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**[MID SIZED
MISSION –
THE USE OF
MID SIZE
GROUPS AS A
VITAL
STRATEGIC
COMPONENT
OF CHURCH
PLANTING]**

Midsized mission – the use of mid size groups as a vital strategic component of church planting

In Heidelberg, Germany a group of Vineyard D.A.CH¹ members are meeting together to discuss ways of reaching out to the disadvantaged in their community. They have a heart for outsiders and want to be the hands and feet of Jesus, especially to those not very well integrated in society.

Meanwhile on Mothers Day, ladies living in Ruslip, northwest London are surprised to be handed bunches of flowers by members of 'LBH' from St Andrews, Chorleywood. Some ladies want to talk, others offer money in exchange for the flowers and all are delighted that someone would take the time to bring flowers to their front door free of charge.²

And in cafes across Brussels, Christians and not-yet Christians meet to explore the practices of the Christian faith, including serving others and exalting Christ as Lord in everyday life.

Different countries, meeting places and activities, and variously called mid-size communities, clusters, expressions or home groups. Even so, these groups have something in common - they are all mid-sized groups, being used as building blocks to grow city-wide church planting movements as a networked expression of church. While some of the featured groups and churches use the 'cluster' model pioneered at **St Thomas Crookes**, Sheffield, UK (www.stthomascrookes.org) in the 1990's³, others have discovered the mid-sized model independently.

The groups described in this paper are larger than (and in some cases made up from several) cells of six to twelve people, but smaller than the celebrations of 100+ people gathering on a Sunday to worship together in a celebration style meeting. As the St Thomas Crookes website succinctly

puts it,

mid-size groups are 'a community that is small enough to have a common vision, but big enough to do something about it'.

St Andrews Chorleywood, UK (www.st-andrews.org.uk) was introduced to the basic principles of clusters by the St Thomas Crookes team. Four years after launching the concept, 22 mid-size communities (MSCs) meet in suburbs, villages and towns over a 25 mile radius around the original parish-oriented church site. "MSCs are a way of creating extended families with a very clear missional focus," says Andrew Williams, associate vicar at St Andrews. "The groups are larger than a home group, but considerably smaller than the gathered congregation; big enough for a newcomer to feel they don't stick out, but small enough that they can feel welcome."

"In the early days we experimented with having up to 72 people in the MSCs, but the closer we got to 72, the sense of family, belonging and purpose deteriorated. You could measure it in terms of attendance. In groups with less than 50, attendance was 90% or more, but once more than 50 people belonged to the group attendance diminished. We now say a mid-sized community's maximum size should be 50, with 35 people probably being the optimum number. When numbers get too big, people begin to think 'if I am not there it doesn't matter'."

This paper explores the potential of these groups as a strategic building block for church planting movements, through asking the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of a mid-size group?

Some groups interviewed use mid-size groups as the primary expression of

church life, while others are mainly missional alongside or as part of a 'gathered' teaching service or large celebration of several clusters. Still others have been formed with pastoral considerations.

2. Where and when do mid-sized groups meet?

The rhythm of being together depends on the mission of the mid-size group. Some meet one Sunday in four, others more frequently, and during the week too.

3. The practical bits – how are mid-size groups formed and led, and how are the leaders equipped?

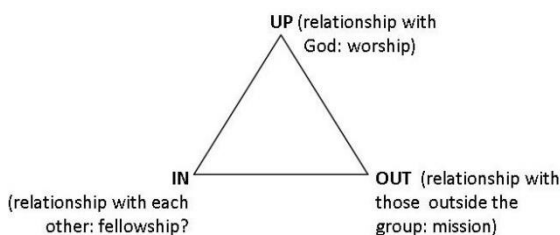
Introducing mid-size groups into the church involves a process of change. How do churches using this model form mid-size groups? They are also usually lay led – so how are the leaders equipped for the task?

4. What is the potential for mid-size groups to become for church planting movements?

Some church planting movements are structured around mid-size groups. But within others there is the potential for these groups to become movements themselves existing alongside the mother church.

1. What's the purpose of a mid-size group?

Many churches describe the purpose of mid-size groups in terms of the Lifeshapes triangle (www.3dministries.com) first developed at St Thomas Sheffield.



Mike Breen was team rector at St. Thomas Church at Crookes and Philadelphia Campus from 1994 – 2004. In their book on clusters, Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen⁴ expand these directions in the life of clusters as follows:

- Clusters are mid sized groups (larger than cells/small groups and smaller than celebrations) which grow together in their relationship to God as they explore whole life spirituality. (UP)
- Clusters build Christian community as places of belonging and participation...on days, times and places that suit (the are quite distinctly different from inherited "Sunday service") (IN)
- Clusters gain identity and purpose from a united mission vision, being called to a clear geographic or network focus and engaging in social patterns of that culture and context (OUT)

They add the additional dimension OF:

- Clusters are linked together by a network of support and accountability to a diversity of other mid-sized groups, recognising that clusters are not isolated units, but part of the wider church.

The vast majority of mid-size group gatherings will include elements of worship, fellowship and mission, whether or not they are influenced by the St Thomas Sheffield cluster model. But the primary purpose of the mid-size group can differ – are they mainly a vehicle for mission, a combination of pastoral and missional, or the basic unit of the church?

