

CELL GROUP FISHING

Matthew 4v19; 9v9,10.

How can we impact people around us with the good news of Jesus? I have this question mind as I continue to explore the Biblical principles on which cell groups rest. The big message today is that cell evangelism is about doing it together. It is not so much about sharing your faith by yourself, as about doing it with others.

When Jesus said “**Follow me and I will make you fishers of men**”, (Matthew 4v19) He didn't have one man with a fishing rod in mind, but a group fishing with large nets. Earlier this year in India Liz and I watched a group of men fishing with large nets off the coast of Goa. It was a real team effort. Everyone had their own part to play. On enquiring we discovered that they were a family – father, brothers, uncles, cousins & very close friends.

Larry Stockstill leads the Bethany World Prayer centre in Baker USA, a church with well developed cell groups. He writes: “*The old paradigm of 'hook' fishing is being replaced by teams of believers who have entered into partnership for the purpose of reaching souls together. Jesus used the 'partnership' of net fishing to illustrate the greatest principle of evangelism: our productivity is far greater together than alone.*” Dr. Yonggi Cho, who leads the massive Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea says much the same: “*Our cell group system is a net for our Christians to cast. A pastor should never try to fish with a single rod but should organise believers into the 'nets' of a cell system.*” (Both quoted by Joel Comiskey in 'Home Cell Group Explosion' Touch Publications.1998)

But Jesus didn't just teach in words, He demonstrated what He meant. This is what is going on in ch.9v9,10 . **As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.**

In these few words we see how Jesus had an impact on Matthew's life and how He and His disciples immediately got among Matthew's circle of friends. This was family fishing. Let's look particularly at verse 10 and notice four simple steps. Remember this is not a formula. It is one example. But it teaches us a lot.

1. Arrange a social event

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house. There are two familiar themes here. First, Matthew arranged a special dinner. Second, he held it at his own house. According to Luke 5v29, the meal was in Jesus' honour. **Then Levi** (Matthew's Jewish name) **held a great banquet for Jesus at his house.** He didn't miss this opportunity. His life had been changed by Jesus. He was leaving his job and becoming a disciple. So he held “*a great banquet*”.

Having fun is magnetic. Healthy cells spend time together outside of regular group meetings for worship and prayer. When Joel Comiskey researched some of the biggest and fastest growing cell churches in the world he discovered that groups who gather six times or more each month in informal social settings multiply their group twice as much as those who never meet socially or perhaps do something only once a month.

So let's have more "great banquets"! More parties! There are all sorts of occasions worth celebrating with a party. Some are obvious like anniversaries, bonfire night, Christmas and housewarmings. The arrival of summer is always worth celebrating with a barbeque and, of course, birthdays. We had 64 people pass through our home last Sunday, including some neighbours, for my 60th birthday 'Open House'. Around this time of year Bryan & Cathy's group have a party because so many of their group have birthdays at the same time; another ideal opportunity to invite friends.

There are also less obvious party occasions. Our teens' brilliant auction and fashion show this month was an example of creative "party" thinking, and this week our Kidz Klub team have arranged a 'Light Fantastic' evening as an alternative to Halloween. Michael & Monica had a 'Come Ugly' party earlier this year in their home in Alnwick! Great fun!

2. Invite your circle of friends

Many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him. Matthew had his own circle of friends. This introduces us to an important cell principle: your 'oikos': (Greek. literally, your 'house' or 'household'). This is a circle of people wider than family or those under your roof; it is your social circle; your sphere of influence; those you have common ground with. It is not usually a large circle – that would be "acquaintances", but a smaller circle, those you spend quality time with for, let's say, around an hour a week.

Each of us has our own circle. Some of our circles are bigger than others. No two people have exactly the same group of close friends. Each circle is unique and you may be the only believer your friends have contact with.

Matthew's circle of friends consisted of fellow outcasts. So he invited them to his dinner. Luke tells us there was a large crowd of them. Still today, new disciples like Matthew seem to be the best at inviting friends along. Alphas in particular thrive on new believers inviting people to the next course because they have such a wide circle of un-churched friends.

Of course there *are* others who are outstanding at being "invitational", but many of us are not very good at it. (I would put myself in this category.) Perhaps this is because some of us have been disappointed by the response in the past. Some hard facts might help us get perspective here. We are told by those who like stats that for every 25 people you invite, 15 will say "yes", 8-10 will turn up, and of those perhaps 5-7 might be happy to come again.

