
Chapter One

Clusters in a Nutshell

What are clusters and why are they important? This is a very reasonable question to address right at the start. We want to give you enough of a broad overview in this first chapter to see why this may be important for you and to identify the main themes. We shall explore the practicalities of how you might best introduce and grow such mid-sized missional communities, what their gatherings may be like and how they work with different generations. In later parts of the book we will re-visit and expand the principles that we introduce here. We shall look at the mission context and also at some frameworks of doing church and see how these explain the place of clusters. We shall explore the practicalities of how you might best introduce and grow such mid-sized missional communities, what their gatherings may be like and how they work with different generations. Then in the last part, we shall seek to shed more light telling the story of how clusters developed at St Thomas' in Sheffield and have now been adopted and adapted by scores of other churches. This concludes with an honest look at their strengths and weaknesses and some questions they raise.

So we come back to our core question, what are clusters? Are they a new fad or fashion in how to do church? I hope not. In fact I passionately believe not, if we understand them rightly. We believe that they are flexible and adapt-

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able, being based on core principles rather than a rigid model. We have been working with church planting and fresh expressions of church for 25 years and throughout this time our driving aim has been to discover effective missional communities. Communities that engage with changing and diverse contexts to contribute to the re-evangelisation of our culture. We believe that clusters are examples of such missional communities Examples of emerging mode church, in contrast to inherited mode that principally connects with a disappearing Christendom.

Under the following headings we summarise the essence of these mid-sized communities.

Clusters of Small Groups or just Mid-sized Communities

Yes, at the most basic level, it was that straightforward when clusters were started at St Thomas, Sheffield. Clusters were simply a group of small groups! But they are much, much more than that, as we shall see. Typically a Cluster was composed of two to six or seven small groups or cells. And yes, it's important that the constituent small groups can be of different types. They may be a lot like cells of the cell church movement.¹ But they may be more like households or house churches.² They can draw on base community insights³ or even be the gatherings of mixed Christians and not-yet-Christians from a New Age background who socialise in one another's houses in different combinations from week to week.

But as other churches have adopted clusters, they haven't always been made up of small groups. Some churches have introduced mid-sized clusters without any sub-structure. In some cases this has been an initial phase and the clusters have later developed constituent small

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groups. Other churches have a mixture of clusters made up of small groups and others without. It could be that this mid-sized group merely has a sub-structure of accountability partnerships or prayer triplets.

So the more important question is how many people are there typically in a cluster? With between 2 and 6 small groups, it's likely that total numbers range from 15 to 65 people. Some have grown so fast that they have gone over one hundred adults and children. But one of the very significant things we have seen is that the essence of cluster as missional community begins to get lost above 60 or 70 people. The ideal size which defines cluster dynamics probably ranges from 25 to 55 adults. If there are children this may go up a little.

The important thing to grasp right at the outset is that cluster or mid-sized community defines a grouping with a specific sociological, ecclesiological and missional identity. The key is how cluster works as a community, as an expression of church and as a missionary band. These are the things we want to unpack in these chapters. As we have indicated here, clusters grow. They grow in quality and in quantity, and yes, they do multiply.

What Clusters are NOT

At the outset it's most important to clarify some things that clusters are not. No, they are not just a strategy to re-structure large churches. They embody a universal principle of healthy missional church and as such can be implemented in any size church. A small existing church of 30 to 50 could re-form itself to develop one or two clusters. Any sized church could initiate clusters in parallel to their existing body of people. Then again larger churches certainly can transition into a cluster-based approach. Some churches

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that tried and failed to introduce cell church principles have found cluster size has been embraced really well. Then later, healthy cells have emerged within the clusters.

In talking too specifically about the size of clusters we have to be a bit careful. Since leadership with vision is the seed for clusters, we have learnt to “call it what God’s put in their heart”. If a few people have caught a vision to birth a cluster, even if they aren’t as big as a small group yet – recognise and respect their faith and call it an emerging cluster. To begin with we were so set on the discovery of this extended family size community that we wanted to be rigorous and only call it a cluster if it was large enough to be bigger than a small group and preferably to already be made up of two or more small groups. But over the years we have seen that vision and faith in the founding leaders are key So call it what they have caught sight of.