Purpose 1: Mid size groups as a vehicle for 'mission'

Norkirken/Normisjon, Bergen, Norway (www.norkirken.no) have turned the triangle by 45 degrees, so that the 'out' focus has become the driving force. Diagram 1 illustrates the place mid-size groups have in their thinking. Mid-size communities are their primary expression of church for the world (out), still knowing that they will (go up to) do the celebration, and (down to) do discipling.

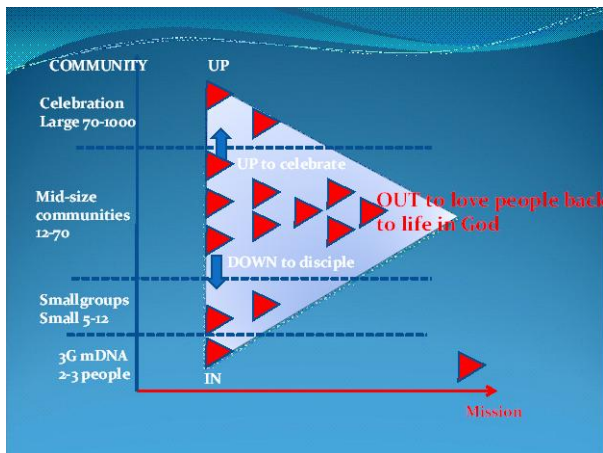


Diagram 1: Norkirken's model of mission

The red triangle (Diagram 1) represents the primary unit of 2 – 3 people, which Norkirken's pastor Svein Høysæter says they 'strongly believe is vital to keep the *up-in-out* alive and reproductive in church.'

Cell Group Network Helsinki (www.verkosto.net) meets in Helsinki Metropolitan area, Finland. Cell groups are part of the integral structure of the church, but they have begun to use mid size groups as a way of cells 'fishing together'. Currently they have seven clusters with around 30 or more people in each.

"Our church wasn't reaching people so we wanted to do something and clusters were a good way to do that," says team leader Hannu Vuorinen. "Previously we taught that the cell was the missional vehicle, but when you look at the up, in

and out, our cells were mainly inward with a little up and out. Our basic understanding is that clusters should be up and in but mainly out. We are in a process of moving to that – I think at the minute many of the clusters are also just believers coming together and hanging out, but that is not where we want to stay."

According to Andrew Williams from St Andrew's Chorleywood, UK, the missional potential of mid-size communities (MSCs) occurs because their members come from a particular community or social group, meet in that community and reach others around them.

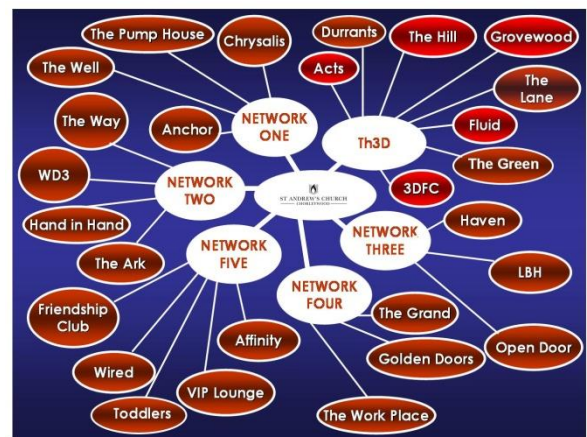


Diagram 2: Cluster structure of St Andrew's Chorleywood. Networks meet to worship together at St.Andrews on rotation, and in cluster the other weeks.

This is in contrast to Andrew's early days at the church. "I remember our Christmas services. The church was beautifully lit, it was all absolutely superb. At the end there was an altar call and only a handful of people went forward. My reflection was that nobody had actually invited anybody because they didn't have ownership of what was going on."

"Last Christmas however an MSC put on an event in their community where 70% of the people invited were non-Christians."

Andrew believes MSCs release the

potential of ordinary believers to get involved in the outward dimension of church life.

“During the early days we would go and have supper with new MSC leadership teams and always at the end of the meal they would say almost coyly ‘I’ve been carrying this vision for many years’.

“Mid-sized communities with a missional focus create an environment where they see the gospel still works”

“Faithful Christian people need to be released. These are busy people with demanding jobs. We could not ask them to go and plant a church, but they can go and establish a missional community. Mid-sized communities with a missional focus create an environment where they see the gospel still works. As confidence rises and people are transformed by God’s grace – it becomes the complete rediscovery of the adventure of faith.”

The outward focus of mid-size groups and involvement of all believers in mission also strongly appeals to Trond Loberg and his team from **Normisjon Storsalen**, Norway (www.storsalen.no). For the last year they have worked together to develop ‘cultural clusters’ within the church which usually meet monthly.

“In our church we have a great heart for the lost people, but we are very used to in-drag where the goal is to get people into the church services,” says Trond.

“This model showed us a new way of thinking – to go out instead of in-drag into the church. It corresponded so much with what we saw in the Bible but previously we didn’t have any framework for doing it.



The last gathering before Christmas 2007 in a mid-size community called "Nordstrand-fellesskapet" connected with Storsalen. Nordstrand is a part of Oslo, and fellesskap means fellowship. So the name means they are a fellowship in Nordstrand.

“We already have really great celebrations and have gone as far as possible in that direction. But we were missing structure and how to help the ordinary guy to reach out to his friends, students and co-workers, and we found that clusters showed how one guy can go with this vision and help the other people around him to do the same. Each group has a specific target, which can be geographical, work or interest based. We have a hip hop group who want to spread the good news of Jesus in the break-dance community, and one for business people at work.”

