’s supper. Then the children are dismissed for the children’s cell.

Icebreakers

The first thing that happens in a cell group is the icebreaker. A question is asked to which all (adults and children) respond. Recently, the icebreaker in one of our groups was, What are you afraid of? Some of the responses were:

- I will gain too much weight in my pregnancy
- I will die young like my dad did
- I won’t be able to finish my thesis
- I won’t pass fourth grade
- My cancer will return
- Ben won’t get his parole

Then it was Jeremy’s turn. He was a second grader. He put his head on his arm and began to cry, and he said in a small, jerking voice, “I’m afraid to go to sleep because I have nightmares.” One of the dads in the group came over to Jeremy and put his arm around his shoulders. He held him for a minute, then prayed with him and over him, that God would take away the nightmares. One of the older girls in the group went over to Jeremy and said, “You know, Jeremy, I used to have nightmares, but I prayed to God and he took them away.” This story illustrates the kind of intergenerational ministry which can and does happen even in the light-weight part of the evening, the icebreaker.

Worship

Following the icebreaker, the group usually enters into a period of praise. Sometimes a child chooses the songs; sometimes a child leads the songs. Sometimes a parent and his/her child will have chosen the songs together. The praise time may last a few minutes or a half an hour, depending upon such factors as the spirit of the group, response to the Sunday morning experiences, or the needs of the evening. Sometimes the praise time turns into a time of lament if some or many in the group are suffering difficult times.

Recently, in the stillness following our singing “Jesus, Lamb of God,” kindergartner Justin called out in his tiny, high voice, “Can we sing it one more time?” Of course we did, and we sang it with a new sweetness, knowing anew that Justin was absorbing this beautiful message. Another time, our twelve-year-old son (another of the spiritual “bricks”) asked if our group could sing Dennis Jernigan’s “When the Night is Falling.” Our family owns a copy of this song on tape, but I had never noticed that he paid any attention when we played it. I certainly didn’t know he knew the composer or the

name of the song. From that moment on, I began to see my son with different eyes. Perhaps some of our spiritual “bricks” are really dormant volcanoes with much happening beneath the surface, awaiting the time to erupt. Worshipping together in a close and intimate setting reveals our inner spiritual lives to our children and theirs to us.

Lord’s Supper

Our cells meet on Sunday evenings, and we have found that observing the Lord’s supper in small, close settings has brought new meaning and depth to what can become a rote ceremony, especially for children. The children in our church partake of the Lord’s supper with the adults. We have found no biblical prohibition of this practice. It offers opportunity for children to hear their parents and other adults they know talk about their feelings and thoughts as they take of the bread and the cup.

There are dozens of ways to observe communion, and each way illuminates a new facet of Christ’s death: the Passover, the crucifixion itself, the resurrection, the sacrifice, the atonement, the substitutionary lamb. Here is a partial list of the multiplicity of ways we have observed the Lord’s supper:

- Ask two fathers to read the passage in Genesis twenty-two where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Ask the father who read Abraham’s part to describe how Abraham must have felt, then ask the father who read God’s part to describe how God must have felt when he sacrificed his son.
- Ask three adults to recall a particularly meaningful communion service and tell why it affected them so much.
- Ask two adults to describe their baptism and the feelings of newness and purity they felt in Christ.
- Ask each person to say what moment of the crucifixion they think was most difficult for Jesus.
- Re-enact the last supper with Jesus and his apostles.

This way of partaking of the Lord’s supper elucidates the spiritual concepts surrounding it. The children begin to discern the many facets of the sacrifice of God and Christ. An added benefit is that it becomes more and more natural to discuss spiritual things with their families.

There is at least one other benefit of taking the Lord’s supper in a small group with children participating. In the three years that we have been with AMC, we

have been a part of four cells. We always go with the new cell when the old cell “births.” In all four cells, the children have wanted to serve the Lord’s supper. They take great delight in carrying the platter of bread to the adults and other children in the group. They also view with solemnity the task of toting the tray of juice-filled cups. Then they enjoy taking up the used paper cups. We have yet to experience a massive tray spill, though many individual juice spills have occurred. We have discovered the efficacy of white grape juice. The children are participating in the spiritual life of the Christians around them; they are being taught; they are actually serving.