Furthermore, clusters are not just a variation on cell or household church, although cluster-based church can work with and incorporate these models and insights extremely well. In Appendix 4 we explain how cluster has much in common with the cell and base community movements and certainly is a development of their insights. Cluster based church is a post-modern approach to church planting and mission. A cluster is not just another size or level of meeting. When done well, it is much more about community in mission than about meetings, though we will look at what and how they meet. (Chapter 11 and Appendix 3)

Clusters Re-discover Biblical Congregation

To understand clusters we shall need to recognise that one of the principal weaknesses of the western church is that we have lost Biblical and sociological ‘congregation’. What we now call congregation, we believe is something

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different. This is particularly serious because we define church as congregation and it's the word congregation that carries all our assumptions about church. Congregation is at the heart of how we have come to understand church. So this is precisely why it is so important that we re-imagine congregation so as to re-discover its true biblical identity and dynamic. Clusters are precisely such a re-discovery of this mid-sized community. And the avoidance of the use of the word congregation is extremely crucial if we are to break out of the conforming mental map that goes with that word.

In today's western church formed by Christendom, congregation is all about a special religious event (service) in a special building on one day of the week. The historic development of congregation as parish church and gathered chapel has taken from the Cathedral most of the characteristics of what should be celebration. It is western distortion of congregation that has enshrined clericalism and prevents the liberation of the whole people of God in community-based mission. (Chapter 6)

Clusters seek the recovery of the biblical congregation. These do not depend on a professional caste of leaders and they express a deep reality of community where absentees are missed and everyone has a chance to contribute. Clusters are about an extended family size community that recovers these interactive dynamics of participation and belonging. They are holistic missional communities. Clusters are not about buildings, a religious event or one special day of the week.

As you read chapters 11 to 14 of First Corinthians, Paul repeatedly refers to "when you meet together". And his descriptions only make sense and come to life with gatherings from 15 to 60 that do extended family community. (Chapter 5)

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Robert Warren’s influential little book *Building Missionary Congregations*⁴ gives a wonderful challenge and vision of the church becoming mission centred. My only critique to him was that it should have been entitled *Building Missionary Communities* because so much about the word congregation traps us in inherited mode.

Clusters are Defined By Mission

Clusters are communities that are defined by mission. This is their principle difference to “Pastorates” which have been successfully adopted by some churches and may be a similar sized grouping. It’s the cluster mission focus above anything else that sets them apart, holds them together, gives them identity and motivates them (Chapter 2). Clusters that lack a clear unified mission purpose stagnate or die. It is the quality that most strikes a visitor to clusters. Ideally, each cluster should be initiated and gathered round their specific mission context or sub-culture. Their driving force is to seek to be community in that context, of that context and for that context. They seek to be indigenous incarnations of the Gospel. Jon Fox, one of our cluster leaders, summed up that “clusters are small enough to share a common vision and large enough to do something about it.” (Chapter 7).

So we have seen clusters proliferating for all sorts of groups in our plural society. Some are engaging with areas that still retain neighbourhood relationships. Others are enthusiastic about a non-geographic social network such as café culture or club culture. A particular need can call for a community to be built that leads to a cluster. For example A2B cluster stands for Addiction to Belief and then Good News is a cluster that has arisen out of a drop-in café feeding the homeless. Then again, several clusters have drawn together those concerned for church in the workplace. Some

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clusters are multi-generational and others focus on youth, whilst still others reach out to young adults exploring creative community. (Chapter 12).

Examples of Clusters Mission Focus

- Link—Young adults in the workplace
- Banner Cross & Beyond—Suburban local community
- Grassroots—Inner urban local community
- Home—Young adults—creative arts
- Sadacca—Addiction to Belief...Drugs and Homeless
- D3—Clubbing scene
- Generator—Intergenerational Extended Family
- Devoted—Youth
- Walkabout—Social, Justice and Environmental issues.
- Go Global—Integrating internationals

