
CELL GROUPS

Otherwise Known as ICUs

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

CELL GROUPS AND OUR VISION

Our life with God is best lived out in the context of relationships with other people. We were not made to live solo in the kingdom of God. Aside from benefiting from the nurture and care provided by fellow believers in Jesus, we each have a great deal to offer to others of what the Lord has done in our lives. Bottom line, we need people.

Although we are accepted “*just as we are*,” and no one “*must*” mature as a prerequisite for eternity, God wants His children to learn more and more about who He is and all that He has made available to us. That growth and maturity is significantly accelerated through discipleship. Many congregations provide discipleship and care only from paid staff members or from a few key lay-leaders because they view discipleship as a highly specialized assignment. That greatly limits individuals from exercising their God-given ministries and gifts and it unnecessarily restricts the amount of “*one-another*” ministry available to the congregation.

Discipleship is not essentially an academic activity; nor is it something Jesus entrusts to just a few, *leading* believers in each congregation. It is the one “*job*” Jesus gives to each and every one of us. For the most part, it is unstructured and episodic—meaning it happens best, simply during the course of lives lived in relationship with one another. We disciple others mostly by passing along to them the truths, lessons and insights we have learned on our journey with the Lord. Too often, we end up fellowshipping only with the people we already know. ICUs counteract that tendency and bump us out of our “comfort zones” into places of more fulfilling activity. That is why we try to be fairly intentional about promoting more relationship and ministry between the individuals in our congregation by having *intra-congregational units* (ICUs) of people.

These groups of 6-12 people follow the pattern established by Jesus and His disciples, as well as by Moses when he divided up the nation of Israel to assure care for everyone and to keep himself and the people who were with him from wearing out (Exodus 18:15-26; Deuteronomy 1:9-18). Our

ICU/Cluster arrangement is not inherently spiritual. It follows a biblical model, but it is just a helpful structure, not a holy one. It is artificial and imperfect.

ICUs AND OUR MISSION AS A CONGREGATION

The primary reason we have ICUs is to increase our ability to get “*ministry*” (i.e., personally delivered care, concern, counsel and discipleship) directly to everyone who wants/needs it. Thus, the purposes of our ICUs are to:

- Offer connection and relationship to newer people—both believers and seekers.
- Connect people with one another in truly meaningful relationships.
- Attract friends to the Lord and to our congregation.
- Provide *close-by, frontline* spiritual care and practical help for everyone.
- Love, nurture and develop people over the course of many months.
- Disciple and transform people into nurturers of others.

THE FOUR PURPOSES OF ICUs

- CONNECT unconnected people in authentic relationships.
- ATTRACT people to the ways of the Lord.
- NURTURE and care for the group members.
- DISCIPLE and mentor group members into greater maturity.

CELL GROUP LEADERSHIP

“Small groups of 6-12 people meeting one another’s needs, reaching beyond themselves to nurture and develop each other in love and service, taking individual and collective responsibility to raise up future leaders—this is the future of ministering congregations in the 21st century.”—Daniel Brown

“Most issues for which people need support can be handled in a small spiritual kinship group. The main human ingredient is a leader who is willing to pull people together; see that they are loved and nurtured; orchestrate some form of Bible study with them; and, help them use their spiritual gifts both within and out of the group to touch lives in service to Christ.” —Carl George

LEADERSHIP KEYS

In his book, “Nine Keys to Effective Group Leadership”, Carl George lists (and elaborates on) nine regular activities that will make a successful cell group. Certainly, what the members of the group choose to do will also affect the quality of everyone’s experience, but the leader sets the tone and outcome of the group by giving attention to the following. From his book and my personal experience, I would advise every ICU leader to:

1. Meet God regularly in prayer and Bible study, asking Him for insight and understanding for the people you lead. True authority rests in revelation and love for others.
2. Make your first *natural* priority to recruit and mentor the apprentice leader. Spend 50% of the total time you devote to your cell group on your apprentice.
3. Focus more on the time between meetings, rather than at the meetings—make at least one meaningful contact with each cell group member in the days between your meetings.
4. Prepare your mind and heart for what God wants to do at the meeting, and include your apprentice in that process of inquiry and revelation.
5. Conduct the ICU meetings with sensitivity toward those who are there—both believers and seekers. Your time together ought to be driven by present needs, not a prepared agenda.
6. Focus on serving the members of your group, and find every way possible to enlist them in serving others outside of the group. Your ICU will mature and bond together most quickly through serving.
7. Frequently mention attending worship services (for congregational connection and instruction), and, as much as possible, serve and sit together in the context of your whole congregation.

8. Connect regularly with your pastor/coach to debrief about the people in your group—and what you are doing to disciple/mentor them at this point in their faith journey.
9. Take every opportunity to build acquaintances with those who do not yet believe, serving them at points of struggle or need. Talk about this and encourage similar patterns among members of your ICU.

WHAT DO ICU LEADERS DO?

ICU Leaders (and all others) can make mistakes, err in judgment, and otherwise live imperfectly. They are not infallible or “*all-knowing*” in their authority. Hence, their input can always be appealed to other leaders. We’re not trying to set up some sort of legalistic hierarchy to keep people under the thumb of more experienced believers, but we do want to contend for the bounty that comes to people’s lives when they live in accountable discipleship with believers who have walked the same path before.

The main role of an ICU Leader is to serve, and to be an example. Just as Jesus loves, mends, and trains us, so ICU Leaders intentionally try to do the same to the people in their groups. In effect, each ICU is like a small congregation or home fellowship, and the ICU Leaders spend lots of time with the people:

1. Nurturing the members of the ICU (especially the Apprentice Leaders) *between* meetings, proactively staying in contact with cell group members.
2. Providing *most* of the spiritual care and counsel needed by ICU members, and arranging for additional ministry as needed by them.
3. Caring for, praying for, and encouraging ICU members—especially the Apprentice—to follow hard after the Lord.
4. Mobilizing the ICU in various settings for *service and fellowship*.
5. Leading the ICU meetings so that they contain Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and sharing.

The Bible tells us “*in abundance of counselors, there is... (a better chance of) victory (rescue, deliverance, safety).*” (Reference Proverbs 11:14.) ICU Leader’s do their best to minister to people—drawing upon their knowledge of Scripture, their experiences in the Lord and their sense of what

the Spirit is telling them. All counsel and help is offered, not mandated—in other words, the ICU Leaders are a resource for people to *call upon, not to answer to*.

WHAT DO THE APPRENTICE LEADERS DO?

Again, the biblical pattern seems clear: Moses mentored Joshua; Paul took Timothy alongside. Just as Jesus sent the disciples in pairs, so the Apprentice Leaders function alongside of the Leaders, learning many things and preparing for the day when they will lead an ICU with their own Apprentice. In basic terms, they:

- Learn to become an ICU Leader by acting as a “*shadow*” to the existing Leader.
- Intentionally develop relationships with newer or unconnected people, and invite to accompany these newer friends to the ICU.
- Make meaningful contact with members of the ICU a couple of times a month—offering prayer, counsel or help.
- Identify and nurture a “Rising” Apprentice Leader.

Jesus said,

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” ~Colossians 3:23-24

No verse could be more apt for Apprentice Leaders than that. The more actively they help with logistics, prayer ministry, Children’s Ministries, greeting, and forming relationships with new people, the more dynamic their present and future ICU will be.