

Student Led Cell Groups: Nothing Short of a Revolution

Published in Youthworker Magazine, September/October, 1998

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There is a dynamic, life changing movement among teens that's impacting the very foundation of youth ministries all over the world: Kids reaching their friends for Christ through student led cell groups.

I was a new youth worker in the mid-1980's, and I was growing frustrated with the lack of follow-up at teen-focused crusades and evangelistic outreaches. If, for example, 1,000 kids come to Christ during a three-day crusade, follow-up might be left in the hands of a 35 member adult staff. And there's no way 35 adults can handle all those kids!

But this method was all I knew. It was—and is—the way outreach to youths was typically and traditionally conducted. Heavy on the flashy entertainment with low-key gospel messages and light on follow-up and nurturing. So I continued with loud music, flashy light shows, and games. I saw kids having fun, but I saw little depth fostered in them. Sure there were small group Bible studies and prayer partners—more intimate structures in place—but the students weren't completely connecting with the programs we were setting up for them.

Then I heard Ralph Neighbour of Touch Outreach Ministries in Houston singing the praises of cell groups. He said they never grow larger than 15 members; they meet in homes; they're evangelistic—members invite non-Christian friends to the groups; if these friends become Christians, the group that helped birth their new faith is also charged with nurturing it.

I almost leaped out of my seat. "That's the answer to the follow-up question!" I exclaimed to myself. Soon I was studying the movement, and I ended up traveling to 30 countries that were using cell churches. Back then there were no web pages, no conferences, not even any books written about cell churches—yet the same ministry model somehow was thriving all around the world. It was nothing short of a revolution.

It was only natural that I started investigating how cell groups could be applied to youth ministries. Trained, committed student leaders would do the leading, follow up, and nurture—just like the adults in the cell church model.

And in the last five years, student-led cell group oriented youth ministries have been increasing in number. My organization is working with 1,000 to 2,000 youth ministries that are either completely cell-group oriented or are transitioning to that model. But that's still the minority when compared to traditional, adult-driven youth ministry models.

That's partly why I believe a lot of youth workers continue to burn out, why the average life span of youth workers still hovers around 18 months. Our hearts are just fine—it's our methods that need fixing.

We all got into youth ministry to see kid's lives changed. But the youth ministry model we've been taught—program based, adult-driven, entertainment-oriented—simply doesn't work. We've become tour guides for our students, and they've become consumers. Kids want something deeper, and they aren't getting it.

But the cell-group model has built-in intimacy because the kids there are already acquainted with each other and care about each other. It's student-led, which commands greater commitment among members. And here's the real key. Adults will never have the passion to reach and care for teens that teens themselves already possess. There will never be enough adult leaders or volunteers to reach multitudes of kids. But there are enough students to reach their friends—if they can be trained, equipped, and disciplined.

Cell-group youth ministries have been springing up all over the globe. There's a youth ministry in Bogota, Columbia—the cocaine capitol of the world—that has over 10,000 youth in student cell groups. (And there are only two full time youth workers!) I met one of their cell leaders, a 17 year old girl. Speaking through an

interpreter, she said that in four years her cell had multiplied 18 times. While on a recent trip to South Africa, I met a 22 year old youth worker who has more than 75 youth cells in his ministry.

I envision the day when like minded youth workers strategically link cities together to organize and mobilize their students to evangelize their peers through student led cell groups. When you see 15 year old kids do it all—receive training, guide the cell, make mistakes, labor over their lost friends in prayer, line up transportation to the meetings, and lead their friends to Jesus—you will never be the same.

How Cells Work

There are two primary focuses of student-led cell groups:

1. Evangelism — Equipped with well planned strategies, student leaders reach out to their well defined circle of friends. The outreach cell includes three types of students: Seekers, Hurting or New Believers, and Healthy Christians. In each cell there's a student leader, a student co-leader and a key adult to help ensure the success of the cell.
2. Leadership development and edification — The primary role of adult youth workers and volunteers is to pour their lives into the student leaders—not into every member. The adults encourage, equip, hold accountable, mentor, disciple and edify the student leaders. The student leaders, in turn, work with their cells. (That's the structure of the cell model at work; An adult mentor can disciple a few student leaders much more easily than every member of several small groups.)

Cell groups reach out to youth in the context of love, care and support. In a world that is void of meaningful relationships, kids are drawn to Christ by their peers, and in the group they can experience—often for the first time—unconditional love. The love of Jesus.

Some Nonnegotiables

Can youth ministries tailor their cells to their own particular needs? To a point, yes. But there are a few things I believe cell-group youth ministries must do in order to be successful:

1. Meet In Homes. There's something special, intimate, and safe about meeting in different homes each week. Plus, it makes more sense and is easier for kids to attend meetings in homes—they're probably visiting them on a regular basis anyway.
2. Multiply. If the cell doesn't split in two by the time it reaches 15 members, the numbers will actually start to decline as the kids observe how much more unmanageable the group has become with over 15 of their peers in it.
3. Student-led. This is a must! Adults have to give teens the responsibility of leadership while mentoring, encouraging, teaching, and yes, allowing them to fail. The group has to be the student leader's baby—completely.
4. Even mix of spiritual maturity. If there isn't a good balance of kids, the group can't work properly. The group needs non-Christians or it becomes a holy huddle. But the right combination of non-Christians, new Christians, and mature Christians can cause a unique dynamic. The lost can find life. The hurting believers can grasp hope. And the mature Christians realize, " God can use me!"