Intergenerational cells are a blessing for the children, but when the adults begin their personal ministry time, extended prayer, and Biblical discussion, the children often get bored and restless. They need prayer, ministry, and Bible study on their own level. At this point the children leave the adults for their children’s cell.

What is a children’s cell?

The working definition for a children’s cell is “a small group of children bonded together around a leader for mutual care, prayer, questioning, and discussion. Living their Christian life together, they reach out to serve others and to win other children to follow Jesus.”¹

In actuality, children’s cells function much like adult cells. There is an initial icebreaker followed by a time of sharing God’s current work in the lives of those present. A time of confessing and praying for one another follows. After this, the adult facilitator leads an interactive retelling activity reviewing the morning’s story and enlarging upon its major theme. For example, the children may pass around a heavy rock while the teacher retells the story from Exodus chapter one. Following the retelling, a particular theme or concept is focused on (in this case, the courage of Shiphrah and Puah, Israelite midwives who feared God and disobeyed Pharaoh). The leader and children are then encouraged to share a time when they had an opportunity to observe or practice this concept (in this example, to stand for right). Following this, there is often a period of time for “listening” to God, a time for making scripture real and usable, and a time for asking for God’s empowerment in overcoming sin or for healing.

Who Leads the Children’s Cell?

Churches that have attempted various types of small group programs have found that dealing with children is one of the toughest problems. Some churches

basically leave it up to the parents to cope the best they can. If a teaching situation is set up, it is the parents who are responsible for leading it. On the other hand, some churches hire baby sitters who watch the children at the church building while the groups meet in homes child-free. In our cell groups, we call on all of the parents and “aunts” and “uncles” to take turns in caring for the children. Each week a different adult takes the children and works through the cell guide (see curriculum section) with them. Each cell has a children’s cell coordinator who keeps the signup sheet and is responsible for getting the children’s cell guide to the right person.

Probably the most significant thing that happens in the children’s cell group is that the various adults who take turns leading the children’s cell share the work God has been doing in their lives, confess areas of weakness, and pray for God’s guidance in their everyday existence. The children begin to see that God is working in the lives of all of the Christians around them, that the adults they know well seek God in all they do; in essence, the children are privy to the “normal Christian life” as lived by the adults in this church.

Curriculum

Since the inception of AMC, God has sent those who can write our curriculum. We coordinate our Sunday morning Bible lessons with our Sunday evening children’s cell materials. Once or twice a year, we do a churchwide study in which all the adults and children focus on the same texts and concepts. These series have included the studies of the names of God, the fruit of the Spirit, the book of Ephesians, and the Gospel of John.

The children are currently studying the life of Moses and the period of the Exodus. On Sunday mornings our hundred or so preschool and elementary age children are divided into tribes and camps as were the children of Israel. Each child and teacher has an Israelite name. On Sunday evenings we build on the Sunday morning content and concepts. For our Sunday evening cell time, we produce a weekly children’s cell guide which is mailed to our children’s cell coordinator. She/he gives it to the person responsible for teaching that week.

Babies

In our Sunday evening cell groups, babies and toddlers stay in the adult cell. Often, babies are held by various mothers, dads, singles, and “grandparents.” The toddlers toddle around during the cell time, usually occupying themselves. Sometimes they fall asleep. At about age three, the children begin going into the

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children’s cell groups. Sometimes two-year-olds go with the children’s cell, especially if an older brother or sister is also there.

Our cell group has one family with six children under twelve. The baby, Michaela, began coming into our children’s cell at about eighteen months. We often find a special role for her. Recently she was “baby Moses.” She participates in the art activities and sharing time. When prayer time comes, the adult leader prays over her, though just two weeks ago she said her own prayer. She often sits in the lap of one of her siblings or the leader during the story retelling.

