

# RESURRECTING THE CLASSES

## An Introduction to Cell Church for Methodists

CHURCHES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES, NOT JUST THE BUILDINGS THEY MEET IN BUT THE GROUPS OF PEOPLE TOO.

In different parts of the world during the last half of the twentieth century new movements of Christians based on small groups have emerged. God has been doing a similar thing from the Roman Catholic *Base Ecclesial Communities* of South America to the Korean mega-churches built on cell structures. This paper is a brief introduction to some aspects of these movements with a particular emphasis on what is known as Cell Church.

Bishop John A.T. Robinson wrote in 1960 that *“the theological recovery of this idea of the church in the house is one of the most important tasks of our generation.”*

Christian Schwarz, author of *Natural Church Development* has surveyed over 1000 churches across every continent. He identifies eight ‘quality factors’ common to growing churches. Of these the factor with the highest correlation between quality and growth was *‘intentionally multiplying small groups’*.

In an age of changing culture small groups are increasingly relevant. For encouraging discipleship they are almost indispensable. The class meeting or cell community is a gift Methodism holds in treasure for the whole Church - yet she

has forgotten she has this gift. It is time to resurrect the classes.

One of the keys to Methodism is its structure of classes.

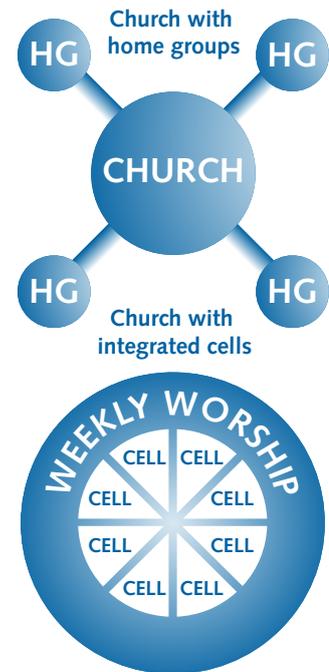
*“The weekly class meeting has from the beginning proved to be the most effective means of maintaining among Methodists true fellowship in Christian experience... All members ... shall have their names entered on a class book.”* Deed of Union 3.9

Sadly few Methodist Churches today operate a dynamic system of classes.

### WHAT IS CELL CHURCH?

Ian Freestone, a Church Army officer from Australia who has planted churches based on cells devised the diagram at the bottom of this page. It shows a range of different ways in which small groups can relate to congregations, our normal way of being ‘church’.

Cell Church is in the middle of this spectrum. In a cell church there is a balance between small groups and larger congregations. Each is recognised as being truly ‘church’. Neither is more important than the other. A cell church is like a bird with two wings - and can fly!



The diagrams above show: a) a church in which small groups are an optional extra - appendages to the church. b) a church in which small groups are integral to the church. In many churches with small groups these are an optional extra. In a cell church the congregation is a gathering of the cells. The church structure is like a honeycomb. The cells are linked, support each other and form the basic building blocks of the church.



## CELL CHURCH IS EFFECTIVE IN:

- DEVOLVING PASTORAL CARE
- ENCOURAGING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND MATURITY
- DEVELOPING THE GIFTS OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD
- SUPPORTING EMERGING LEADERS
- ENCOURAGING FAITH SHARING & SERVICE

## 6 CELL VALUES

- JESUS AT THE CENTRE
- CHURCH IS A COMMUNITY OF OPENNESS, HONESTY AND SACRIFICIAL LOVE
- EVERY MEMBER GROWING
- EVERY MEMBER IN MINISTRY
- EVERY MEMBER WITNESSING WELL
- LIVING CELLS MULTIPLY

**“No Circuit ever did, nor ever will, flourish unless there are bands in the large societies”**

John Wesley, April 1788

# A VALUE-DRIVEN CHURCH

CELL CHURCH MAY LOOK LIKE A SYSTEM - A WAY OF ORGANISING CHURCH - BUT IT IS VALUE-BASED NOT SYSTEM-BASED. THE STRUCTURES SERVE THE VALUES. THIS IS TRUE OF ALL CHURCH STRUCTURES BUT OFTEN THE VALUES ARE NOT STATED AND SOMETIMES THEY ARE NOT CHRISTIAN! IN A CELL CHURCH WHAT IS DONE IS CHECKED AGAINST THE VALUES.

