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Section "E"

Cell churches find their calling

- In a religious world that is increasingly being supersized, some worshipers find everything they need in small groups.



DAVID BREWSTER • Star Tribune
Cheri Hardwick of New Brighton played a tambourine as she sang with others during a cell church service.

By JEFF STRICKLER
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Cheri Hardwick knows the name of every person attending her religious service. She knows their spouses' names, their kids' names and even some of their pets' names. She's not a memory expert. She knows everyone because there are only seven other people at the service.

Hardwick, who lives in New Brighton, is part of a cell church, the opposite end of the spectrum of the mega-church. While mega-churches measure their membership in the thousands, cells cap their membership at 10 to 12. Beyond that, it splits into two cells.

Although most cell churches meet in members' homes, they are different from home churches. And they are different from the fellowship groups that many large churches support. They are set up to be entities in and of themselves, with every member of the cell taking a turn leading services.

"Instead of sitting in a pew while a pastor or priest does all the teaching, we learn and grow from each other," Hardwick said. "I really like that concept."

Churches continues: Flexibility is the watchword of the cell churches. **E10 ▶**

Cell churches find their calling

◀ CHURCHES FROM E1

The leaders of the cell church movement in the Twin Cities are the Rev. Julie Jacobs and her husband, Robb, and their organization, Rivertown Christian Ministries International. (They live in Stillwater; thus the Rivertown reference.) They oversee cell churches in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and, of course, Minnesota, where the group officially is known as the Frontier Fellowship Cell Church. They also have full-time jobs outside their ministry.

"People are starting to realize that big-box churches don't always meet some of the deeper needs of the members," she said. "People are becoming aware of the need for more fellowship. Too many people just sit in the pews and are not fully engaged."

She quickly added that she doesn't see the cell churches vs. traditional churches issue as an either/or proposition. On the contrary, she and her husband, who also attended seminary but is not ordained, regularly attend worship services in larger churches.

"All churches are good; that's not why we started this," she said.

Robb Jacobs added: "We encourage people to go to brick-and-mortar churches. Cells are about fellowship and support, while worship services are about celebration."

It's all up to the members

Flexibility is the watchword of the cell churches, Julie Jacobs said. She creates a lesson plan that determines the topic of each week's meeting, and she has distributed a list of rules that range from the pragmatic — "We will keep matters shared in the group in strict confidence" — to the philosophical: "We will take off our masks and be transparent with one another."

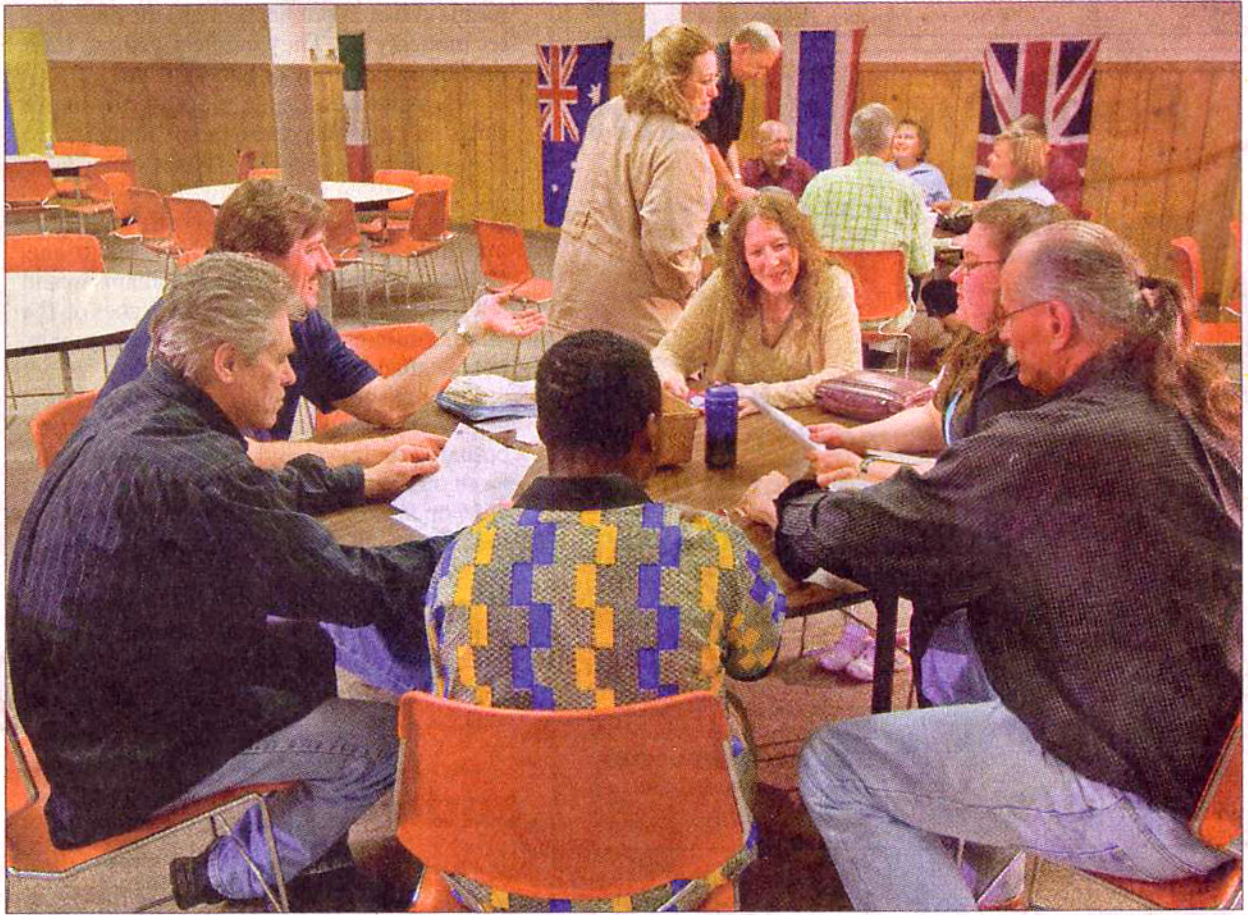
But beyond that, "it's pretty much up to the members of the cell how they want to run it," she said. "Some of the cells are set up geographically, but others are based on common interests; a couples cell, for instance, or one for young adults."