“But we were missing structure and how to help the ordinary guy to reach out to his friends, students and co-workers”

These aren’t the only mid-size groups functioning at Storsalen. In addition to the cultural clusters, which mostly function as a supplementary unit to the central celebrations, there are small church groups, and missional fellowships. Co-pastor Bertel Hjortland defines the groups as follows:

Small groups: at least 12 persons or more meeting in a faith community defined as their primary fellowship. While some individuals may be connected to Storsalen, in reality they can survive and thrive as an independent unit. The group’s purpose is defined around the Up, In and Out triangle and includes teaching and communion.

Missional fellowships: there are teams sent to local congregations, primarily in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, to run or help with children and young people's work. This kind of ministry is missional as there will be a high percentage of non-believers. The teams form communities which are less independent than the small church. Some remain connected to Storsalen, others leave Storsalen and become attached to the local church.

Paul Machonachie says there are three main types of cluster operating at **St Thomas Philadelphia**. (www.stthomaschurch.org.uk)

The '*strongly incarnational geographic clusters*' have a central core of people living in an urban area, and other cluster members come to help during the week. They are based around programmes and are fairly high maintenance. For example, STOMP kids clubs are for primary-aged children in the city, where home visits allow relationships to be built up with the family.

Apostolic clusters are based around strong leadership, growing quickly by inviting people in and multiplying by splitting down the middle. These have the potential to generate a lot of growth, but Paul says the challenge is to get to 3rd generation growth and beyond.

'*Slow burn*' *community-based clusters* are more likely to multiply through groups of two or three people 'budding off' and gathering fresh members from the church 'fringe' as well as those outside the church.

Paul has also identified a fourth 'very pioneering' model, where 2 or 3 people go to a new community (network or neighbourhood) with few resources. They seek to build an indigenous cluster with pre-Christians who are open to the gospel and their friends and contacts. This type of model is used by **c|movement** in

Zurich, Switzerland (www.cmovement.net and www.dneurope.org) or Neil Cole as described in his book *Organic Church*⁵

Purpose 2: Pastoral and missional mid-size groups

Mid-size groups at **Holy Trinity Brompton** (www.htb.org.uk) are called *Pastorates*. They meet fortnightly in venues across London (with small group meetings for pastoral care and discipleship during the weeks in between), either in the morning or evening, and have around 20 – 35 people in a group. There are now over 60 pastorates functioning at HTB, with a membership of 1750 people. HTB's website has the following to say:

"We have been running pastorates at HTB since 1978, and in that time have found them to be the best way for people to get integrated into the heart of the church, to build community, to make friends, to have fun and to develop individual gifts and ministries. Pastorate groups are run by members of the congregation, most of whom are not in full time ministry."

Although the name would suggest a purely pastoral focus, these groups also get involved in 'every aspect of church life' including missional activities such as mission and social action, prayer ministry and Alpha courses.



HTB's pastorates get involved in 'every aspect of church life' including mission and social action

Vineyard DACH (www.vineyard-dach.net) in Heidelberg, Germany started to use clusters because the concept is driven by relationships rather than events. The church has been in existence for four years, but the leader Marlin Watling found the dynamics changed as numbers grew.

“Clusters... allow us to be relational on the one hand, and missional on the other.”

“With 70–100 people it becomes more big-group orientated,” he says. “In Germany people are very event focused. We struggle with the fact that we want to have church more than the event, but people come back to the event as being the incarnation of the church. Clusters move what we do to a more relational space, allow us to be relational on the one hand, and missional on the other.

Mick Woodhead, rector of St Thomas Crookes would agree, saying that the pastoral life within the cells making up the cluster has increased. “The small group is the place where they chill together and pray together. Members don’t need to feel guilty that they aren’t doing a mission as a cell because they know in three weeks time they will meet with three other groups in their cluster and they will do a pizza evening when they invite their friends in or on the Saturday they will go out and clean the streets as a group of 35.”

AAVM (www.valgmenighed.dk) has had clusters for over five years. The church formed in 1990, and used cell groups from the beginning. However according to senior pastor Keld Dahlmann, the church grew to the point where no new member could find a natural way to enter a cell group, and it became difficult to disciple people properly. So clusters (*klynge*) became a way of handling this growth through providing a network of between 20 and 60 people that a new person can relate to. Each cluster has several cell groups within it meeting the weeks between cluster meetings and newcomers to the cluster are able to become part of a cell group at their own pace. Clusters meet monthly on ‘Cluster Sunday’ when no main service is held, and often also on an evening during the month.

As the mid-size model matures in the life of the church, groups can take on a variety of functions. Keld has identified two different ways in which clusters work within AAVM, called *sodal* and *modal* structures.

Modal structure: These clusters have a strong pastoral potential and have been very good at revitalizing the periphery of the congregation by involving people who may have attended only sporadically or felt on the fringe in the community. According to Keld, these clusters work well when they have the larger celebration level community – i.e. the church services – as a supportive framework with high quality teaching and worship/music. The basic direction of these clusters is ‘In’, however Up and Out are also part of their activity.

Sodal structure: these clusters have a more missional identity (OUT) and are less dependant on the worship service. They reach out to people who have no other contact with the church. The leaders and core group will often attend on a Sunday and have that support for their own discipleship, but many members of the

cluster won't because they are not 'church' people.

