

Growing Christ Church Deeper and Wider

INTRODUCTION

We are in the process of launching what we are calling Connect Groups at Christ Church. This is a paper written to explain the broader vision and rationale.

The heart of the vision is about growing Christ Church deeper and wider. So this is a vision about ...

GROWTH

Growth involves change. As an infant grows into a child and a teenager into a young adults there are changes. As a tree grows it sheds its leaves and takes on a new shape.

As I have been reflecting on us reaching this 100 year mark and looking back at my tenure here as leader of this amazing church I do not believe that with festivities almost behind us we should now just be business as usual.

I can not believe that we should be and look like we do now in five or ten years time. We live in a society that desperately needs transforming, that desperately needs God's healing and wholeness. We are making an impact on this society and beyond. There are many wonderful things that are happening and on Sunday we will hear some of the stories of hat God is doing. I long for more; more Warehouses, more mission teams, more infiltration of society at every level with good news, more salt, more light...

So this is a vision about growing and changes that will follow.

CHRIST CHURCH

Trevor Pearce is heading up an initiative in the Anglican Church in Southern Africa called "Growing the Church". He has been set free to promote and facilitate this across this Anglican Province. I am delighted to have Trevor and Cheryl as worshipping members of Christ Church and we will do all we can to support and encourage him. But my mandate, our mandate is to grow Christ Church. This is where God has placed us and we have a responsibility here.

This is a vision about growing Christ Church. I know that there is grace in modesty and in not wanting to draw attention to one self and in preferring others. I see that grace in Christ Church, and I am thankful for it. But I also see a tendency in us that says we should not grow, and that we should stay as we are and just involved in helping others to grow.

This is a vision about growing Christ Church. It is about us, our life together, and what I believe God wants to do in and through us. It is about you and me, growing.

DEEPER

This is a vision for growing Christ Church deeper. This is a vision about us going deeper with God. Unless we are rooted deeply in the life of God what ever we attempt, what ever programme we seek to role out, how ever hard we work, what ever sacrifices we make will be of lasting value.

This vision I have is for us all to grow deeper roots, build foundations that will enable us go higher than we have ever been before or imagined possible. If we do not grow deeper what is built will topple and fall.

This is not about a formula. Changing the size of small groups from between 10 to 15 to between 20 to 35 is not going to some how change everything. It is as we push into the heart of God and hear him for our church and obey him that we will see Christ Church grow.

So this is a vision for growing deeper.

WIDER

This is a vision for growing Christ Church deeper and wider. It is about more. It is about more people coming to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord. It is about more ministries being birthed and empowered and more disciples of Jesus released into effective ministry. It is about more teams of people making an impact on this City, this nation this continent. It is about more worshippers of God, more evangelists, more pastors, more fully devoted followers of Jesus. More hope for a broken needy world.

Having prayed, researched, consulted, and discussed and prayed about this with the Pastorate, Staff and others I believe that this is the way we as Christ Church should go in expressing our life in these three modes of Celebration, Congregation and Cell. While as I stated changing the size of groups will not in itself bring about the desired growth we are looking for, I believe that this format of meetings and this structure will serve us better and release more people into ministry, grow a greater sense of community, and draw people to know Jesus better.

So the vision is for ***Growing Christ Church deeper and wider.***

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Christians have always met together, and from the earliest beginnings of the church we can see that members of the community of faith have gathered in both small and large groups in many different settings.

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of local churches, such as the 'Galatian churches' (1 Corinthians 16:1) or 'the churches in the province of Asia' (1 Corinthians 16:19). These churches broke down into smaller gatherings which met in homes (Romans 16:3-5, Colossians 4:15).

It has been suggested that the churches in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi consisted of several medium-sized congregations, meeting regularly in people's homes, while the whole community met together less frequently, perhaps in a purpose-built venue. In effect, there seem to have been three types of gathering in the Bible: the large, the medium-sized and the small.

