

Church-Growth Strategy Goes Global

The 'G12' model made popular by a 300,000-member Colombian congregation is spreading

A cell-church strategy that is credited with growing a Colombian congregation to more than 300,000 members is spreading in the United States, with one Louisiana pastor seeking to use the model to plant churches worldwide.

The G12 cell-church model made popular by César Castellanos, founding pastor of International Charismatic Mission in Bogotá, Colombia, is being touted as a new key to church growth by several prominent charismatic pastors, including Dick Bernal of Jubilee Christian Center in San Jose, Calif., and John Hagee of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio.

Castellanos is touring the world teaching at G12 conferences in places as diverse as New York, London and Nigeria. This month pastor Larry Stockstill of Bethany World Prayer Center in Baton Rouge, La., one of Castellanos' chief supporters in the United States, will host an Encounter God, America! G12 Cell Conference to explain the model that he said more than doubled the cells in his church—from just under 500 to more than 1,200, with each group comprising 12 members.

"There are other cell-church systems; we don't come against them," Stockstill told Charisma. "But we feel this is a discipling mechanism. You're not just putting people together in groups of shared interests; this is discipleship."

Though cell-church ministry is not new, in the last decade G12

has emerged as a leading strategy, employed nearly as often as the model popularized by Korean pastor David Yonggi Cho, whose Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul once was the largest in the world.

"We tried it [Cho's system] but just didn't experience the growth we longed for," Castellanos said. "From 1983 to 1990, we only had 70 cells."

He said he received a vision in 1990 regarding a new discipleship program based on Christ's model of mentoring 12 disciples, then sending them out to disciple others. "Jesus was reproducing His character in His group of 12," Castellanos said. "We have to do the same thing. You have to choose 12 people, then you have to reproduce the character of Christ in those 12, then every one of them will do the same with another 12."

Calling his program the Government of 12 (G12), Castellanos incorporates an intensive, gender-specific training curriculum; an Encounter weekend at which participants address hidden areas of sin and emotional hurt; and a School of Leaders course.

Castellanos said the approach caused his church to grow to 48,000 cells throughout Colombia. After an assassination attempt in 1997, Castellanos and his wife, Claudia, a former Colombian senator, moved to the United States and in 2001 planted a church in Miami that is said to have 200 cells.

"We have been able to show the world something that has been proven," Claudia Castellanos said.

Indeed G12 is going global. In 2002 Stockstill began leading a Global G12 Project aimed at training leaders and planting churches worldwide. Dividing the world into 12 regions, Stockstill oversees leaders in each area, who all mentor groups of 12. With more than 700 churches planted since the initiative began, Global G12 leaders hope to start a total of 1,759 churches by the end of the year.

"I haven't found a place where it doesn't work," said David Pursifull, a missions pastor at Bethany and coordinator of Global G12. "It's a principle that's flexible. It's basically just going back to the Scriptures and doing what Jesus did."

At Cornerstone Church, pastor John Hagee said since he began using G12 in 1998 he has had to add roughly 1,000 seats to accommodate the weekly attendance. But he said the system has changed his congregation's spiritual maturity more than its size.

"Every member of our church was instantly accountable to someone," Hagee said. "We were developing leaders of high caliber ... very rapidly. What used to take years was taking weeks and months because of the intensity of the training. These [leaders] were mature, better-equipped ... Spirit-filled Christians who were excited about evangelism."

G12, however, is not without its critics. Some have said the model can become legalistic and works best in nations where people are used to being told what to do.

"Our experience in trying various traditional small-group models was that they often have to be managed heavily from the top level of church leadership, they involve fairly

complicated systems, and require a commitment that most people are hesitant to make,” said Ted Whalen, pastor of small-group ministries for New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo.

While he said G12 is helping fine-tune cell-church ministry, Joel Comiskey, California-based missionary-turned-professor who did his doctoral dissertation on G12 and has written two books on the subject—takes issue with G12 advocates’ insistence that churches adopt, not adapt, G12 principles.

“Castellanos followed Cho exactly, then adapted [his model],” Comiskey said. “Now he’s not giving room to others to adapt his model as he did. My feeling is that we should be just as César Castellanos: adapt and be creative.”

Stockstill said his church did not experience strong growth until it adopted G12 precisely. And having observed the shepherding movement in the 1970s, he said G12 is not authoritarian. “The shepherding movement was based on total control of a disciple; this is based on releasing disciples, ” Stockstill said.

Other critics have expressed concern about placing undue significance on the number 12. Typically, scholars say Christ’s choice of 12 disciples symbolized that He embodied a restored Israel, according to the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. But Hagee believes 12 is the number of government in Scripture.

“When God established a nation, He established it around 12 tribes ... and it has been through 6,000 years of persecution ... yet it endures. Jesus chose 12, and He established the kingdom of God, and it has been through persecution ... yet it stands.

When you have that number, you have for whatever reason a divine paradigm that God endorses.”

Yet observers say G12’s strength lies in its emphasis on mentoring and releasing new leaders. Ted Haggard, pastor of New Life Church and author of *Dog Training, Fly Fishing and Sharing Christ in the 21st Century*, which explains his philosophy on building cells around areas of shared interest, said Stockstill is a strong leader whose church would have flourished with or without G12.

“I think the strength of G12 is that it places individual responsibility and specific goals on people so they feel that ministry is something they can do,” Haggard said. “Larry Stockstill is such a great Bible teacher that he could use any system and it would work. His success comes from his anointing, not from this system.”

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