Keld says however that all clusters within AAVM are encouraged to make Up, In and Out an integral part of their vision, and a cluster should help a group of people live as disciples in all three of these dimensions. How they do this in practice is up to the individual cluster.⁶

Purpose 3: Mid-size groups that drive the life of the church

The Well in Brussels, Belgium (www.thewell.be) is a initiative of Christian Associates International (www.christianassociates.org) They didn't have a prescribed model when they began as four couples in 2004, but as they talked and prayed about what form their 'creative communities' should take, relationships and serving others seemed to be key.

The Well meets in separate 'Expressions' for worship, teaching and fellowship three weeks in four, with a corporate 'All Well' gathering once a month. The Expressions follow a monthly worship theme, such as 'majesty', which is unpacked in three directions –conversion, community and cause - one for each week. These three directions are similar to the 'Up, In and Out' of the cluster model.

Conversion: points to our ongoing relationship to make Jesus Lord of our lives

Community: our relationships with each other

Cause: the relationship between the body of Christ and the world.

Each group also has five practices which emphasise building community:

1. Serve others as Christ served us – this includes working with homeless people and refugees on a regular basis.
2. Make friends and invite people into the community

3. Identify needs and share resources
4. Look for and develop gifts in each other
5. Exalt Jesus as Lord daily and corporately.

"Now when we gather for worship, we talk about the practices, which allow us to see how the theme works out in every day life." says Carlton Deal, The Well's team leader.

"The practices are very new but they are important because the things that are most reproducible are the same in their smallest as they are in the largest. So if on the smallest level each person is connected to each other by those practices, then each expression is connected and The Well as a whole is connected."

Amsterdam-based church **Zolder50** (www.amsterdam50.nl) tries to encourage knowing Jesus, becoming like him and making him known at all levels of church life. In their life groups of 2–3, knowing Jesus is individual bible study, becoming like him is accountability and making him known is praying for non-Christians.

Home groups have up to 20 people. At this level becoming like Jesus takes the form of bible study together. Members become more like Jesus as they learn to live together in loving relationships, while they are encouraged to make him known through each group having a missional focus. This could include for example joining a photography club or sports club, or getting involved in some form of voluntary work in order to build up a network of friends outside the church. The biggest level of neighbourhood churches recently divided in two, with 75 people (four home groups) in each group. "The larger the gathering is the more consumerist people are," says Todd Watkins, one of Zolder50's pastors. "What needs to be done is done by a couple of people organising things and

others aren't doing as much. So we are experimenting by splitting into two smaller congregations so more people can get involved.



Zolder50 has recently divided into two 'neighbourhood churches' which meet on alternate Sundays. (Photo credit: Eric Asp)

Each neighbourhood church now meets on alternate Sundays, with groups who are not meeting then encouraged to get involved in some kind of missional activity. Todd admits it is 'a bit scary' for people to be sent out and not have an every Sunday church.

"They want to have fellowship together, study bible together and pray together," he says. 'At the moment we are focusing on how the groups can reach into our networks, and how friends from these networks can connect with the group. So we don't want to be just a bible study group, but somewhere we can invite non-Christian friends. Right now we do have some people who aren't believers who are part of the groups and they are seeking and learning through being involved."

2. Where and when do mid-size groups meet?

Meeting in homes...

ImF-Byrne(www.saron.no/imf) developed from a parachurch youth group within Norway's Lutheran church. In the beginning the church grew rapidly from a core of 50 to 150 young people, with three celebrations: teenagers meeting once a month, young adults once a month and family and adults every other week;

however Thomas Rake, one of ImF-Byrne's pastors says they needed smaller communities for discipling and fellowship. They began with cell groups, then a video about small groups at **Saddleback Church** (www.saddleback.com/flash/default.htm) inspired them to try meeting in larger 'housegroups'.

"Our big gathering was very 'hip' and we needed a smaller community where we could get closer and be more intimate and hold each other more accountable. At Saddleback they gathered six small groups in one home at the same time, so there would be 30 or 40 people together instead of just 8. This felt good to us so we decided to give it a try.

"At the time we had around 50 people meeting in small groups, with between 5 and 10 in each. We started to meet with four small groups in one home at the same time. There would be some time where everyone was together for teaching and popcorn and pizza, and then they would split into different groups for prayer and discipleship."

They are now beginning to look outwards, saying that each group has to be missional as well as pastoral, with a defined mission focus that they want to reach.

Zurich based **c|movement** in Switzerland is a church planting training movement – but the by-product is that churches are planted! Their smallest unit is the committed community (cc) or housechurch, which is a family or group of between three to ten friends who are disciplined together. The goal is that an activity involving members of the housechurch happens every day, for example one day a couple of them might met together to go jogging, while on another they meet in 2s and 3s in accountability groups, or on a Sunday they spend the afternoon and evening together.



c|movement's church planting team

Up to five committed communities together form a 'net housechurch', with an independent leadership structure of elders (leaders of the net) and deacons (leaders of the housechurches or cc). "The reason we don't let [the net] be bigger than five housechurches is that everybody must know everybody else," explains Florian Bärtsch of c|movement. "With the people of 3-5 houses you can spend a day together or have a birthday party. Once a net grows to more than 65-75 people or more than 5 or 6 cc's we split the net in two nets of 3 cc's and then let them grow."

Invading secular space...



Members of the Well's expressions meet in restaurants around Brussels.

