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Young People in Cells – the Challenge to the Church

Liz West issues a *cri de coeur* to the churches. Too much of our dealing with Christian young people is top-down, information and entertainment-based, and does not accord them either the dignity or the responsibility that is theirs in Christ. Explaining the cell church model, she challenges churches not merely to tolerate young peoples' presence, but to accept their spiritual gifts and to give them real responsibility in ministry and mission. This is a vision of hope and growth, culturally rooted in the experience of being young in Britain today.

Introduction

The interest in cell church is growing as more churches are beginning the long process of understanding the cell model and moving their congregations into cell groups. At the same time many youth works from different denominations and streams are accepting the challenge to pioneer the cell model amongst young people and children. Conferences and resources to support the youth cell movement are aiming to give as clear an understanding as possible of what is meant by this new way of being church and particularly of releasing young people to be all that God intends them to be. There are only a handful of youth works that have been in cell groups for more than two years. This work is still in its infancy and there are many lessons ahead for us to learn. However, early signs are that young people are rising to the challenge of change and can achieve vastly more than we have come to expect.

This new way of being church is only new to our generation. At various times in the history of the church there has been a rediscovery of the need for not only corporate worship and teaching, but for the dynamic of small groups specifically committed to making disciples and reaching the lost. This was the pattern in the early church until the time in the third century when it was institutionalised into buildings with the role of leadership defined by the ordained priest. The emphasis on intentional small groups emerged again with the Anabaptist tradition, amongst Moravians and more recently with the Wesleyan groups. Some would say that there were elements present in the Jesus Movement in the 1960s.

The goal of these models of church is not primarily to change the structures, although this is necessary, but to change the values that believers live by. These values that are essential to motivate the life of cell members have been distilled down to five and briefly stated are:

- Jesus at the centre of our lives individually and together;
- Church is seen as a community of committed relationships characterised by open, vulnerable relationships of accepting, sacrificial love;
- Every member is in ministry, using their gifts as led by the Holy Spirit;
- Every member matures as they make themselves vulnerable to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives;
- Every member is involved in reaching out to those who do not yet know Jesus.

A cell is not just any small group, but one which is committed to seeing these values motivate the lives of its members. It is one which is committed to working together to reach those who do not know Jesus and to develop new leadership which allows the group to grow and multiply as new Christians join in.

These values can be seen to be driving the life of the early church in Acts 2:42-47. This passage describes how the believers lived and shows the values that motivated their lives. Their lives were transformed in a very real way by their experiences and it is evident that their motivating desire was to worship God and to have him at the centre of everything. They were living in a community characterised by sacrificial love for their fellow believers. This community was based in homes as well as larger gatherings. It was the place where seekers and new believers found the life of Jesus, where they received teaching and became disciples.

Youth work in churches today

With this in mind, what is motivating youth work today? This question needs to be asked of those leading youth and children's work in churches in this country week by week. Many churches no longer work with teenagers and where there are young people in the congregation, the average group is between ten and twenty. At worst we are seeing young people entertained while their parents get on with what real church is about. There is pressure to keep the young people who have grown up within the church family and little hope that others will be added in from non-Christian backgrounds.

These young people are being taught in order that they may have some knowledge of the Christian faith, but what is the fruit in their lives? Are we creating disciples or consumers? Even the newer emphasis on youth celebrations and culturally relevant services has not encouraged discipleship of young people. It has been an important step for the church to take account of youth culture and we now have experienced youth teams who are able to communicate with young people in a relevant way. As a result they have not only been able to keep the young people of the church, but they have also attracted those outside the church. However, without a structure that intentionally disciples young people, this model still depends on the charismatic youth leader and a lot of resources which are unavailable to many churches.

Despite our efforts, young people are still voting with their feet and have been for several decades. If they are not pleased with the programme on offer, or if the

youth leaders are not exciting enough, they withdraw from the group and create the statistics that have become so familiar to church leaders. Conformers survive, but the dissatisfied leave, and the minority that do return to church later in life have often been painfully hurt by exploring many things they live to regret.

Many, both those in Christian youth work and in the church in general, have been deeply disturbed by these trends and yet are unsure of any answers. It is not surprising then that the advent of the cell model in youth work has been so widely welcomed. But what challenges does this bring to the church?