## CELL CHURCH VALUES

### JESUS AT THE CENTRE...

This may seem obvious - how can you have a church which does not follow Jesus? Cell church states this explicitly and checks all church life against it.

### CHURCH IS A COMMUNITY OF OPENNESS, HONESTY AND SACRIFICIAL LOVE

Cell Church is not something we go to in a particular place at a particular time. Cell Church is about the development of small Christian communities who share their lives, their walk with God, and their witness for Jesus together. His way was the way of sacrificial love and it must be ours too.

### EVERY MEMBER GROWING

We are disciples - seeking to learn and grow in Christ. There is an expectation that members of cells are seeking spiritual growth and Christian maturity.

### EVERY MEMBER IN MINISTRY

The ministry of the whole people of God is clearly expressed in Cell Church. It is in the cells that people learn to express and share their experience of God. It is in the cells that they develop their own particular gifts.

### EVERY MEMBER WITNESSING WELL

Witness is not an optional extra. All Christians are witnesses to Jesus: what sort of witness we are is our choice. We can be true witnesses or poor witnesses, but we will always be witnesses. Cells help us to be true witnesses.

### LIVING CELLS MULTIPLY

This is a biological fact. It is true for small Christian communities as well. Without the aim of multiplication - the growth of the cell and the formation of two or more after a period of time cells are doomed, like natural cells, to die. Living, growing vibrant cells all aim to multiply.

**A different sort of Leadership** is required for cells from that normally expected of church home groups. Cell leaders are facilitators. Their skills must be in the discernment and development of the gifts of cell members. They are not there to do everything for the cell but to enable the cell to do for itself. Cell leaders must also be prepared and able to train up an apprentice leader.

**A cell is not a meeting**, though cells do meet. A cell is a small Christian community. The focus of cells in Cell Church is a weekly cell meeting but the cell is not a meeting: it is a community.

**Outreach through cells** is the norm in a Cell Church. Cells are not meetings for Bible Study or prayer - though they do these and more. They are communities and all communities have a fringe. Cell communities have a fringe of people who are not Christians who will be drawn to Christ as the cells express his life in their life. Cells will hold social events to which people on their fringe can be invited. The intention is to include people in cell life so that they can explore their spiritual journey and find Christ.

# THREE LEVELS OF CHURCH

CHURCHES NEED DIFFERENT SIZES OF GROUPS FOR DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS. JOHN WESLEY DISCOVERED THAT SMALL GROUPS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR "GROWTH IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE". HE ALSO TAUGHT HIS FOLLOWERS TO ATTEND THEIR LOCAL PARISH CHURCH. HE DID NOT SEE THE CLASSES AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP.

A church based on cells can harness the dynamic of the small group to enhance its congregational worship. One of the keys to the success of cells is the equipping of leaders so that they can equip others in their cell. Most congregationally based churches rely on a professional minister for this equipping task. In cell churches the minister is there to equip the cell leaders.

Jesus spent most of his ministry with the 12. Among the 12 he spent more time with Peter, James and John. Jesus' pattern of ministry may have looked like the diagram below. Most paid professional clergy in Britain are expected to pastor more than 150 people. Cell spreads this load. In the cells people pastor each other. Cell is really good at maximising the participation of church members. Cell will not work without a church strategy for searching out, encouraging and supporting the developing of the gifts of the people of God.

**Cell/Class**  
6 - 14 people  
Main function - personal intimacy



**Congregation**  
25 - 175 people  
Main function - social fellowship



**Celebration/Circuit**  
175 + people: the more the merrier!  
Main function - worship



Churches that want to explore Cell should be aware of the need to examine their expectations of their minister and their expectations of themselves. Ministers need to model Cell values in their churches and their lives. The minister should be in a cell but preferably not leading it, modeling the servant ministry and showing the need for all Christians to accept ministry.