The Well in Brussels initially met in homes, but now regularly use restaurants around the city.

Team leader Carlton Deal takes up the story: "We decided to start meeting together, not because churches meet

together, but because we were making friends and it was easier to meet together regularly every week rather than reschedule something each time. Then we decided to move into a public space and to meet in a café – we enjoyed eating together as part of our worship and it made sense to be in a place where we could continue to do that.

"We thought it was extraordinary that the Chinese Buddhist owner of a brasserie in Brussels would say 'sure you can meet, no charge,' but as it turns out it is not extraordinary at all. But it only works if you are willing to be 50 or 60 people. We filled that place up and he asked us to leave because it was the spring and he needed the space.

"This it was a decision point for us. We had to ask ourselves if we should find a bigger place or multiply so at that point we decided to multiply by splitting into 5 groups. We were in our first year with only 60 people. One Sunday we met as a single community and said goodbye to the restaurant. The next Sunday 80 of us met as five groups in five different teams – an increase of 20 people in a week!"

St Thomas Crookes groups are discouraged from meeting in the church, although groups with a focus on the elderly for example are best suited to using the church lounge – "and that's OK."

Their groups meet anywhere - in homes, cafes, bars, and even a garage. At the moment there is a big emphasis on the bar and café culture in the city centre and we have had some great openings with Starbucks, as well as pubs," comments Mick Woodhead, St Thomas Crookes team rector. "We have one landlady who contacted us to see if we want to come and use her pub. When we asked how she knew about us, she said she'd heard we meet in other pubs and would love us to come because we are such great customers – great to be around and you

spend!”

Mick adds that meeting in a restaurant does limit numbers – with the advantage of forcing groups to multiply, adds Mick, “It’s much easier to get a great venue in a bar with 25/30 people than it is with 60. The restaurant people love you with 30, but when you number 50 or 60 they just can’t cope.”

A family-based cluster in Norkirken/Normisjon, Bergen, Norway are hoping to start meeting in a local kindergarten building, while one of their other groups has a missional focus in the biggest shopping mall in the area, where they work with teenagers and drug addicts. Still another group spend time hiking in the mountains, building relationships with friends while enjoying invigorating walks and beautiful scenery.

What about Sundays?

St Andrews Chorleywood works around the principle of being a gathered *and* a dispersed congregation. All the MSCs gather on the fourth Sunday of the month for a time of celebration. On other Sundays groups of MSCs meet on rotation for worship, teaching and a time of testimony.

Individual MSCs also meet up at other times, either on Sundays or other days of the week, and the small groups that make up the MSCs get together weekly.

The mid sized group’s main activity is defined either by geography (a group of believers meeting in a particular location reaching out to their neighbours) a people group (for example the elderly, the deaf or students) or a perceived need. Where and when the MSCs meet is up to them.

“We have had some wonderful testimonies from these groups,” says Andrew. “One group met a refugee family who had been horribly persecuted in their country of origin, and were living in the UK in a hostile environment. Our guys

were out there, tending to their garden and it was the first time the family had experienced any sign of affection from British people.

“they are out there in the community demonstrating the Father’s love.”

“Another group goes as an MSC into a care home for elderly people. They realised many of their residents didn’t have any family to help them celebrate their birthday, so they throw birthday parties for 90 year old people. Everyone signs a separate card for them so there are lots to open. If you talk to the leaders of this MSC, they would say they aren’t really the “leader type”, yet they are out there in the community demonstrating the Father’s love.”

Many churches introducing the mid-size group model use the concept of ‘Cluster Sunday’, when there is no central service and only the clusters meet. At St Thomas Crookes the church doors are actually locked on the second Sunday morning of each month! According to team rector Mick Woodhead, on that Sunday the whole church community is out in cluster, digging gardens, painting apartments, going on walks with neighbours – and in the evening they gather and share the stories of what happened that morning.

Some of St Thomas Crookes clusters are beginning to meet on more than one Sunday a month, and Mick suggests these groups will reverse the Cluster Sunday model, by meeting ‘out’ three Sundays a month and only joining the central service once a month. They will review this in six months or so to see how it is working, but Mick feels that keeping a regular meeting together does promote accountability and prevents the groups drifting off because they are doing their own thing.

St Thomas Philadelphia has the vision to be a church for the whole of Sheffield, UK.

Planted by St Thomas Crookes, it also uses the cluster model. Currently clusters meet a various times during the week, with celebration style gatherings on Sundays which people rotate in and out of, but minister Paul Maconochie says that different models can be used at different times.

“Flexibility and recognising seasonality is important”

“Flexibility and recognising seasonality is important,” he says. “There are times when it is right to get everyone to meet out in clusters on a Sunday – often when we are trying to get people to think that way. If we just said ‘you can meet out on a Sunday’ they probably wouldn’t, so Cluster Sundays when they have to meet as a cluster are a good way to get everyone to do it.

3. The practical bits

How are mid-size groups set up?

According to their pastor, Martin Cave, **IMI Kirken, Norway** (www.imikirken.no) is a church strong on cells and strong on celebration. The cells are missional in approach, but are not the place to invite non-Christians to. On the other hand someone wanted to share an experience of healing, but felt she couldn’t do it in front of the whole church – it was too intimidating.

So, says Martin, although they have very small ‘boats’, and very big ones, they need ones in the middle where they can go together to take in new land. The church is in the process of introducing clusters as a way of taking in ‘new land’ in mid-sized boats.

