

# Reaching and keeping older teens through the use of cells!

(YWG ed.2 – nymo site edition Dec 2002)

No I don't mean locking them up, but rather creating small groups called cells that will meet some of the needs of the older teens in our parish and draw in those who are outside, so that they can grow in a relationship with God.

Today, many young people are deeply isolated/insecure; therefore, belonging to something is a need that is strongly felt. However acting against this drive is a powerful cynicism which says "trust no-one, especially those in authority". Since many older people tend to be viewed either with some suspicion as authority figures or with disinterest as "dinosaurs", peer groups are felt to be the crucial place to belong.

Our job, then, is to create a place where young people can get a sense of belonging, where they will be accepted right away simply for who they are not for what they do or believe. A small group or "Cell" is such a place.

It is a group of less than a dozen young people who meet together weekly to talk about their life of faith or (perhaps more realistically at the start) their lack of it. It aims to become a group that in time will grow, both numerically and spiritually, but in the meantime provides mutual support and encouragement no matter what the spiritual condition of its members. It is a safe environment to express views because of clear mutual agreements, made right at its beginning, about confidentiality and the gentle acceptance of the views of others.

A cell meeting generally has the classic 4 W's structure, which, working through the session, runs as follows –

- A Welcome time, drinks and food of some sort with some social time to loosen everyone up (maybe an Icebreaker of some sort).
- A Worship time, any creative culturally relevant way (maybe music) to place Jesus clearly at the centre of the meeting
- A Word time, where some part of the bible is looked at together to work out practically what God is asking us to do. This part may take some time to develop; in its early stages the group might discuss a subject that interests them and then at the leader's suggestion, look at scripture to see the Christian perspective. This needs to include practical suggestions for specific action in the following week.
- A Witness time, where we speak about our struggle to live out what God wants of us, especially in light of what the group discovered in the previous weeks Word session. The leader can facilitate this "witness" by encouraging everyone (including themselves) to share with the group how they managed to live out what was discussed in the previous weeks Word session and generally to say what they are feeding their spiritual lives with, i.e. a prayer, spiritual reading/tapes etc.

Clearly in the early stages of the group all aspects of the session have to be modified to reflect the membership i.e. we wouldn't expect them to have brilliant prayer lives and be into serious spiritual reading but the principle is "**any** prayer or spiritual reading is good, encourage it".

The leader must gradually introduce the Christian aspects in a way that won't scare off the first members who should be those older teens still involved in parish life. Because of this the social aspects of the group are very important and this is especially true in its early days, so the venue of the cell meeting is crucial. A warm, friendly, comfortable environment is crucial in helping people to relax and to begin to trust each other enough to be open. Establishing such a group from scratch could, for example, involve a video and pizza evening with time built in to discuss a carefully chosen but spiritually provocative video.

The 4 W's structure is used so that running such a group can be made as simple as possible as we are hoping that members of the group will end up running it once the numbers reach a dozen. When this happens the cell divides (hence the name "cell") to form two new cells.

The aims of the group are three-fold:

- Personal growth – through putting into practice clear practical principles gleaned week by week from the Word section and from listening to the experience of others in the Witness time.
- Multiplication – the number of cells multiplies by new members joining until there are sufficient for cell division to occur.
- Mission - the task, as the group matures, of bringing friends into the group so that it's size increases.

The benefit of this type of group is that it draws young people in from the fringes and beyond to the centre of the parish, very naturally, through the network of friends that the young people already have. It provides sustenance and support for its members who are exposed to spiritual life in a way that is culturally acceptable to them. It builds a place of trust and openness into which Jesus can come. Lastly, in a church lacking large numbers of full-time youth workers, once established the cell(s) will run without the need for intensive adult supervision. Suggestions for cell meeting outlines can be found in, for example, Youthwork Magazine (see [www.youthwork.co.uk](http://www.youthwork.co.uk)), and at [www.deepimpact.org/](http://www.deepimpact.org/).

For a more academic study of the psychology behind cell group structure, try reading Liz West's insightful study in 'perspectives' issue 1: 'Young people and the theology of the church', available to download from [www.fyt.org.uk/perspect/download.html](http://www.fyt.org.uk/perspect/download.html)

*A Servant*