# TIME PRESSURE!

Time is a problem in most churches. Churches seeking to transition to Cell will need to appraise all their activities and may need to stop doing some of them. One cell church sought to avoid overloading their members by giving the following guidance:

## UNDER GOD:

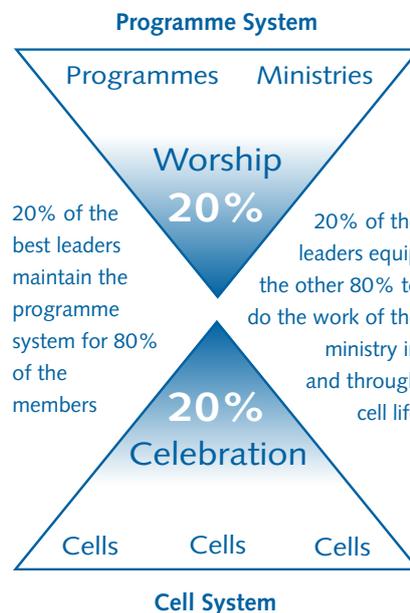
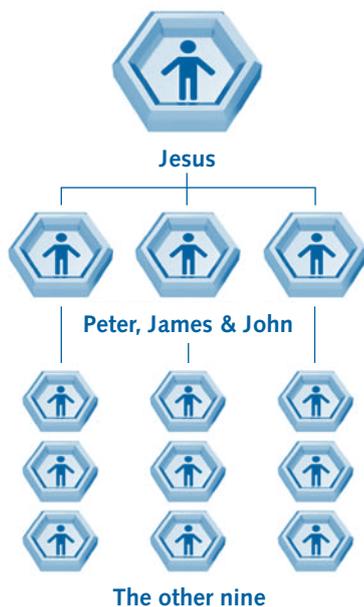
- FAMILY COMES FIRST
- CELL COMES SECOND
- RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON - CHRISTIANS COMES THIRD
- MAINTAINING CHURCH STRUCTURES COMES FOURTH

(Nettleham Methodist Church, Lincoln)

The first seventy years of the Methodist movement were marked by remarkable growth. But by 1815 or so the Class Meeting was being replaced by prayer meetings. By 1850 Methodism had begun to decline as a proportion of the English population. It has never regained its initial vigour – nor its Class Meetings.

"Cell is a really good place for seeing my own gifts developing ... and other people's. Gifts and talents are emerging. It's amazing! That the Community is not just a meeting is really important – it develops genuine relationships. The smaller group is better than the larger previous group."

Cell member, Nettleham



# THE SHAPE OF A CELL MEETING

WHILE A CELL IS NOT A MEETING, CELLS DO MEET. THE CELL MEETING IS A FOCUS FOR THE COMMUNITY. CELL MEETINGS VARY IN SHAPE AND FREQUENCY BUT THE MOST COMMON SHAPE FOR CELL MEETINGS USES FOUR SECTIONS - KNOWN AS THE FOUR W'S.

## WELCOME

An 'icebreaker' helps to develop friendships, sets the tone of the meeting, includes everyone in and encourages participation. The welcome puts people new to the group on an equal footing with established people. People new to the concepts of cell often say "We don't need to do the welcome - we know each other." After a few weeks of using a welcome most people realise that they did not really know each other as well as they thought.

## WORSHIP

Worship in cells does not mean singing! Some cells express worship in song - but few do all the time. Cell worship is flexible, imaginative and different. It allows all to participate and contribute. It may range from silence to listening to music to drawing something or modelling something in clay. There is no set pattern of worship in cell.

## WORD

The word is a life-application study in which the cell are encouraged to ask "How does this apply to my life?" The Word is central to cell life and is about study of the living word revealed in the written word in scripture. This is not the same as some traditional Bible studies and care needs to be taken to ensure that the life application of the Word study is central.