“At the minute we are collecting information and pictures of what is happening elsewhere,” says Martin. “We decided that within this year people could just ask questions, and then in the twelfth

month we will ask ‘What is the answer?’ In January 2008 we will gather the whole church for a weekend conference, and introduce how to be a church using clusters.

“One of the key principles will be that the groups are run by the people, not the pastor. When we started the cell groups we were very strict and said ‘if you want to be a member of this church you will be part of a cell’. What we are now saying to the people is ‘if you feel God is calling you to do it, we will support you as a church leadership’. The only thing we will ask is ‘what is God putting on your heart, and what do you believe in?’



Members of a St Thomas Philadelphia cluster enjoying a BBQ together

Paul Maconochie from St Thomas Philadelphia has used a similar question with his congregation.

“Our vision last year for the church was ‘this is my call, is what is your call?’, asking people to really seek God for what they are called to do and what they are called to lead in the context of the church,” he says.

Paul suggests three ways mid-size groups can form.

Organically grown clusters occur when a someone starts a small group, and it multiplies to become a cluster. Because the small groups all have a common source, they share the same vision and values.

Gathering a cluster around someone with a particular missional vision. This is often someone who is already serving in the

church. They are responsible for recruiting a team. When they advertise the start of a group from the front enough people come forward to begin a cluster immediately, then the small groups are organised within the cluster.

Two or three small (cell) groups are asked to come together to form a cluster. This is often used as a tool at the beginning to get people in the church to sense what a cluster is, but according to Paul these clusters are almost always sterile and don't go on to reproduce and form new clusters.

It is important that as new clusters form, members of other clusters who share that particular vision are allowed to move across to the new cluster.

"We try to teach our lay leaders to be releasing," says Paul. "There needs to be accountability, so if someone in their group feels called somewhere else they need to talk through why they want to do that, but if it is clear that their vision lies elsewhere or that their personal vision lies closer to someone else's cluster the cluster leaders need to release them."

Identifying leaders

Norway's **Normisjon Norkirken** in Bergen (www.norkirken.no) is 'giving birth' to clusters. Currently they have 5 clusters of up to 20 people in each. A Cluster Sunday each month reminds people they should be 'out there', however not everyone in the church has joined a cluster yet. Svein Høysæter, Pastor of Norkirken has found that introducing clusters to the church requires a mindset change, but also finding the right leaders for a group is key.

"I am looking for character in every leader and passion in the missional leaders"

"I am looking for character in every leader and passion in the missional leaders," he says, adding that he wants to focus more on the five-fold ministry gifts explained in Eph 4.

"We introduced the idea of clusters in the services, but we have also invited people directly to different workshops, saying 'if you have a vision or passion for something, come and learn about what you could do.

I'm not sure if this method has helped us as much as I thought it would however. I wanted the cells to grow organically because we know that is what is reproducible and will last and I didn't want to do the social construction thing where we put cell groups together to form a cluster. But some people need to see some sort of model first, so maybe we need to do both in the knowledge that the 'social construction' type only last for a period. But some people need to see some sort of model first.

The table below is a summary of some of the qualities the churches interviewed are looking for in leaders of mid-size groups.

Vineyard DACH	People we know well and trust, who have a heart for a certain Watkinsect of mission
Norkirken	Character and passion
IMI Kirchen	A calling to mission
Cell Group Network Helsinki	A missional heart and purpose
St Thomas Philadelphia	All leaders are home grown, and have to begin at cell group level, as there has to be a process of testing calling and character.

Training leaders

In most churches leaders of mid-size groups come up through the ranks of the church and have previously led a small group. As lay people, usually with a secular job in addition to their mid-size group responsibilities, how are they trained and equipped on an ongoing basis for leadership?

One of the key features of cluster leadership is 'low control, high accountability.' In other words, the church leaders are happy for cluster leaders to do whatever God is leading them to do as a cluster, but they have to be prepared to be accountable for it. The accountability structures then often take the form of 'huddles', where the group leaders are gathered together on a regular basis for discipleship, mentoring and support.

The materials used in huddles differ, and tends to reflect the individual needs of the leadership group. Todd Watkins from Zolder50, Amsterdam huddles their house group leaders once a month and also does a retreat with them every six months. "Our training is needs based – we are processing what people are going through and what their questions are, and training and equipping for them. We use the bible and teach on different topics such as evangelism or conflict management."

Many other churches, including IMF Byrne in Norway use 'Lifeshapes', discipleship materials developed by Mike Breen at St Thomas Sheffield.

"We teach life shapes and try to apply it to different life situations and processes, different stuff that happens," Thomas Rake of IMF Byrne explains. "We cover questions like how do you build a team, how do you do ministry, how do you do mission? Most of our huddles meet every other week for 1 ½ hr – just try to disciple each other and one leader in each of three celebrations huddles the house group leaders.

At St Thomas Crookes, team rector Mick Woodhead meets the cluster leaders on a monthly basis. Each leader gets personal time and then there is time together for envisioning. In turn the cluster leaders huddle the cell group leaders once a month.

Once a term Mick meets with all the leaders in the church, and twice a year he spends a day with the cluster and cell leaders before the biannual vision Sunday.