Challenge: to rethink our expectations of young people

Is there ageism in the Body of Christ? We have some serious questions to address if we are going to see young people not just kept in the church, but released to be disciples. By disciples I mean those who are learning to live day by day not by a list of imperatives, but according to a value system which motivates their behaviour internally. Disciples will be known for the fruit growing in their characters (Gal. 5:22,23) and for their desire to be obedient to the commands of Christ.

What answers do we give to the following questions? At what age does the Lord hold us accountable to live like Jesus, calling us to love God, to love one another and to go and make disciples? At what age should we begin 'to prepare God's people for works of service' (the role of leaders as seen in Eph. 4:12)? Are there some works of service that young people should not be prepared for? At what age are we called to be good stewards of the spiritual gifts we have been given and particularly at what age should the gift of leadership begin to be used? Do gifts come with an age-related certificate, whether these are the ministry gifts listed in Rom. 12:3-8 or the charismatic gifts in 1 Cor. 12:4-12? In fact, does the phrase 'mature in Christ' have anything to do with age?

The challenge to the Church is to find biblical answers to these questions and then to allow those answers to motivate the way young people are disciplined within the church. There are inspiring biblical examples of young people being used by God. In 2 Chron. 34 we find that Josiah became king at the age of eight and by sixteen was seeking God for direction in leading Judah. He began early on to live a life committed to serving God and was used effectively by God as a result. David was a young man when anointed by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:11-13) who had himself been called as a boy (1 Sam. 3:1-10). As a young man Daniel was used by God in Babylon because he was able to live in an idolatrous culture and yet was not influenced by it. John Mark (Acts 12:25) and Timothy (Acts 16:1-5) as young men were part of establishing the early church. It appears that Jesus himself chose young people to be his disciples.

Culture has changed and adolescence has been extended as education has taken a higher priority. However, it could be argued that there is a low expectation in the church today of the contribution that young people can make. As a result these expectations have been fulfilled and young people do not themselves expect to contribute to the work of the Kingdom. This must be a factor that has increased their disillusionment with the church.

Challenge: to find a new model that will disciple young people

It is perhaps this motivation to keep young people in the church that has led to the adoption of models of youth work that have not been effective enough in equipping young people to be disciples, to use the spiritual gifts they have been given or to contribute acts of service to build the Kingdom of God. There has been a desire to make it easy for them and to please them. Now there is a need to find a new model of youth work that releases young people to be disciples, not just in their ones and twos, but in numbers that can have an impact on their generation. Perhaps we have come across young people who are no longer debating who should run their lives. They know that Jesus is Lord of their lives and they are motivated to build a relationship with him. Out of this relationship flows obedience to his commands and a commitment to grapple with their sin and to serve him in whatever way he reveals to them. They are inspiring and effective. Cell groups encourage more young people, more of the time towards this kind of commitment. How is this possible?

Youth cells that are peer-led depend on young people using their gifts, learning to serve and committing themselves to the values that drive cell life. The structure of a youth work based on cell groups encourages this value system. The basic building block is the cell and everything else supports it. Cells gather for larger meetings for worship and teaching. This facilitates good Bible teaching for everyone as well as an opportunity for relationships with others from different cell groups. The teaching is used as the basis for a life application time in cell group meetings. In this way youth leaders are able to direct the focus of the whole youth work and to ensure that young people's lives are being impacted by the Word. They become 'doers of the word and not just hearers' (James: 1:22) in accountable relationships.

Within the cell meeting there are opportunities for all young people to use their gifts. Whether it is the gift of hospitality as the cell meets in the homes of different cell members each week, or of exhortation to encourage their friends on through the process of change; everyone has a contribution to make. The meeting is in four parts, Welcome, Worship, Word and Witness, each encouraging the values to be established and cell members to contribute.

The group forms each week with a Welcome question or activity which enables everyone to participate and get to know each other. As a new group forms this is an essential part of creating a community. Honesty in sharing is encouraged by the leader being prepared to openly and appropriately share and begin the process of people being vulnerable to each other. This paves the way for deeper sharing later in the life of the group. At times young people might talk about hurts and difficulties in response to the Welcome time. This is an opportunity for the group to gather round and pray, releasing God's healing into that situation.

In the Worship time, one of the young people leads the others into the presence of God. Sometimes this is done by singing or listening to a worship CD, but groups creatively use this time to worship in other ways. They use a psalm to thank God for who he is and what he is doing, or write their own psalm or poem, worshipping through creation or giving testimony to what God is saying and doing in their lives.