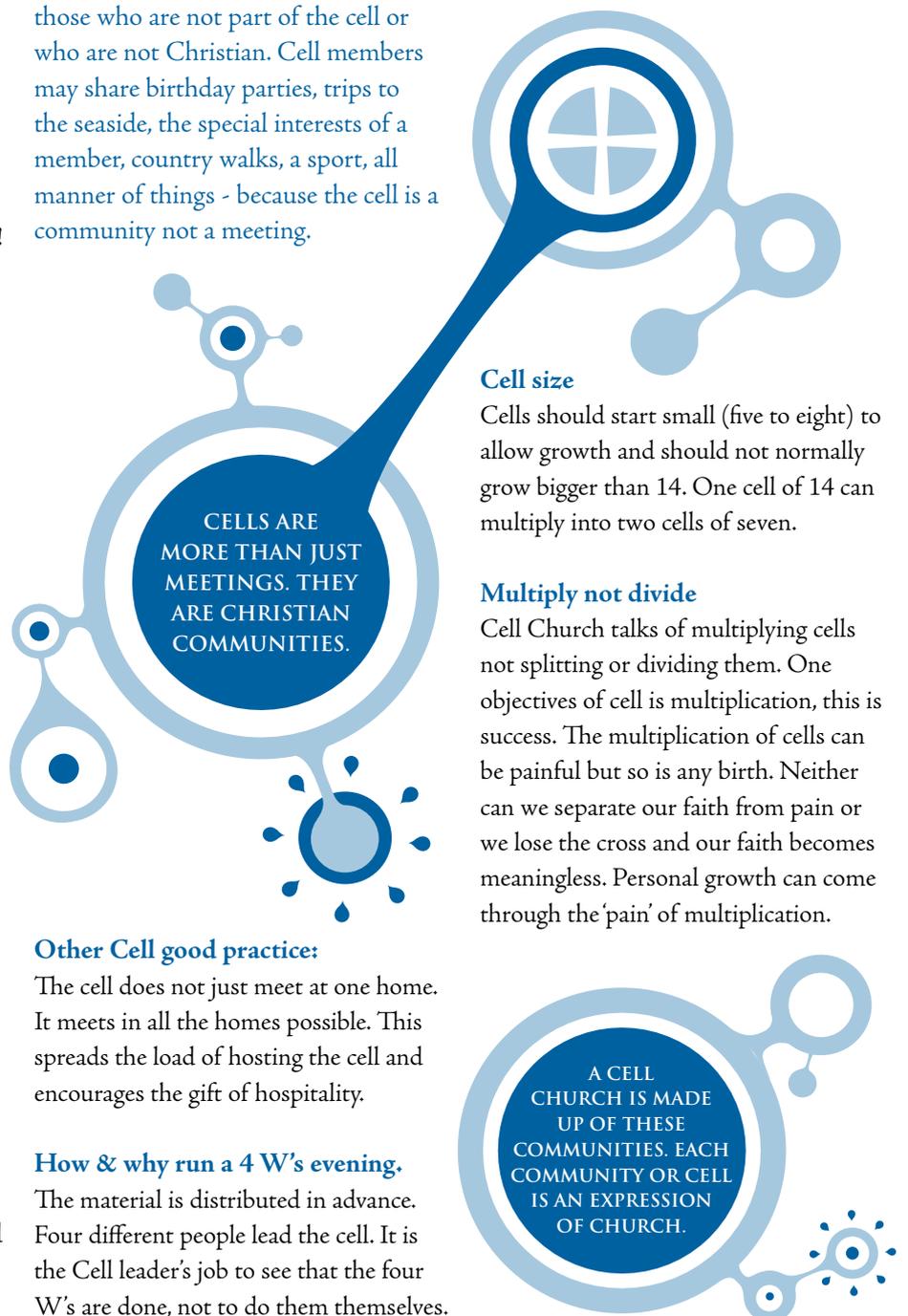
## WITNESS

This section of the cell meeting almost always comes last. It is the focus of the relational evangelism and social outreach of the cells. The witness section encourages the cell and its members to put what they have learned in the Word section into action in their lives. If the cell hopes to be evangelistic

the people who lead this section must have a heart for evangelism. The Witness section can also review the life application of previous meetings.