MSC leaders at St Andrew's Chorleywood are huddled once a term, a task shared by associate vicar Andrew Williams, MSC Coordinator Ruth May, and MSC Development Directors David and Jenny Rosser. "The intention is to provide a place and time where we can be available for the leaders" explains David Rosser. "Over time we will ask questions about how the MSC is doing; how they as leaders are doing and how are they as individuals. We will look at the different elements that affect the MSC, including the 'Up', 'In', 'Out' dimensions. Exploring the development of the mission and vision of the MSC is always important and where necessary we will help them think through any issues that are causing problems or blockages. We also help them explore the potential for the multiplication of the group and the release of new leaders and vision. Above all we spend time praying for and ministering to them. Their spiritual and physical welfare are our major focus during these times."

In months with five Sundays, Mark Stibbe (the vicar) and Andrew meet all the MSC leaders. They are also starting to have a time of worship and commissioning twice a year. An annual MSC leaders conference focuses on the DNA, vision and values of the MSCs, and when the church is hosting any other conferences, the main invited speaker is asked to do an evening session for church staff and MSC leaders.

As far as theological training goes, St Andrews runs a year long course called 'LATTE', which stands for "leadership and training theology evening". We are not teaching theology for the sake of theology," says Andrew, "we are teaching theology for the sake of mission – it's applied theology for missional leaders. And we don't twist MSC leaders' arms to attend; they volunteer – and there is a good uptake."

4. How are mid sized groups being used in church planting?

Mid-size groups have a primarily missional function – so want to grow, but by their very definition they are mid-sized, with no more than 60 members at a time. When they get bigger than this, it is logical that they reproduce. This means they have huge potential in church planting, either as a basic building block of a church planting organisation, or as a movement within the existing church structure.

As a basic building block of a new church planting organisation

Carlton Deal of The Well, Brussels wanted to create reproducing groups of disciples but he read somewhere that if a church doesn't multiply within the first few years, it is less likely to in the future.

"This terrified me," he admits. 'I like the idea of the hedgehog concept⁷ – hedgehogs aren't so clever but can do one thing really well – roll up into a little spiky ball so the fox can't get at them. So we should know what is the one thing we really want to be best at, and for us it is to equip teams of ordinary people to be able to lead reproducing, Christ-centred communities.

"Each expression has a 5 team of bi-vocational lay-leaders, with the potential to become a church in its own right. It's a bit like the spokes of a wheel, with the All Well as a centre, and the expressions like a wheel. As time goes on however, the

expressions themselves should reproduce and gain satellites off of them. "

Just over a year ago Zolder50's home groups each committed to go to another city in Holland, in an exercise they called 'spying the land'. Most home groups spent a weekend in the city carrying out surveys to discover what people thought about God and each other, but they were also tasked with getting to know the city to see if they could possibly plant a church there in the future.

Back in Amsterdam, the church recently split into two 'Neighbourhood churches' with four home groups (75 people) in each. They have some connections and ties, and meet in the same building although at different times. Zolder50's optimum size for a neighbourhood church is between 50 and 150 people, so in theory, as these two churches grow they will split again. In that way they have the potential to become a network of neighbourhood churches across the city, who are loosely organised as a City church that meets once every two or three months for worship and envisioning.

Thomas Rake of IMF-Byrne, Norway says their church is a 'congregation of twelve housechurches, and his dream is that these individual housechurches will multiply and spread all over their area and beyond.

In Bristol, UK members of **The Order of Mission** (www.missionorder.org) are planting missionary communities in pioneer settings. The leaders are linked through their membership of the Order and the local network, however the communities meet independently of each other. They all come together once a month for a shared teaching weekend focusing on the key things what it is to be a church, and may in the future meet for celebration style gatherings in a public space in Bristol.

Church Plant leader Mal Calladine says they are relationship driven, with building relationships and communities coming before events. “In *The Forgotten Ways*⁸, Alan Hirsch says it is important to decentralise in order to prevent institutionalism. As soon as you start to centralise you lose some sense of the life. Community, autonomy and accountability are high values in our model of church.”

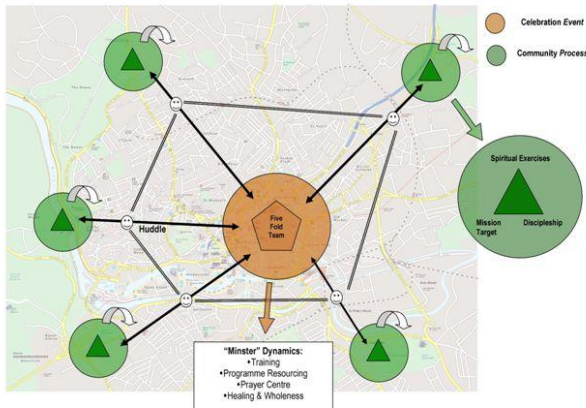


Diagram 3 – The Order of Mission’s Bristol Vision diagram. The green circles represent communities each with the ‘up, in and out’ dynamic.

c|movement’s ‘nets’ are groups of housechurches that function as independent lay-led units. An apostolic team of church planters will pray in an area for some months, then evangelise as a group because ‘as a group you win groups’ says core team leader Florian Bärtsch.

“As a group grows in faith it becomes a committed community, led by a deacon who is trained out of the group. A shared DNA comes from the apostolic church planting team to the committed communities. Once a net of communities comes together, each member of a housechurch is trained in discipleship as the normal spiritual level. But in addition to the basic discipleship we develop the different ministries according to the five-fold ministry in Ephesians 4.