The aim is to concentrate on God in worship and allow him to speak through the young people to others in the group.

Cell groups are not bible study groups, but there is always a time for applying teaching with the goal of allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in the lives of young people. Having worshipped God, the group then looks at the teaching and applies the Word to their lives. Some are concerned to release young people into leadership because they suspect that they will not have enough biblical knowledge to keep the group from getting into error. This is a risk that is taken even when adults lead homegroups. It is the joint responsibility of both the young leaders and youth leaders to work together to minimise this risk. The young leader needs to be motivated to read the Bible and to learn in as many ways as possible. It is the youth leaders' responsibility to encourage young people to increase their knowledge and particularly to recognise and encourage the gift of teaching amongst the young people. The teaching at monthly Cell Celebrations should be given by experienced Bible teachers who are able to communicate the truth in a way that young people can hear it. It is especially important that this teaching is applied in the cell meetings.

The goal of the Word section of the cell meeting is to increase understanding and to bring to light issues that the Holy Spirit is wanting to deal with. It is here that the dualism that is part of our postmodern culture is challenged. Questions like 'how does God want us to live?' and 'how do we need to change as a result of what the Bible teaches?' help young people towards holiness and right living. Attitudes are challenged and hurts shared. The young people are then able to pray for one another, using the gifts of the Spirit. There is a degree of accountability in the group about these issues, although many cells break into yet smaller groups where real accountability is possible. These groups of two or three might well meet at another time during the week.

The fourth part of the meeting is given over to planning outreach and praying for their friends who are not yet Christian. The young people are encouraged to particularly pray for three friends who they spend most time with to become Christians. The group finds ways of introducing these friends to other Christians in relaxed social situations. Eventually those who are interested in finding out about Christianity and what happens in the cell are invited along to a cell meeting, or an Alpha course that the young people run themselves for their friends. New leaders are trained up through the life of the cell group so that the group can divide into two small groups again as it grows to about twelve. Cells are able to accommodate rapid growth as a result.

Although the structure of the cell meeting can appear restricting it has three definite purposes. Firstly, it is reasonably easy to lead which is essential if inexperienced young people are going to do an effective job. Secondly, it enables new leaders to be developed as each part of the meeting can be given away to a group member who is ready to take responsibility and understands the purpose of what they have been asked to do. In this way new leaders can practice under the eye of the current leader who is more experienced. Thirdly, it allows the group to stay on track as far as the values are concerned because the structure supports the values.

Although the structure is helpful, more experienced leaders will be able to highlight one part of the meeting structure if that seems more appropriate during one meeting. They will get to recognise where the Holy Spirit is leading the group and can move away from the structure to follow that lead. We have seen that cell leaders as young as fourteen are able effectively to lead a group of their peers using this structure. They have seen their cell members grow as disciples and their friends become Christian.

Challenge: to grapple with youth culture

Youth culture in itself brings a challenge to the church. It is highly relational, with young people turning to their peers for supportive and trusting relationships before they turn to any adult. Young people want to create their own story and do not want to accept the story handed down to them from a previous generation. They want to participate and have ownership of what they are involved in and that includes the way they like to do church.

When we run youth work by providing programmes for young people which are adult inspired, driven and organised, we encourage them to become passive consumers. Are we then surprised when we cannot compete with all the range of high quality activities that are on offer for young people or with the pressures of school work? Even meetings that are based on 'hot topics' do not necessarily encourage young people to develop their own relationship with God. There is much emphasis on knowledge and understanding and not on personal application of that knowledge to bring about change in the internal motivation of a young person. They are also not experiencing that level of community which is the necessary environment to allow them to share hurts and difficulties and to encourage the level of Christian life-style which the Bible prescribes for believers.

Young people who are influenced by their 'pick and mix' culture are even more in need of a place where they can be truly honest and where issues of dualism will surface. If they are listening to the voice of their culture which says that if something feels good to them they should do it or believe it, they will struggle with maintaining a relationship with the Lord with any consistency. It is doubtful whether a group of more than twelve can be committed to building the true community that is required to create young disciples. This brings a challenge to the church where youth work is organised around events and activities.