Not all cell community meetings follow the four W's format. Cells are encouraged to meet socially and informally to provide 'ways in' for those who are not part of the cell or who are not Christian. Cell members may share birthday parties, trips to the seaside, the special interests of a member, country walks, a sport, all manner of things - because the cell is a community not a meeting.

The four W's can come in any order to suit the material but usually comes in the order given on the left. The Welcome is simple to lead and can be given to someone who does not have the confidence to do one of the other three. Over time they will gain confidence and try another of the sections.



# THE DNA OF CELL

LAURENCE SINGLEHURST LOOKS AT THE THREE VITAL STRANDS

**DNA** is the building block of life. It shapes the outcomes; it affects all the cells of the human body; it is the core building block. Just as DNA affects us as human beings, I believe it is true that when we look at cells in the life of the Church, it is vitally important that they have the right DNA. If the DNA is wrong, then the outcome will not be the one we desire.

I believe there are three strands of biblical DNA for the life of the cell. They are connected to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Mark 12 : 30-31).

And, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20).

From this we can extract three strands of DNA. *The first strand is that we are to know that God loves us, and that we are to love him.* This is obviously a foundational and fundamental dynamic that our small groups and our cells work on all the time.

There is much that we experience in life that will tell us that God does not love us and care for us and we are, of course, often challenged in terms of real love for him. Our group supports us in this fundamental dynamic.

But if we have just this one strand of DNA, then we have a Bible study. A dynamic Bible study; possibly even a great Bible study, but God wants more. *The second strand is that we are to love*

*one another, to love the body of Christ.* John Stott, on being asked what God the Father is like, points people to the scriptural revelation of who Jesus is, and says that Jesus portrays for us who the Father is. But on being asked how do we know what Jesus is like, he said that we can see what Jesus is like by the sacrificial love that Christians have for one another. In other words, the care and concern that we have for one another is the core of our authenticity. Jesus said that by the love you have for one another, they will know that you are my disciples. As we all know, in a post-modern world, our words have less impact, and our actions more. The world wants to see a demonstration of real community.

But if we have two strands of DNA, great as they are, this gives us a fellowship group. Or perhaps a house group. There is nothing wrong with this, it is good as far as it goes, but God wants more.

*The third strand of DNA is that we are to love the world.* Scripture indicates for us to love the world in two ways. We are to love people; Jesus demonstrates this in the story of the Good Samaritan, that we are all called to be channels of God’s love to people and we express that love through our words and our actions. Jesus challenges us to go and build bridges of love and community, and through these to speak the words. Unless we go, then no one will hear.

But we are to do more than this. It is not just about loving people. Jesus also describes for us (Matthew 5: 13-16) that we are to be salt and light in the society; that we are to be transformational, and Christian values and principles should become the bedrock for our society. They show us how to live, how to do business, to respect authority, to raise children in

a proper way. We as Christians are to be challenged to take Jesus into every place that we go. By living out His values, by having a high value for people; by being honest, we reshape the foundations.

This gives us our three strands of DNA. It is this outward focus that is so often the challenge for us because it is so sacrificial. Just as cells in the human body can go wrong, so there is a drift in these small groups or cells, which are foundational to church life. They can so easily become fellowship groups or just an intellectual exercise, and therefore, just as the body has means to look after itself, in the cell church we encourage churches to have supervisors who visit a cell once a month, or once every other month and evaluate whether the DNA is really there.

Is this a three-strand cell? Of course it would be equally flawed if it were just outward looking and nothing else, just as it would be if it were just word-focussed and nothing else. So the supervisor works with the cell leaders for these three strands of DNA.

Finally, just as the DNA is vital, it must be remembered that the cells in your body communicate to one another, and part of the secret of a cell is that it is about communication. It is not about the voice of the leader or the one or two wonderful extroverts – the secret of a cell, and its anointing, is the participation of its members.

That is why we have the Welcome section, because we believe God wants to work through everyone, from the most mature Christian to the newest member of the group. If this kind of DNA infuses our cells, we will be a church that loves God, that loves one another, and that reaches out to our world.