Many churches have fellowship groups organized along the same lines, she agreed, but a cell is different.

"Those are branches of a larger tree," she said of the fellowship groups. "A cell is exactly the opposite. Everything happens within the cell."



The Rev. Julie Jacobs welcomed a cell group to a service.



Photos by DAVID BREWSTER • dbrewster@startribune.com

Two cell groups met at separate tables after an abbreviated service. The groups use space made available to them at Arlington Hills Lutheran Church in St. Paul.

The biggest difference between a cell church and a home church is in the organization's ultimate goal, she said.

"Home churches are trying to grow big enough that they can get a building," she said. "Cell churches are trying to grow big enough that they can split" into more cells.

Combined services held

On the first and third Sundays of the month, the combined members of the Frontier Fellowship Cell Church gather at Arlington Hills Lutheran Church in St. Paul. On the first Sundays, Julie Jacobs leads a traditional worship service.

"It's a chance for the people in the cells to understand that they are part of something larger than themselves," she said.

On the third Sundays, she leads a shortened service and then has people break into cell groups — preferably not their usual ones — for an abbreviated meeting. Not only does this enable her

to make sure that the cell meetings are being run properly, but it also allows people to check out the format without making a commitment.

"We have people who just come to the third Sundays," she said.

The cells are "God-focused and Bible-based," but the meetings are nondenominational, and pointedly so. People trying to use them to promote a particular theology will be asked to stop and, failing that, asked to leave.

"People are encouraged to express their opinions," Julie Jacobs said. "We want them to be who they are, but we won't allow them to start putting forth an agenda."

Nor will they allow them to avoid participating. Her weekly lesson plans include discussion topics that are intended to draw out people. An example: "What are some of the challenges, distractions or struggles you face that hinder you from achieving your spiritual goals?" And then, every few weeks, each member has to

lead one of the meetings.

"If nothing else, that forces them to open their Bible," she said. "It's easy to hide in a large church. You listen and don't interact and then you leave. That's not God's plan. He wants us to be fully alive, to function on all cylinders."

That includes interacting with other people. "The purpose of the time together is to get people talking, to engage them and to develop relationships with the other participants," she said.

Those relationships were mentioned time and again by cell members who were asked what draws them.

"I like the fact that it's intimate," said Josh Wallen of Oakdale, who, along with his wife, Kelly, organized a cell. "It's very easy to get lost in [a mainstream] church. I like the accountability and friendships" of a cell church.