Church growth writers sometimes speak of a three-tier structure of **celebration**, **congregation** and **cell**. All three are important and complement each other.

The **celebration** is a large gathering of Christians: a big church or a group of smaller churches coming together to recapture a vision of God's greatness and to enjoy a profound sense of worship. There would generally be anything over 150 people, depending on the size of the meeting place.

The **congregation** is a medium-sized gathering, normally 18-35 people. Its size makes it possible to know and be known by most people.

The **cell** consists of between four to seven or eight people, who gather to pray and support one another in their walk with the Lord.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Small Groups have been part of Christ Church since the early 1970s when they were introduced by David Prior.

Five years ago John Atkinson took us through a re-launch of Small Groups and groups were formed around four different purposes - study, friendship, service, growth, and with the intention that they would reform after three years.

Our observations are that for the most Small Groups at Christ Church do well as regards friendship. There are some that can look back fruitful times of study, and few have been involved in significant acts of service. But we have not seen significant growth in numbers of people in Small Groups in the past five years. We have not seen a steady multiplication and birthing of new groups because existing groups have got too large.

A year ago we began to look at different models being adopted in different churches. At our staff and Pastorate gathering Alison, who had visited St Thomas Sheffield, presented their "Cluster Model". Sally fresh back from an Alpha Conference presented the HTB "Pastorates Model". There was discussion around these amongst Staff and Pastorate and amongst the Small Group Pastors. I took the opportunity of being at the New Wine Leaders Conference in May this year to speak to various church leaders about the models they were using and I had opportunity to of attending an HTB Pastorate while in London.

All this has fed into the mix as we have prayed and asked God, "What do you want Christ Church to look like in 5 years time? What shape do you want us to be?" I have spoken about us being "mission shaped", but how do we become mission shaped? What step is God calling us to make to become more "mission shaped"?

While recognising that applying a formula will not some how work the miracle, I none the less believe that Connect Groups will serve as a structure on which we can grow both deeper and wider and that God is leading us as Christ Church to take this step.

Bill Hybel's definition of vision is "*A picture of the future that inspires passion*".

So here is the picture of Christ Church's future that stirs passionately in me ...

- Sunday services that are inspiring **Celebrations** that help us recapture a sense of God's greatness and enable us to enter into and enjoy a profound sense of worship.
- Mid size **Congregations** called Connect groups of 18 – 35 people gathering mid week on alternate weeks during school term to worship, pray, learn and seek God together in a warm welcoming fellowship that is open and easily accessible to new comers.
- **Cell** groups of any where between 4 to seven or eight people meeting in a variety of contexts where there is mutual support through confidential sharing that grows deeper and more intimate as trust is built over time.

SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS

I believe that as we get a clearer vision for Congregations (what I have called Connect Groups) and for Cell Groups, our Sunday Celebrations will gain clearer focus and vision as well. Much of busyness and resulting stress around our Sunday Services stem, I believe, from trying to do “Congregation” and “Cell” things in the wrong context. There is much more we can explore in this regard.

CONNECT GROUPS

This is the major focus of what is new and so I will expand on this in some detail.

Connect Groups are congregation-sized gathering of between 20-35 people who meet fortnightly during school term on a midweek evening or morning to worship, pray, learn, and share a meal together. They connect us with God and others in the body of Christ – hence their name.

Connect Groups are led by a team of two leaders (typically a married couple or two single people) supported by a core leadership team. They will meet in the home of one of the Connect Group members or in one of the venues at Christ Church.

Connect Groups are open and welcoming. Visitors and can be invited to come along without having to ask permission first. The normal practice would be to let the leaders know that you are bringing some one along and then introduce them to the leaders when you arrive so they can be welcomed, put at their ease and feel included.

The format of an evening will typically, but not necessarily, be: a social gathering time including something to eat and drink; a time of worship; teaching from Scripture; discussion and prayer in smaller groups.

