

10 LECTURES ON EVANGELISM:

1. SINGING THE LORD'S SONG

The term 'evangelism' is widely misinterpreted.

It is not: Pressurising people to believe

Conducted only by 'experts' addressing large crowds

Impossible in a plural society

Evangelism means literally to 'gospelise' – to tell the message about Christ with the intention that people commit themselves to him. This is a task for the individual Christian and for the church as a whole. 'The evangel is Jesus – not religion, or a feel good factor or a particular expression of theology. God is the evangelist' - Michael Marshall.

Here are some classic definitions of evangelism:

'To evangelise is so to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their saviour and serve him as their king in the fellowship of his church' - William Temple.

Evangelism is those actions that are governed by the intention to initiate people into the Kingdom of God' - William Abraham.

Evangelism is 'One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread' - Daniel Niles.

Bible Society's Church Growth material described evangelism as being about:

- Presence – being there, connected to the people we seek to share Christ's love with.
- Proclamation – declaring the Good News on the basis of 'being there' with people.
- Persuasion – enabling people to make their own decision to follow Christ.

Many Christians find this difficult – for various reasons – eg: poor role models, embarrassment, lack of faith, concern to keep friendships, worry about being asked difficult questions (many of which no one has answers for) Many have negative images about what evangelism is, thinking of it as being – hard sell / pressurising people to believe, for experts only, programme centred

Mission is every way in which the Kingdom of God is demonstrated in his world. Evangelism is every way in which the Kingdom of God is declared in his world. 'The nature of God and the mission of God is revealed through incarnation' - Eddie Fox and George Morris.

It is not that the church of God has a mission but that the God of mission has a church – without mission we are not church.

We often assume that the world at large is resistant to the Gospel, yet there is a search for security, wholeness, affirmation, relationship, acceptance The Gospel addresses these things: We have a mission and a message. We are called to be 'fishers of people' (Mark 1 v. 17) - There must be a catch!

Jesus sent out his inexperienced disciples almost immediately – they learned on the job: Luke 9 & 10. Observe Jesus' model of apprenticeship training in evangelistic ministry – watch and hear me, come with me and share in this ministry, now you go and do the same, then come back and share the results with me.

Three misconceptions about mission and evangelism:

- That this is optional – no, it's a command!
- That this is something we do for God – no, he does it through us!
- That a church has to be perfectly ready to engage in mission – no, you never will be fully prepared!

To evangelise is an activity we can describe as

- momentous – incredible privilege
- multi faceted – takes many forms – word, deed, sign
- shared – in partnership with others
- contested – opposed by the powers of evil
- divine – God's mission, Holy Spirit inspired

On the wider issue of mission:

'The mission of Jesus and the mission of the Spirit are nothing other than movements of life; movements of healing; of liberation; of righteousness and justice' - Jurgen Moltmann.

'To clarify the nature of mission is to answer the question, what is the church for....? It is a community in response to the Missio Dei, bearing witness to God's activity in the world by its communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed' - Andrew Kirk.

To be effective in this task we must be connected but distinctive – salt and light – Matthew 5 v. 13 – 16. Connected with those whom we seek to reach with the Gospel but not so immersed in the culture that we are indistinguishable from it in life style, character and values.

One of the problems in witnessing for Christ is that the church has 'lost the plot' – majored on the minors, become an institution more than a movement disconnected with the society it is called to reach. We need to re-state the Gospel of God's grace in Christ, received through personal faith and surrender of our life to Jesus Christ.

The Psalmist asks 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' – Psalm 137 v. 4. We must recognise firstly that the land is 'strange' (changed / changing) and, secondly, know what the 'song' (message) is.

Western missionaries must continually re-learn the obvious: Jesus was not white, middle class or Methodist. Commend him to others avoiding these pitfalls!

George Hunter's profile of 'secular' people in the USA indicates that they are: essentially ignorant of basic Christianity, are seeking life before death, are conscious of doubt more than guilt, have multiple alienations, are untrusting because they are insecure, experience causes in history as being 'out of control' and cannot find 'the door'. He believes that those who can reach such people will have an understanding of modern culture, live by the faith they commend, have a passion for a missionary church, make a deliberate decision to reach beyond the Christian culture, will not write people off, identify with the people they are called to reach, encourage the church to witness in word and deed, are gripped by a core of convictions and engage in Christian apologetics.