The Holy Spirit Isn't a Child

I believe we're on the cusp of a major revival in the United States. History shows that many revivals began with a ground swell of prayer among youth. Like the shifting underground plates that cause earthquakes, our kids are poised to lead us into revival.

Are we ready?

My hunch is not yet, but the pieces are coming together to bring in the harvest. And I believe the cell-group strategy will be at the center of this revival. I know of no other structure in the world that can manage the numbers and produce leaders like the cell model.

I know there are some that wonder how in the world junior and senior high schoolers can display or possess enough of maturity to lead their peers. Here's what a youth worker in Washington wrote me:

Chris was a member of our first cell group. He plopped himself into the recliner every week and proceeded to listen to the discussions. (Notice I didn't say 'participate'; he was silent.) Yet, when the time to multiply into two cells came, God put him on our hearts as a potential leader. Believe me, we argued. "God, he's a great kid, but he won't talk! Besides, he's only an eighth grader!" I asked Chris to pray about this ridiculous possibility. You should have seen his face! "Who? Me?! Do you really think I could do it?" he asked, stunned. He agreed to pray about it. Would you believe that the very next week we couldn't shut him up during the discussion? He came out of his shell just because God called him and somebody believed in him. It was great. Needless to say, after co-leading for several months, he's about to have his own group.

While teens may be young in years, the Holy Spirit inside them is no child. Is It Your Turn?

Has God been preparing you to transition from a program-based, entertainment-oriented, adult driven youth ministry to a relational, student led cell model? Listed below are some practical suggestions to help you along the path:

Pray. Seek the mind of God. Is God really calling you to a cell model?

Get pastoral backing. All too often youth workers make the mistake of being lone rangers. If you have your leadership's blessing, you'll be planted on firm ground.

Do your homework. The cell-group is radically different from most methods of ministry. You must have in place a solid game plan. You must be prepared to manage the growth or it can unravel on you.

Clearly communicate your vision and the transition; model "cell life." Enter into sincere, meaningful relationships with your potential student leaders and adults. Learn together what true Christian community is.

Carefully select and equip student leaders. Pray for your start-up leaders and train them in all areas of cell strategy. Remember, you cannot grow beyond your ability to produce new leaders.

Launch a prototype group. After four weeks of training "go live." Have your leaders start to bring in their lost or hurting friends. Quickly work out the bugs in this first cell.

Allow students to make mistakes. Keep your student leaders from drowning, but let them learn to swim.

Model a passion for the lost. There's nothing more energizing for students than leading their peers to Christ. But you must also model that same passion. Lead by example.

Raise the standard. Expect the best from your student leaders and they will rise to the occasion.

Help them succeed. Weekly, ongoing encouragement, discipleship and equipping will further their leadership potential and longevity.

It will take longer than you think. Allow for two to three years to restructure your ministry. I know of one youth worker who failed two years in a row to get a cell ministry going. But the third year produced more than 40 cell groups.

I have never seen a more capable group of Christian youth than cell group leaders. God is raising them up. Isaiah 43:18-19 says: " Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" (NIV)

The waves of revival are beginning to break. Are you and your students ready to ride them to shore?

The Outreach Cell Format

Students meet in different homes each week or every other week. Cells range in size from three to 15 students. When the groups reach 15, they multiply into two cells. A cell meeting lasts about 90 minutes. The format is as follows:

- Food (15 minutes). This allows the students time to reconnect, relax, and get some chit-chat out of the way.
- Ice Breaker (10 minutes). This draws the group together, especially if there are visitors present. It will also help leaders gauge the group's emotional condition.
- Vision statement (5 minutes). Each week several key points are shared to further the vision of the cell and inform any newcomers what they can expect from the group.
- Cell topic (45 minutes).
- Gospel presentation, ministry time, prayer (15 minutes)

A Leadership Cell Format

Student leaders and their adult mentors gather for training, equipping, strategizing, and learning how to further disciple students in the cells. Student leaders and adults typically meet in the youth worker's home. The format is different than an outreach cell:

- Food
- Ice Breaker. Much more in-depth, vulnerable, and revealing. Probing questions. Here's where everybody gets honest about their walks.
- Worship (20 to 30 minutes).
- Message. A hard-hitting message with a twofold purpose: 1) To further disciple student leaders; 2) To apply Scripture to student's weekly ministry in the outreach cells.
- Prayer. Focused prayer for student leader's concerns and for their non-Christian and Christian friends.
- Break.
- Cell equipping/strategizing. Access current ministry, work through any questions and concerns. Further training.