Peer-led youth cell groups on the other hand do answer many of the difficulties of discipleship within our post modern culture. They are based on building quality relationships and create ownership and participation. They are very adaptable to different cultural groups as each group lives out the values in the way that is relevant to their situation. They also provide a place where dualism can be exposed and an accountability that supports individual change. In this way they challenge current attitudes to releasing young people by taking the step of trusting them to take responsibility for their own Christian lives and the lives of others as well.

Challenge: to change the way youth leaders work

Potentially one of the greatest challenges cell groups bring to the church is in the changing role of the youth leader. Traditional youth work has a high dependence on the youth leadership team. A charismatic leader grows the group and inspires the youth team, but what happens when the time comes for the leader to leave? Currently this is happening on average after just over two years in Britain for full time youth leaders and less for volunteers. The strong relational basis of youth work means that the loss of the leader is hard for the young people. When young people are in cell groups adult guidance and contribution is essential.

However the challenge this model brings to youth leaders is to become those who disciple young leaders, who identify the few and develop them in order for them to lead the rest. Initially it feels as if there is a loss of control by the youth leader and this is so when young leaders are released to run cell meetings without adults present. Despite close relationship with the cell leaders, this does mean a commitment to different thinking. Success is not seen in terms of exciting programmes and numbers in the group. Success is measured by whether young people are living out the values of cell life, being released to make their contribution.

A leader who empowers others is not abdicating their job or even delegating tasks to young people. It is not the common story of 'our young people are involved, they take the monthly youth service'. Not that this is a wrong thing for them to do, but it is limiting. Empowering young people is releasing them to be the people God made them to be. A youth leader needs to know the young people well enough to know how to do this as each one has a unique set of needs. Following Jesus model of choosing twelve disciples, the focus for the leader will be on those young people who will then be able to lead the others.

The youth leader's job will be in supervising the cell leaders, helping to choose and train new leaders and taking on any pastoral problems that the cell group is not able to handle. Initially the youth leader will need to organise cell celebrations, but in time these too need to be given away to the cells to do. Instead of responsibility for Friday night or Sunday youth meetings, youth leaders have weekly contact with cell leaders, a monthly cell leaders meeting and regular peer cell leadership training. Youth leaders empower the cells to take responsibility for weekly cell meetings and any outreach events that the cell sees as being necessary. Much of the adult leaders' time is now spent in building friendships with cell leaders in order that they can be a helpful role model. This does not happen through meetings, but through sharing life together. It grows out of relationship and every year new relationships form with new leaders as the eighteen year olds leave for further education and younger leaders need to be found and equipped.

This change of role includes a new mindset and can be difficult for those who have been used to being in control. They have to learn to allow young people to make mistakes in order that they grow and become dependent on Christ as maturing disciples. The good news to the church at this time when there are fewer young adults in church who have traditionally led youth work, is that peer led cells do require less adult time. This is especially so when the adults involved are living the true role of one who releases and encourages others.

Challenge: to adapt to include the unchurched

Perhaps this is the greatest challenge of all. How will the whole family of the church respond to an influx of young people who are new Christian or at least on their journey to faith? This becomes especially exciting when many, if not most of these young people will be from backgrounds where Christianity has never been considered and where church is seen as an out dated institution, irrelevant to life. It does seem that young Christian people do not want to be separate from the rest of the church. They openly value relationship with others outside their peer group. They do see their need for support and wise counsel.

Will we learn to put aside our own preferences in order to accommodate this new life? Is it possible to see the family of God not confined to ageism and tradition, but to release every member into appropriate ministry whatever age they are and however new a Christian? Will there be a time when the whole church will be here to worship God, love one another and be so concerned for those who do not know him that they change their lifestyle to reach them? These are huge issues, but experience has shown that as young people start living the values behind life in cell groups they do bring a challenge to adults in church. The challenge is to rethink values and to learn to release young people.

It is early days yet for this model of youth work, but Christian young people, supported through cell life are seeing their school friends become Christians and be discipled. Will the church rise to the challenge of change to include this new life in? If we fail to do so, young people will not stop reaching out to their friends, but will become separated from the rest of the Body of Christ. We will all be the losers by that separation. If we are prepared to welcome them in and work out ways of building relationships with these young people, all our lives will be enriched as we see young people released to be the people that God intended them to be, making their contribution to the life of the church.

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Further reading

William Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, Touch Ministries, Houston 1994.

Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, WS, Pasadena 1996.

CelliT - How to Start Youth Cells (available through Youth With a Mission).