I know that the reality will not be all neat and tidy and orderly with the groups neatly falling into the pattern and picture outlined. The military may work that way, but not the church. We are far more fluid and chaotic and delightfully messy.

One size does not fit all.

WHY CONNECT GROUPS?

1. They provide an excellent way for people to join the church.

A newcomer coming to Sunday Celebration may find themselves lost and go unnoticed in the crowd. They could come to church on Sundays for months and not really get to know anyone.

Charlotte had correspondence with some one recently that illustrated this. She emailed a invitation to a number of people and got the following reply.

Charlotte, You can remove me from this list. I have moved from Christ Church to ... she mentions a church, Sincerely, S

Charlotte replied.

Oh - I am sorry I didn't know - and I am sorry you have moved. I hope that there was nothing wrong that provoked the move and that you are happy at the new church. Please let me know if there was anything negative that prompted your going. Wishing you all the best - love Charlotte

Reply ...

It was less of something negative and more that there was nothing positive. After two years in the church I still was a stranger in the congregation and felt like I had to put forth an inordinate amount of effort to connect with people, find committed small group members, establish a relationship with a mentor, or find people who really were keen to know me, teach me, challenge me, hold me accountable, and live out Christian community with me.

That was such valuable feed back. It is more a case of hit and miss if you come along to a Sunday Service and find what this person was looking for. No matter how good the welcome team and how many labels are written out and we can still drop the catch and miss the opportunity.

Equally trying to join a small group is not easy. You can't just pitch up. The leaders need to be asked first and they then consult with the group. This process takes time – four or five weeks - and that can be misunderstood by the person as being unfriendly and exclusive.

Going along to a medium-sized gathering, such as a Connect Group, is much easier. Where there are 18-35 people, you will feel neither the centre of attention as “the new person” nor a sense of not being noticed. The Connect Group is small enough to be noticed and welcomed large enough not to be the focus of attention.

2. They provide opportunities to build community.

People come to church for a variety of reasons. Most people come back and join because of friendships and meaningful caring relationships.

Jesus said that it would be by the way we love one another that others would know we were his followers.

Connect groups provide the place where people can meet others, find their place in the life of the body of Christ, and be nurtured and supported in their walk of faith.

3. They allow us to pace ourselves better

One of the features of Connect Groups is that they meet bi weekly in term times. People have real lives that are already full and busy. Connect Groups meet for seasons and between times there is space for rest. We need to discover rhythms of rest and work in all we do – church stuff included.

4. They provide a secure context where people can grow in their gifting.

They provide places where we can get involved and take an active part and so grow and develop various ministries – worship leading, preaching, teaching, pastoring, evangelism, prayer, hospitality, leadership, ... all the gifts and ministries needed to plant and grow churches.

It is intimidating to preach for the first in front of 200 people or to give a talk to 80 or more on Alpha. The same is true for leading worship, leading in prayer. It is also rather exposing to have to do the same in front of 8 or 10 people. The Connect Group of 20-35 people is an ideal place to begin to exercise ministry. It is the greenhouse in which we can grow and test new ministries.

5. They are an effective means of church growth

They not only provide an ideal way for people to join the church, establish friendships and come to and grow in their faith. They also provide the context in which gifts and ministries can be tested, nurtured and developed. So there is growth in numbers and in depth.

When a Connect Group starts to get to 30 people on a regular basis it is time for it to prepare to divide (or rather to multiply!).

This immediately creates more opportunities for new ministries to be birthed. Two new Connect Group Leaders need to be commissioned and brought onto the team. A new core teams needs to be established around them. There are now more opportunities for worship leaders and preachers to step up to the mark. It creates more space for new people to be brought along and join in.

A process of multiplication could dove tail well with Alpha. Members of a Connect Group could be involved in leading on Alpha and then incorporate people from Alpha into the new Connect Groups.

As this growth in numbers and ministries takes place we will have the buildings blocks needed to start another Celebration Service, which does not have to be on Sunday or even in Christ Church. This forms the building block for a new church plant.