We find that babies and toddlers pose more problems if there are several in one group. If cells are truly intergenerational, usually no more than two families with young children will be in a group. Of course, there are exceptions, and two of our twenty cells have an abundance of young children. A mother in one of these groups described how they addressed this difficulty:

We found ourselves with six two-year-olds. They were not content and were quite disruptive in our adult cell, yet they completely ruined the children’s cell. Therefore, we created a toddler class. We placed one adult with the six in another room, equipped with praise music and toys. While the adult supervised, she/he prayed for each child. During adult cell time, a sheet had been passed around on which we recorded special prayer needs of our toddlers. The requests ranged from potty-training difficulties to temper tantrums to future mates. This strategy has relieved the situation in a way that has blessed us all.

Teens

During our first year as a cell church, our middle and high schoolers met as one large teen cell at 4:00 on Sunday afternoons. The teens were then expected to go with their parents to the regular adult cell meeting at 5:30 or 6:00. We realized after some months that this was not a good plan. Some teens only attended the teen cell; some attended only the adult cell. A few attended both. This year we are attempting to integrate teen cells with our adult cells, much like our children’s cells.

Our first teen cell was formed within an adult cell that already had four teens among the families. Now, several teens from other groups attend this cell. The teens stay with the adult cell for about half of the evening, participating with the parents and children in the icebreaker, worship, prayer, and the Lord's supper. They then break into their own cell for sharing, prayer, discussion of the morning's lesson, and ministry time. We now have two teen cells functioning in this fashion. Each teen cell has a teen cell leader who is being trained by our youth ministers. Ideally, an adult also attends the teen cell.

The other teens in our church attend their parent's cell on Sunday evenings, though we are hoping to create at least two more teen cells. At this point our middle schoolers typically stay in the parent's cells. Some like to go with the children during the children's cell time; others stay with the adults. My own seventh grader, Daniel, goes with the children's cell and loves it. There is another seventh grader in our group who goes to a teen cell.

We have found that allowing teens and their parents these options has been spiritually beneficial for most of our teens. Some who desire more autonomy are in teen cells, yet with parents and other adults around. Some teens stay with their parents. They seem very comfortable with this and are blooming. I am most pleased with the options for our middle schoolers. There is wide spectrum of maturity and spirituality within this group, and now, those who still wish to identify with childhood can find a place, while those who identify with our older teens may join a teen cell. *Most importantly, parents and children are not separated perpetually from sixth grade on, which often happens in churches.*

Conclusion

As I have stated before, we want our children to have an empowered faith, which we believe is produced when they have opportunities to encounter and experience God. As a model for this, we look at the early life of the shepherd and warrior, David.

David exhibited an astonishing trust in the Lord when he offered to fight Goliath. In examining his earlier life, we find the source of his deep trust. David spent many quiet hours in communion with God as he

cared for his sheep. His beautiful shepherd psalms stand as testimony to the fact that he *knew* God, *feared* God, *worshipped* God. We also know that David had experienced God's deliverance on at least two occasions, when first a lion, then a bear had threatened his sheep. David calls on these experiences of God when he says, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear *will deliver me from the hand of the Philistine*" (1 Sam 17:37). Now *that* is empowered faith.

Children in Christian families will be fighting giants in their lifetimes. David's willingness to fight Goliath and his trust that God would deliver him grew from years spent coming to know God in quiet times of prayer and praise and from his *recognizing* God's hand of deliverance in times of conflict. As our children participate in the spiritual lives of the adults in the intergenerational cells, and as they pray for each other and listen to God in their own cells, they, like David, are coming to know God and are beginning to recognize God's powerful hand of deliverance in their own lives. We believe that God uses children in the work he is doing on this earth today. As our children come to know God and see that he is working in their lives, they will be ready when they face life's giants. And they will say with David, "The LORD who delivered me before will deliver me from the hand of this enemy."

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Notes

⁰ John Westerhoff's descriptions of the concept of "faith-enculturation" in his books *Generation to Generation* (1972) and *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (1976) sparked a reformation in approaches to teaching children in churches in the last two decades. He defined this concept as "a process consisting of lifelong intentional and unintentional, formal and informal

mechanisms through which persons and communities sustain and transmit their faith and lifestyles." This faith-enculturation concept generally came to be known as "Christian formation" or "spiritual formation."

¹ Lorna Jenkins, Speech, Conference on Children's Cell Ministry, August 2, 1994, in Virginia Beach, Virginia.