“In one house you might have an evangelist and in another house you have a praying person, with a lot of fire, so then

you let them rotate,” explains Florian. “These people have the same function as the circulatory system has for the human body. The bloodstream brings oxygen to every cell of the body. The Eph 4 people do the same for the net and help to keep the net alive.

The elders are stabilizers who oversee the values of the ‘net’. So the apostles plant the DNA, the deacons develop it in individual houses and the elders oversee the values in a net.”

“Once a net gets to 75 people, if they are reaching more people then they multiply in two nets with three cc and grow from there. Because we have this structure it forces you from the first day on to train the people for multiplication, so houses have to reproduce houses, deacons have to reproduce deacons, and elders reproduce elders and nets have to reproduce nets. It is from the beginning a very strong multiplication strategy because you know this will happen and you aim for.”

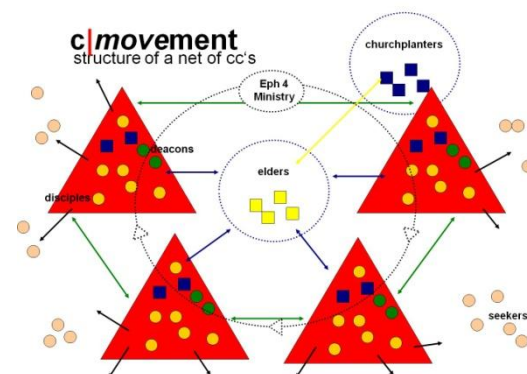


Diagram 4 – c|movement’s model of church planting within housechurches.

Use 2: as a movement alongside existing church

Mid sized groups are well established at St Thomas Crookes Sheffield. They are made up of smaller cells and together are part of the larger celebration on Sundays at the main church building.

But the church leadership are beginning

to perceive something different is happening where some of the clusters are taking on a life of their own, with a particular focus on university students (www.churchforstudents.com) and young people. This, says team rector Mick Woodhead, is the beginnings of a movement, and needs to be dealt with differently if they are to be allowed to take off.

According to Mick, there are three elements required if we want to move from a cluster to a movement.

1. *Develop diversity:* Allow low control and high accountability through the huddle structure to encourage diversity. For example, a group of young adults started with nine members, but now have sixty, reaching out to the café culture in Sheffield. Other clusters are multiplying very quickly in the workplace or among young families.

2. *Cultivate community:* The clusters are meeting together as celebration only twice in year – one is a community event during a weekend, where they have a barbeque and the kids come, and the other is an adults only event. This is a new thing allowing a rhythm of community to keep the connections even as they start to grow. Even if more and more groups happen, they can still keep this sustainable and multipliable model.

3. *Counter conformity.* Groups must constantly ask ‘why do we have to do that’ - if instance when groups meet, why do we always get the guitar out to play? They need to be encouraged to break into a new thing. A leader’s job is to ask ‘why?’, and the accountability is to say ‘this is why we are doing it’.

Normisjon Storsalen in Oslo, Norway has four Sunday services, with up to 400 attending the 5pm G2 service alone. But they are also finding that moving to the cluster model has created the beginnings of a movement, even though Pastor Trond

Loberg says in the beginning they had planned to have the classical system of cell, cluster and celebration used in Sheffield.

“What is really happening is that the small groups are growing out from the celebration and the cluster is more like a small church beside the mother church,” he says. “Most people quit the mother church and start a cluster. We are growing them organically and not organising them. Those who have caught the vision and are doing clusters have more of an apostolic gifting and really want to reach out.”

Most small church clusters meet together weekly and usually eat together. One local group has the vision to be salt and light in an area, getting to know people and build relationships. The group meets all together for teaching once a fortnight. The alternate weeks they have what they call ‘the table’ when they have talk and pray together and have together with the Lords supper included. But they have grown now to the point where they are have to meet in two homes for ‘the table’.

Trond is convinced about the potential of mid-sized groups in church planting. “For my part the cluster is the church,” he states. “The mission field is so big. We haven’t reached it in the traditional way; we need new ways. Some of the clusters will be released from our church - if they are only 10 people they are still a church and some of them will grow up to be a celebration and a church in their own right. I don’t want to focus on how they will grow – I just want to get them out there.”

“Mid-size groups really have potential to reach new people; not just that people will come to Christ but that they will be disciples and they will flourish in the gifts God has given them – bringing them from passivity.”

¹ D.A.CH stands for Germany, Austria and Switzerland

² Story told in 'The Gold Index' Summer 2007, a termly newsletter with testimonies from mid-size communities in the church.

³ Bob Hopkins & Mike Breen, *Clusters creative mid-sized missional communities* (3dm publications, 2007) See chapter 14 'Tracing Cluster Roots' for background on the development of clusters at St Thomas Sheffield.

⁴ Ibid 'Cluster Summary', inside front cover

⁵ Neil Cole *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (Leadership Network Publication 2005)

⁶ Summarised from 'From renewed – through catechumenal – towards missional church' by Keld Dahlmann. First published in Danish in the Danish Theological magazine 'Icthus' May 2007 vol 34 issue 2, ISSN 0105-4791

⁷ From Jim Collins *Good to Great* (Random House 2001) See ch5 pg 90 – 119

⁸ Alan Hirsch *The Forgotten Ways* (Brazos Press 2006)

Further resources:

www.3dministries.com – a website with lots of resources on clusters, lifeshapes and church in transition.

European Church Planting Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is



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