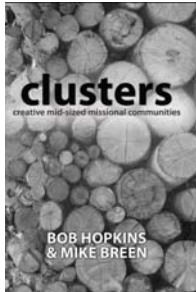




Clusters: Midsized Missional Communities – December 07



Several months ago I was networking with Dr. Kent Hunter, Ministry Consultant Leader for Church Doctor Ministries, (www.churchdoctor.org). In the midst of a discussion on the many values and strategies of midsize groups, he asked me if I had ever heard of “Clusters” at St. Thomas church in Sheffield, England. Kent has led several exposure groups of pastors and leaders to Sheffield. He said clusters were a catalyst for a revival movement in England that has now literally touched the world.

Mike Breen served as the Rector (Pastor) at St. Thomas church during the time that clusters were birthed. After serving for about a decade, Mike was invited to join the church staff of Community of Joy (www.joyonline.org) in Glendale, Arizona in 2003, under the leadership of Pastor Walt Kallestad. Mike is the Director of 3d Ministries (their website www.3dministries.com received over a million hits in the initial months it was launched) and co-authored the book “Clusters” in 2007. I spent some time with Mike, Steve Cockram, and some of their staff at a “Clusters” conference in Arizona in October 2007. I am attempting to give a brief thumbnail sketch of “Clusters” using the cluster’s book, interviews, seminar notes, etc. Understand from the beginning, that the cluster movement’s purpose is the re-evangelization of our culture.

Cluster churches passionately believe that the early church and subsequent church history reveals a significant emphasis on intermediate size groups for building community identity, a place of belonging where everyone is recognized and all can participate. More developed gifts can grow here and the mature bless the whole group. I Corinthians 11-14 is a passage often used to describe what cluster life is about. There are other references in the Old and New Testament that are used to build their case. They also reference synagogues, which are made of up to 10 males (with their families) as another example of an extended family size or a midsize group.

Cluster churches still believe in larger worship opportunities which they call, **Celebration**. This is where two or more clusters come together for worship, equipping, prayer and encouragement. They just do not build “church life” around the large worship celebration times. They believe the “norm” of the Christian faith is authentic relationships which best happens in clusters. As a result, some churches have weekly celebrations, while others might only meet as a large church once a month.

Clusters are not about buildings, a religious event or one special day of the week. Clusters are about relationships! Relationships within the group, relationships with pre-Christians who are invited to participate in cluster gatherings or in the ministry/missional focus like feeding the hungry, adoption/foster care or an interest/hobby like aerobics, scrap booking, etc. Relationships between the leaders with their coaches.

The “cluster” philosophy can look different in different settings, but here are some general characteristics:

- **An average cluster group ranges from 15 to 65 people**
Clusters are designed to be an extended family size group.
- **Made up of 3 or more small groups**
The healthiest clusters have small groups that meet regularly for a higher level of accountability. Men’s groups, women’s groups, couples, children, etc. can be part of the make up of these small groups.
- **United around a common missional vision**

Clusters are defined by a strong mission focus such as urban ministry, orphan ministry, reaching young adults or young families, feeding the hungry, etc. Breen says, "Those that lack a clear unified mission stagger and die". A cluster leader says, "Clusters are small enough to share a common vision and large enough to carry it out."

- **Ideally, organically grown from a single small group**
It is exciting to see one small group reach many for Christ and birth new small groups from within the cluster as it grows.
- **Low control, high accountability**
Leaders of clusters are not professionals! They are given freedom to develop their vision and shepherd their flock as God directs. They are accountable to a coach or pastor and they attend regular coach huddles.
- **Each cluster strives for a balance of UP-IN-OUT**
They believe that groups live out personal and group life in three dimensions: **UP** (Identity defined by intimate time spent in intimate relationship with the Father) **IN** (Relationships defined by a community following together after God) **OUT** (Purpose defined by a lifestyle that makes a difference in this world).
- **Cluster life is 7 days a week community life**
They meet together in variety of formats from the cluster meetings, small group meetings, doing their missional ministry, barbeques, accountability groups, etc. No matter what the setting is you can always count on meals together!
- **Children are valued as part of the cluster meetings**
"We believe that kids 'get' church when they experience it and see it modeled in every day life". One of the pastors from an Oklahoma church says his 9 and 11 year old have grown up in a house church cluster, that's all they know.
- **Clusters can meet at different times and in different places**
Clusters meet anywhere from once a month to weekly. Some might meet on a weekday, every week with no small groups, but a typical cluster of cells might meet three times a month in small groups and once all together. The venues are as variable as their mission focus, and they are likely to be 'on pilgrimage' since their venue needs change as they grow. Meetings have a strong fellowship and food element, worship, prayer, Bible readings & study, stories, etc.

There is so much more to the cluster's movement! I have only skimmed the surface, so I would highly recommend that you purchase "Clusters" through their website at www.3dministries.com or to check out websites of other cluster churches around the world.

Come and hear Mike Breen (and Steve Cockram) speak at the **2008 ABF Conference** held on November 14 & 15th at Hope Church in Mason, Ohio.

Submitted by Steve Lizzio, Director of ABF Resources and Pastor of Adult Ministries at Hope Church in Mason, Ohio.