# MY PIECE IN THE JIGSAW?

## UNDERSTANDING THE EVANGELISM PROCESS

Most people who become Christians do so as a result of a process that lasts two or three years. Before that process, they will usually describe Christians (and Church) as old-fashioned, boring, narrow-minded and hypocritical. If they are to change their view of what Christians are like enough to want to become one, there are a number of things that normally happen:

- They see Christians performing selfless acts of love and are impressed.
- They discover that some of their friends, workmates or family are Christians and are actually normal.
- They hear stories of the way that God the Holy Spirit changes lives.
- They see God at work.
- They become more friendly with the Christians they know.
- They get to know a little of what it means to be a Christian.
- They get to know other Christians (either in Church or some other setting).
- They are challenged (usually three-four times) to invite Jesus to be the Lord of their lives.
- They begin to find out more about the Bible.
- They pray more regularly and feel they know that it is Jesus to whom they pray (most non-Christians already pray!).
- They experience for themselves the life-changing power of God (often several times).

- They say yes to God and invite Jesus to be their Lord.
- They are rarely aware of their own sinfulness, but more often respond because faith in Jesus seems to offer a better way of living.

During this process, Christians help in a variety of ways:

- Christians who are good at loving people and demonstrating the love of Jesus.
- Christians who are committed to spending time with their non-Christian friends doing ordinary things (and aren't in church every waking hour!).
- Christians who are good at talking about Jesus in unchurched language.
- Christians who are sensitive to the way that the Holy Spirit touches lives (especially in healing prayer).
- Christians who are good at talking simply about what they believe.
- Christians who invite them to

- Christians who can give a gospel challenge well (and churches which build them into their programmes regularly).
- Christians who have faith for conversion.
- Christians who can get alongside new believers and help them to grow.

No Christian is equally good at all of these things; we all have our strengths; and our weaknesses. However, in a cell (and even more so in a bigger group) all these gifts will be present in one or other of the members. If we are confident of what we can do to help people to become Christians and know who can do what we cannot, we can work together more effectively to help people to become Christians.

There is one thing that we can all do, and that is to pray consistently and persistently that those whom we love might come to know the greatest love of all that is found only in Jesus Christ. Everything we do should be undergirded in prayer!

Graham Horsley



# OUR CELL JOURNEY: A ROCKY ROAD

Back in 1999, Bradeley Road Methodist Church was a small church (membership of approx. eighty) located in Haslington (population approximately 6,000), a reasonably affluent area of South Cheshire situated between Crewe and Sandbach.

Realising we couldn't do everything and inspired by the approaching millennium, we as a church earnestly 'set about' discovering God's specific purpose. A year later we heard Graham Horsley give 'An Introduction to Cell'. Graham's talk resonated with our 'Journey of Purpose'.

In June 2000, the Church Council adopted the outcome of 'God's Purpose for Bradeley Road Methodist Church' and we launched a prototype cell. This consisted of one cell made up of potential cell group leaders. Encouraged by this experience three 'proper' cells were launched.

Unlike the textbooks, establishing cells was messy and tough; even with enthusiastic and committed people. We quickly learned that the cell leader role is pivotal. Leading cell is different to leading house groups, understanding and helping each other to live the Cell values is key.

In 2002, Bradeley Road and St Andrew's Methodist Churches united to form Haslington Methodist Church. In September, the church launched its first youth cell and followed by a fourth adult cell group.

Although the transition to cell seemed to be gaining momentum it wasn't until 2004 that the first cell multiplied as a result of an Alpha course. Over the next six months existing and potential leaders participated in CellUK's 'Equipping Future Cell Leaders' course. Paradoxically, in the same period the youth cell was 'put on hold' due to a decline in numbers.

In the last couple of years a further three cells have closed all having struggled to 'get to grips' with the issue of evangelism and cell multiplication. During the same period, the youth cell restarted, this time triggered by a youth in our worship group inviting his friends to church.

Our cell journey has taught us that there is no quick fix answer to the challenge of Christian ministry in the twenty-first century. Our experience of cells has been far more 'messy' than the 'neat and tidy' picture we had anticipated based on the early cell resources.