CELL GROUPS

The strength of our existing Small Groups in Christ Church is that they provide places where trusting supportive relationships can grow. To grow and go deeper as disciples of Jesus we all need places of confidentiality, intimacy and accountability – CIA. This takes time, and constantly adding new members militates against this desired outcome. Connect Groups are not aimed at providing “CIA”. They are open and geared for growth. We need to be looking for other contexts in which we can grow these supportive accountable relationships into our walk with Jesus. This is where Cell Groups come into the mix.

A cell group, because it is smaller, can meet in various contexts.

- It could be a group working in the same location who meet during a lunch hour to share their lives and pray for one another.
- It could be a small (3 or 4) in an accountability group.
- It could be a prayer focused group where they meet before work to pray for each other.
- It could be a group of couples and singles who meet on the alternate mid week evenings (when the Connect Groups are not meeting) for fellowship and prayer.

The field is wide open, and the size of the group could vary. Smaller groups lend themselves to deeper levels of trust and intimacy. The important thing is that we have these supportive “C.I.A.” relationships and give time to allowing them to grow.

There is also no reason why they have to break up when a Connect Group multiplies. You don't have to be in a Connect Group with the same people in your Cell Group. Connect

Groups and Cell Groups meet different needs.

The church leadership will not have a formal mechanism for placing people in Cell Groups. Forming or joining a Cell Group will be encouraged, facilitated and helped along by Connect Group leaders and the Pastoral Staff, but it will be left to individuals to take the initiative.

What about existing small groups? What happens to them?

Existing Small Groups can continue to meet as they have in the past. We have no desire to close down groups or stop them from meeting.

An existing Small Group may decide to meet on alternate weeks, while some of their numbers – not all perhaps - join a Connect Group.

I would imagine though that over time a Small Group (especially if it is a friendship focussed group) would probably move towards being a cell group with the focus on supportive caring relationships.

CONNECT GROUP LEADERS

For me what is more important than analysing what exactly Connect Groups will look like and how they will work and where they will meet, is **what sort of leaders will they have?**

A LEADER NEEDS TO HAVE:

VISION

While the overall vision is “Growing Christ Church deeper and wider” and we will come back to that again and again, the specific vision for Connect Groups will differ from group to group.

I sense that there could well be a Connect Group that has a focus around families with younger children – probably meeting on a Saturday afternoon. The specifics of the vision would need to be sharpened up. What is their picture of the future that inspires passion? What is it about families meeting and worshipping and praying and drawing in others and going deeper and wider that ignites a fire in the belly?

And such a vision may stir up a YES response in some one who is not married and does not have young children, but wants to follow and support and sacrifice for that vision to see it become a reality.

I sense too that some Connect Groups may focus around a vision for community and having an impact on their neighbourhood. Growing the church deeper and wider will take on a different form with that vision and passion burning in the hearts of their leaders.

I spoke to two groups of people today. One had a heart for the elderly retired who feel they have been put out to pasture. The other had a heart for mothers of school going children. Now while we don't want to squeeze everything into the Connect Group system it is that stirring of passion in their hearts that thrills me.

How do we feed that passion? How can I help them take it God and ask him about it, let him refine it, mould it and shape it?

A key aspect of the vision I am setting before you is that I will commit myself to working with the Connect Groups Leaders to help them test, grow, feed, refine, strategise and implement the vision God is giving.

Leaders need to have vision. It must beat in their hearts.

PERSEVERANCE

Leaders need to have "stickability". It requires *"long obedience in the same direction"*.

Leaders will be criticized, misunderstood, misinterpreted, will be disappointed, let down and will take all sorts of knocks. That is not because they bad leaders or because the people they are leading are bad, unloving and unkind. That is just what happens to leaders.

You have got to be able to roll with the punches, pick yourself up when you have been knocked down, and press on when the going gets tough.