Clusters Release a Leadership Explosion

These mid-sized communities or groups of small groups, have seen a phenomenal growth of leaders. Over 30 clusters at St Thomas' are currently led by lay leader teams... all supported by secular employment. And this is true in all the other churches we know that are becoming cluster-based. Their model of community is lightweight and low maintenance. Hence the most common and critical limitation in churches, the shortage of leaders, is released by *lowering the bar* and *raising the motivation*. These mission driven communities are exciting, dynamic places to belong and to lead. Once people catch the vision and experience the difference, many begin to volunteer to start a new group in and for the context that motivates them. In these respects clusters present a completely different prospect from traditional congregational leadership which requires a highly

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competent experienced, up- front leader for a presentational event. When potential leaders experience clusters they begin to think, “I could have a go at this... I might even do it better!” (Chapters 6 & 10)

Leadership development in this mid-sized community or bundle of small groups, also has a crucial difference from the cell church model. Leaders of small groups grow to the next level by leading a slightly larger community of faith. Rather than in Cell Church when good cell leaders cease leading a faith community and just move up a ladder of increasing pastoral support and oversight as they become cell supervisors and then area supervisors. By contrast, in clusters leaders grow in key gifts and skills, such as vision casting, mission engagement, speaking and community development, in manageable steps. And exactly the same is proving true amongst teenagers involved in leading youth clusters (Chapter 12).

Clusters Give a Key to Evangelism & Multiplication

Cell church has brought many blessings and crucial insights for discipleship. However, what is proving the hardest barrier is cell church’s highest goal – that of growth and multiplication through effective evangelism from small groups. Aggregating cells together into clusters seems to solve the two underlying barriers.

First, a mid-sized group or cluster of cells can be more effective in evangelism by giving a more substantial pool of relationships when the cells combine to work not just with the ‘Oikos’ (relational network) of 6 to 12 people but engage a significant neighbourhood or network focus. The evangelistic effectiveness is further increased by the combined energy, gifts and ideas of 25-60 people working together in mission.

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Hence there is a more significant mission resource to respond to a more sizeable and significant mission opportunity.

Secondly, there is the resistance to growth and multiplication because cell members don't want to lose their friends. With cells grouped in a cluster, multiplication of a cell keeps all the relationships in this wider community.

What's Their Pattern of Meeting?

Here we are back to a basic functional question that's always one of the first to be asked. But like most questions addressed to this way of doing church, the answer is "it depends". Because clusters are mission driven communities, leaders will vary their pattern of life to serve the stage of their vision. They are not like a church program that runs to a certain schedule and never changes. They aim to be seven days a week holistic community rather than a one day event.

Some of these clusters may meet on a weekday, every week with no small groups. But typically a cluster of cells might meet three times a month in small groups and once all together. However, to start a cluster, leaders may want to establish the vision and so reverse the order, or even meet only as cluster and later break down into cells.

Lots of circumstances in the life of clusters can lead to other variations on these patterns. Similarly there is flexibility in whether clusters meet on Sunday or weekdays. When they are normally meeting midweek, there may be a 'cluster Sunday' once a term. St Thomas' and one or two other churches have had periods when clusters have regularly met on Sundays, but this is more challenging. It doesn't have to be like that necessarily and usually it is not advisable in the early stages of implementing clusters.

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Their venues are as variable as their mission focus, and they are likely to be ‘on pilgrimage’ since their venue needs change as they grow. So this flexibility both serves their missional nature and is a mark of a missional community in our mobile and rapidly changing social context (more on meetings and venues in Chapter 11 and Appendix 3).

Clusters Create Networked Church

The result of developing church, based on a variety of clusters engaging with diverse contexts, can be a networked church. This is distinct from a network of churches, because the clusters stay together and periodically gather in larger celebrations. Again the frequency of combined celebration gatherings can vary from weekly on Sunday if clusters are midweek, to monthly or at other longer intervals.

Most important for this networked arrangement of clusters, is the fact that the “small church” cluster expression is supported by “large church” central resourcing. This can be thought of as a matrix, with the missional communities on one axis and central teams on the other axis to provide things like finance, training, children’s resources, youth work, etc. (see chapter 2, with diagram).

This networked structure may allow the twin benefits of combining maximum diversity of mission points with increasingly effective releasing of pooled resources. However, with more churches adapting the model, this networking can vary from a tight-knit array of closely linked clusters to a much looser confederation of semi-autonomous cluster plants. Furthermore, as we saw in the emerging story in the introduction, church can arise based on cluster principles with no such network.