Despite the fact that, at times, we have encountered the temptation to 'give up' on Cell, we remain convinced that it is an essential element of Christian discipleship in the twenty-first century UK.

David Kerr, Haslington Cell Supervisor

## "WHY DO CELL GROUPS WORK WELL WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?"

That was the question that started my whole journey into developing youth cell groups. I am now setting up youth cell groups from scratch for the second time. The first time round, I had been working for an Anglican church in Sale, Greater Manchester. This group of young people met on Sunday mornings and for a weekly youth club. There was a strong bond between the young people and quite a sizeable group, even on a Sunday morning.

After some consideration and with some concerns from some of the volunteers about this new model of discipleship, we set up a prototype small group with some of the lads. "Why the lads?" you may ask. I was a male youth worker and the easiest option was to try these groups out with the older lads in the youth group. This group worked so well that the girls were demanding their own small group! For the lads involved in the group, the

discussions allowed them to build some strong bonds and for them to be real with one another.

These groups continued to grow over several years and not only developed as midweek discipleship groups, but reshaped the format of the Sunday morning groups as well. These groups engaged with social action projects and many of them were led by older young people trained to work with their peers. Of course, the groups had their ups and downs. Some groups were really working, some stood still and some just didn't work. While I was there, the youth cell groups also used Youth Alpha as a way to form new groups. The youth cells met in homes and in the main church building.

One of the highlights of my time was taking a group of young leaders away for their training weekend. These young people had come through their own

groups and were showing the potential to take on roles within the groups.

I am now in a new post in Penrith away from the busy bustle of Manchester, but again we as a youth team are developing cell groups. Currently, we have four youth cell groups working with 11-17 year olds and we're trying out a new group with 10-11 year olds. These groups are enabling deeper conversation and are building links between our youth club and the Sunday discipleship groups.

At Penrith Methodist Church, we're quite early on in our journey. We're looking at developing groups that meet around particular activities such as rock climbing and we look forward to what is to come.

Carl Dodd, Penrith Methodist Youth and Children

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## INTRODUCTORY

### **SIMPLY CELL**

Laurence Singlehurst, Liz West and Trevor Withers, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2005

### **WALKING WITH JESUS**

Gary Gibbs, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2007

### **MOVING TO CELL**

Laurence Singlehurst and Liz West, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2006

### **4LIFE**

Mark Powley, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2006

### **THE CHALLENGE OF CELL CHURCH**

Phil Potter, Oxford: BRF, 2001

### **LOVING THE LOST**

Laurence Singlehurst, Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2004

### **LIFE IN HIS BODY**

David Finnell, Texas: Touch, 1995

## IN MORE DEPTH

### **THE SECOND REFORMATION**

William Beckham, Texas: Touch, 1996

### **EQUIPPED TO LEAD A CELL COMMUNITY**

Liz West and Trevor Withers, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2006

### **EQUIPPING FUTURE CELL LEADERS**

Liz West and Trevor Withers, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2005

### **EQUIPPED TO SUPERVISE**

Liz West and Trevor Withers, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2004

## OTHER RESOURCES

### **SOWING REAPING AND KEEPING**

Laurence Singlehurst, Leicester: IVP, 2006

### **EVANGELISM THROUGH CELLS**

Laurence Singlehurst and Liz West, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2004

### **ECCLESIOGENESIS: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church**

Leonardo Boff, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997

### **JOHN WESLEY'S CLASS MEETING**

D. Michael Henderson, Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 1997

### **CELL UK MAGAZINE**

Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries

## YOUTH RESOURCES

### **CELL IT**

Liz West and Paul Hopkins, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2000

### **PASSION**

Paul Hopkins, Harpenden: Cell UK Ministries, 2005

## COURSES

### **COMPREHENSIVE CELL TRAINING**

1,2 & 3 Residential Courses from Cell UK, Cell UK Ministries, Highfield Oval Ambrose Lane, Harpenden, Hertfordshire AL5 4BX

Most of these resources are available through Cell UK online: [www.celluk.org.uk](http://www.celluk.org.uk)

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