When we do start inviting people we can get some lovely surprises. Liz and I had a barbeque one summer and invited our neighbours and our cell group. A few neighbours came and the couple from across the road were among them. They had seemed very private types but that day they lingered long after everyone had gone and when we invited them to be our guests at a church Alpha Banquet they agreed straight away, and then went through the whole course. They soon linked into our cell group and within the year the wife had confessed her faith in Christ and was baptised as a believer.

Sometimes we shrink from inviting others because we don't want them to turn up to something that turns out to be embarrassing. But when we know that everything has been thought through carefully and will be done well, we feel more comfortable about inviting someone along.

There is real skill in arranging socials which are attractive and appealing to our friends. One couple we know have a neighbourhood breakfast each Good Friday. It has become an annual tradition in the street. I have known some cell groups to specialise in international evenings with food and focus from a particular nation making it easy to invite guests from that nation. I remember in our last church an Indian believer whose husband could make life difficult for her and who would not come anywhere near church; but when our group put on a special India evening he accepted our invitation. Soon afterwards he invited Liz and myself to a family celebration in *his* home.

3. Introduce Jesus to your friends

Matthew wanted his friends to meet Jesus. This is the way it is when Jesus breaks into your life. You just want to tell everyone, especially those closest to you. How could you not? Anyway, they will notice the change in you and ask what has happened, even if you don't take the initiative.

A few years back a church member called Sue in the next street to us got to know a neighbour, Lesley, at anti-natal classes; she shared her faith and invited her to church and she came to believe in Jesus. Lesley was an Avon rep and had a group of people in the neighbourhood she knew through this. When she called on Geoff and Julie in our street she talked to them about her faith and about her church. Julie said that this was what her husband needed! That Christmas Geoff came to church and then an Alpha. Very soon he too had come to faith, and he and I became close friends and he joined our cell.

For two years we prayed for Julie, who seemed to be a convinced atheist. She could see the change in Geoff and was pleased about it but Jesus was not for her. Over this time Julie became a good friend of the group, and occasionally we would meet in their home. She did not believe but she began to belong. Then out of the blue, she agreed to come to a *newfrontiers'* Stoneleigh Bible week. Despite vowing to give the meetings a miss, she came to a large celebration one evening and the power of God came upon her and she surrendered her life to Jesus with half the cell group alongside her. You should have heard the cry of joy when Julie returned to Geoff, who was looking after their two boys in their caravan.

Matthew wanted his friends to meet Jesus, but the real point was this: *Jesus Himself wanted to meet Matthew's friends.* And He wants to meet yours and mine too. He wants to be their friend and redeemer as He is yours and mine, and to catch them up into the most glorious circle of all. *"Ultimately every human circle is doomed to dissolution if it is not caught up in the life of the only genuinely self-sufficient circle, that of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."* (Dallas Willard: 'The Renovation of the Heart' NavPress 2002)

4. Include your circle of believing friends.

Many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. Jesus not only wanted to meet Matthew's circle, He wanted Matthew and his friends to meet *His* circle of disciples. He still does.

Sometimes I have heard church announcements which go something like this: *"We are putting on an event for you to bring friends along. But only those who do have guests can come."* Usually space is the issue – but I would rather hire a bigger venue than make this kind of announcement. We always want our guests to meet as many believers as possible. We want those with smaller circles of friends or no guests to bring to mix in among other people's circles. And we want guests to recognise several faces the next time they come.

This is what Dr. Cho meant by cells being like fishing nets. Each cell is a group of friends getting among the others' circle of friends. To begin with it may be purely social. Indeed, that is the way it will stay for many of these friends. But for some it may go further. They might be drawn to something about you or someone else in your group because Jesus is in your life. They may be curious about the church or what you believe. They may have some need which they share with you because they have come to trust you.

When you introduce your circle of non-church friends to your believing friends it creates all kinds of new possibilities. For example, in one group Claire's husband Jim showed no interest in the gospel, but he loved to play golf. Now, Dave was in that group and so after meeting each other at a cell social he and Jim were soon on the golf course together and getting to know each other.

It is reckoned that a person must develop six key friendships in a church to continue attending. Cells can therefore play a crucial part in both reaching out to new people and in welcoming and integrating them into the church community. This is the kind of church we want to be. These are the kind of groups we want to develop.

So let's go and do some cell group fishing!

John Wilthew. October 2007

