

Spreading the Word—Fast

At one of his recent Sunday services at the Heavenly Vision Center in the Bronx, N.Y., the Rev. Salvador Sabino asked all the “leaders” in the room to rise. He was shocked to see an elderly woman named Sonia among those who stood up. She was one of the quietest people he had ever known—he had once even wondered whether she was mute. Mr. Sabino then asked: “Will all the heads of a cell rise?” The woman remained standing. He later found out that, despite her withdrawn personality, Sonia had at least 48 people under her guidance. Beneath that shy exterior was a true passion for leadership.

For the other 1,400 (mostly Hispanic) attendees at the Heavenly Vision Christian Center, a nondenominational evangelical church, leadership has become a key concept in their lives. Not only are the congregants expected to mentor 12 disciples—newcomers to the church—but they must also encourage the disciples themselves to become leaders. This cascading structure, called G-12—or Government of Twelve—has proved to be a good way of gaining members while keeping the old ones engaged. The idea is to imitate the delegated leadership of Jesus’ 12 disciples. In North America, more than 380 churches have registered to use the G-12 system.

The Wharton business school couldn’t have designed a better growth strategy. According to the imperatives of G-12, leaders have to follow four steps—win new adherents, strengthen the adherents’ Christian beliefs, take them on as disciples and send them off to replicate the process—to complete the nine-month program called “The Ladder of Success.” Each leader meets with his “cell” (often in his home) apart from larger Sunday services. Disciples learn fundamental Christian doctrines as well as techniques for problem-solving, teamwork and leadership.

The system was first imported from Colombia five years ago. It was created by the Rev. Cesar Castellanos in the early 1990s, after a trip he took to South Korea (where Christians account for more than a fourth of the population). In Seoul, Mr. Castellanos met David Yonggi Cho, founder of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, the largest congregation in the world, now with more than 800,000 members, meeting in a number of satellite locations. In the late 1960s, the increasing number of his followers had forced Mr. Yonggi to restructure his church. He divided it into geographical zones called cells, where attendants were encouraged to invite other friends, even non-Christians, to attend cell meetings. These cells

has now reached around 300,000 meeting at various satellite churches throughout the country.

In Colombia, Mr. Castellanos’s wife, Claudia, who is also a pastor, has expanded her influence beyond the church. She thinks that the G-12 model should change not only lives but nations as well. In 1991, Ms. Castellanos became the first Christian senator in her country, and she has been a staunch opponent of abortion and euthanasia in Colombia ever since. Pastors from G-12 churches in Peru, Argentina, Mexico and Canada are already following her footsteps by taking on active careers in politics. Ms. Castellanos is also promoting an entrepreneurial network, under G-12 principles, to foster small-business creation.

A new system makes church membership grow exponentially.

In the U.S., the G-12 system is largely concentrated among Hispanic populations, especially immigrants.

According to Tony Carnes, the director of the International Research Institute on Values Changes in New York, smaller groups that allow for one-to-one interaction appeal to the Hispanic sense of family. They also help newly arrived immigrants to feel a sense of belonging in a strange land. Arlene Sanchez Walsh, the author of “Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Society, and Self,” explains that the structured environment provided by G-12 facilitates integration into society, because it “allows followers to travel the ranks of leadership, learn about organizations and become aware of how management structures are run in the U.S.”

Even people who are among G-12’s biggest boosters acknowledge that the system has its problems. At times it can seem an inflexible model, similar to a business franchise; as such, it may fail to adapt to the specific needs of a particular community, says Joel Comiskey, the author of “Groups of Twelve.” For instance, different pastors may need to adjust the number of meetings required or the types of readings they suggest to suit their congregants’ lifestyles. He notes as well that G-12 is a tactic for gaining new members, not a set of religious beliefs unto itself, and beliefs matter more. “Principles, rather than models, help cell churches grow,” he says.

The Rev. Joseph Mattera, from the Church of the Resurrection in Brooklyn, N.Y., says that the success of the “cell church” is yet to be seen outside of Hispanic churches in the U.S. The reasons are many, not least the American style of life, with its long working hours, cramped urban spaces (in which it is difficult to hold meetings) and jobs that require frequent travel.