Some of you know I often use the phrase "pressing on ..." a quote from Phil 3:14 when I sign off emails.

"I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ."

"Not that I have already attained this ... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

Leadership can be lonely, that is why I see it as fundamental that Connect Groups have two leaders who work together and support, pray for and back each other in the task. It is why I see them drawing around them a core team.

It is also why I want to meet regularly with those Connect Group Leaders so that we – they with Charlotte and me can be mutually encouraged and supported.

ABILITY TO DELEGATE

This is absolutely key – like all the points.

Fundamental to being able to delegate is realising that that we are not running a programme, we are growing disciples. If you are running a programme, a group, or what ever, the outcome you aim at is a successful evening when things went smoothly and as planned. People arrived and are welcomed warmly, the food is hot and social chat unhindered by logistical glitches, the worship songs are spot on and musicians play with out fault, the talk is stunning, entertaining and pertinent, and the prayers are so eloquent everyone is deeply moved by them. Conclusion: It was a well run evening. I am doing well as a Connect Group leader.

You may be, and that may well happen, but that is not the aim. If you have an evening where the worship leader is doing it for the first time and gets the wrong note in the first song, but has the presence of mind to stop and start again with a light touch that puts everyone at ease. If you sit down with him afterwards and debrief and affirm and encourage him and he walks away 10cms taller - that is great evening!

When the food was cold and greasy and most of it was left behind, and you your co-leader sits with the person responsible and picks through what went wrong and works out how to do things differently next time – that is great evening.

When the outreach event failed and only half the people pitched up and you are faced with a deflated and dejected young person who was passionate last week and is now all ready to throw in the towel and you meet for coffee the following week after church to review and learn from the failure – that is a great evening.

Winston Churchill: "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm".

I always have four questions in mind when I sit down with some one – one of the staff team – or some one leading a ministry.

- What happened?
- What was difficult?
- What did you learn?
- What will you do differently next time?

To be able to delegate you need to know what the vision is. And those to whom you are delegating a task must know what the vision is. They must buy in with the vision. They need to see that what you are asking them to do is an important part of the vision.

TEACHABILITY

Jesus said ...(Matt 7:24ff)

²⁴“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Jesus is not looking for people who have it all together. He is looking for people who will “hear and obey.”

According to the Bible a fool is not someone who is mentally deficient. It is nothing to do with intellect, degrees or education. A fool is some one who has the propensity to ignore correction and continue in their own way. But we don't have to be an out and out rebel to be a fool. Some times we don't hear because we filter out what God is saying to us and our defences and entitlements and the things that offend us get in the way of us hearing, before we even get to obeying.

A leader is one who has the heart attitude of the psalmist who says ...

Psa 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

²³Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me;

Cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I'm about;
²⁴See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong— then guide me on the road to eternal life.

In Hebrew there is only one root word for both teaching and learning = lamad. It has a broad meaning of to learn, teach, exercise in, be trained in.

To be teachable requires us to have a humble heart.
It is a heart that asks God to show me my sin before I blame others.
It is a heart that is quick to obey and does not procrastinate.
It is a heart that is open to others who are older, younger, under, over...and says I am sure God will teach me something through you.
It is a heart that takes initiative and intentionally takes action.
It is a heart that is willing to risk getting things wrong but will take ownership of failures and not blame.
It is a heart that wants to cross over and enter into the other person's world to serve them and do what will be good for them, not simply meet their own need in the service they offer.

Without a teachable heart we will simply be bringing people up to where we have got, to reaching our level of maturity. That is not good enough. We want them to go further than we have.

Unless you have a teachable heart you won't be able to grow a teachable heart in others.

CONCLUSION

So that is the vision I set before you. There are many practical details to be worked out. But I come back to the over all guiding statement – it is about Growing Christ Church deeper and wider. I do not have the whole picture. I do not have a programme I want you to follow or a course you must go on. I invite you to be part of a journey – a journey of going deeper and wider than we have ever been before.