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But is it out of Control?

With the explosion of leaders and a loose networked structure, how is the whole show kept on track? If, in such a releasing environment, everyone is encouraged to develop vision and creativity, and such diversity is permitted, what is there to protect orthodoxy? The simple answer here is in a substantial shift from the system in most churches, which relies on high control. Leadership at every level in a healthy cluster system reverses the norm and is based on high accountability and low control. We shall see later how this can be delivered. (Chapter 4) So it's important to recognise at the outset that cluster-based church may still have recognisably similar overall church leaders; vicars, senior pastors, etc. But they will be functioning in a different leadership style and within a different structure. Again we say much more on this in chapters 4 and 9.

Clusters uncover a profound challenge to how we disciple children. When clusters first started no-one thought much about how they would affect children. There was enough to do working out how adults make this new community in mission really work. However, a progression followed, from occasional adding of events to include children, to evolving family clusters and then fully inter-generational communities. And in the process we are discovering the need for an upside-down transformation of thinking about discipling children. This exposes much existing church practice as consumerist provision of children's programmes that robs/enables parents to abdicate their God-given role to disciple their own children. Cluster-based churches are moving profoundly counter-culturally when they begin to resource parents to re-assume the responsibility. And when they equip mid-sized family communities to provide a vital supporting role in this discipling of the next generation (Chapter 13).

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Clusters By Any Other Name!

So what's in a name? Must it be clusters and can they be adapted? Certainly they don't have to be called clusters. One church is calling them 'Mid-Size Communities' ... or MSCs for short! And another calls Youth clusters 'Trash Groups'. Yet another network of rural church used the term cluster for 3 years while it established the practice of these mid-sized, all involved, missional communities, but has now reverted to calling them congregations! (Assuring us that they are still functioning as the real biblical thing). Nor do they have to be structured or supported in exactly the way St Thomas' initially developed them or exactly as we have described them here. As we have said, they may start as an aggregation of cells, or they may start with no cell sub-structure at all.

But they do need to recover the dynamic of missional communities inherent in Biblical congregation. Their flexibility makes them highly adaptable to your context but the underlying principles are what give them their remarkable effectiveness. And it's the underlying principles, just touched on in this summary that we hope to develop for you in the rest of the book.

Mike Breen's Summary of Clusters in 1995 and 2000.

When Mike Breen launched the cluster vision in 1995 he characterised them as "Missionary Congregations" expressing the three relationships UP:IN:OUT in their life together (Chapter 3). Then when the first formal Cluster Leader Training course (then called Lifeskills 3) was run in 2000, he summarized clusters as being about...

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- 1) A place of **Identity, Belonging** and **Ownership...** containing elements of wholeness and maturity. This was to be their “texture.”
- 2) A point of **Gathering...** in fact a gathering together of small groups in wider community. This was to be their “structure.”
- 3) A context of **Training...** the opportunity for all to raise to their capacity, beyond the small group.
- 4) And lastly, **Embryos...** embryo church plants... though by no means all will be or should be. This is still intrinsic to the vision.

Mike also noted that key qualities of these mid-sized communities, were energy and leadership; momentum and direction (Acts 11:23).

Read on!

This first chapter has just given a brief overview of some of the central characteristics of clusters. These characteristics, which I have summarised, make it clear that this is a whole new way of doing church, which requires a radical shift from both leaders and those led. If this summary has caught your attention, then read on. But whatever you do, don't think you have already got the essence and all you need for implementing clusters. If you plan to put any of this into action please, please read on because the church is littered with half understood failed concepts.

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- ¹ Ralph Neighbour, *Where Do We Go From Here*, Touch, 1991, and W. Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, Touch 1995 and Tony & Felicity Dale, *Simply Church*, Karis, 2002
 - ² Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, Authentic, 1999
 - ³ Jeanne Hinton, *Walking in the Same Direction - New Ways of Being Church*, WCC, 1995
 - ⁴ Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations*, CHP, 1995
 - ⁵ *Pastorates*, Alpha International, 2003