What are our motives for sharing faith in Christ – sometimes this is to do with guilt or compulsion or the need to recruit for church. The Apostle Paul sets out a better motivation in 2 Corinthians 5 v. 10 – 21:

- * v. 10 Anticipating the judgement of Christ
- * v. 14 Convicted by the unmerited love of Christ
- *v. 17 Experience the transforming power of Christ
- * v.18 – 20 Continuing the ministry of Christ
- * v. 21 Focusing on the death and resurrection of Christ

All this is driven by the Holy Spirit whose essential role in the life of the individual and the church is to:

- Restore – to its original condition
- Refresh – with a new supply
- Renew – arrange for a continuing validity of

2. **PERSONAL EVANGELISM**

Most people become Christian through the witness of a friend or family member (85%, John Finney). We should have a strong emphasis therefore on equipping every Christian to share their faith first of all with those who are close to them. This is daunting to some but it should be as natural as breathing (Rowan Williams) – if you have good news you naturally want to share it – indeed, you cannot keep it to yourself.

The New Testament describes the work of the evangelist in various evocative terms:

- The fisherman – Luke 5 v. 10
- The shepherd – Matthew 9 v. 36
- The farmer – Matthew 13 v. 3
- The ambassador – 2 Corinthians 5 v. 20

What do these descriptions suggest to you?

Understanding the journey of faith as for most people being a gradual process influenced by many people and experiences, rather than a sudden crisis is encouraging and enabling of Christian witness. We would not generally expect people to sufficiently grasp the Gospel message and decide to follow Christ the very first time they hear about him.

Think about your own faith journey. Identify the steps that led you to become a Christian and how you have grown in faith since then. The Engel scale explores the journey to Christ and afterwards, from a person having no interest in faith through enquiry to conviction and commitment.

In Luke 19 v. 1 – 10 Zacchaeus becomes a follower of Jesus. What might have been his steps to faith? Possibly these....

- Complacency – ‘I can’t be bothered to think about this’
- Curiosity – ‘Maybe I should enquire about this’
- Conviction – ‘I believe this to be true’
- Commitment – ‘I will take action now’
- Change – ‘I will put things right with God’s help’

Receiving Christ as Saviour is likened in the New Testament to

- Soil receiving seed – Mark 4 v. 3 – 8
- Child receiving gift – Romans 5 v. 15
- Host receiving guest – Revelation 3 v. 20
- Bride receiving bridegroom – Revelation 19 v. 7
- Believer receiving bread and wine – 1 Corinthians 10 v. 27 - 29

For many people the way to faith in Christ is more of an Emmaus Road (Luke 24) than a Damascus Road (Acts 9) – a gradual awakening than a sudden crisis. Even some ‘Damascus Road’

experiences may not be as sudden as sometimes they appear – Acts 9, 22, 26. Identify the steps that led Saul / Paul to follow Christ – belief in God, familiarity with the scriptures, contact with credible Christians, observing martyrdom for the sake of Christ

Paul however may never have developed as a Christian without Ananias – Acts 9 & 10 (and later Barnabas – Acts 11, 13, 15). Perhaps your role could be like that of Ananias – interpreting ‘God moments’ and courageously witnessing to unlikely converts. Increasingly in the West we find that people are turned off by organised religion but are often open to spirituality.

In personal witness testimony is a good tool. Your story may not seem dramatic but it may well connect with your hearers – especially if it is backed up by a changed life. Practice telling your own story – you may want to write this out to map out your journey with God and clarify your thinking about it. What are the steps that led you to Christ, the people and circumstances that influenced you? What difference does Jesus make to you today and how does he affect your life in practical ways? Use ordinary non religious language to express this. Share your story first with someone who may be sympathetic to you – not everyone will be! Your story is about Christ in you today not about your life in the past. Know what to say and how and when to say it.

Be prepared for many disappointments in personal witness and don’t blame yourself for these – Your role is to share the message of God’s love, people make their own choice. Many hear the message and reject it. Some appear to receive the message but when difficulties come along they give up – The Parable of the Sower illustrates this graphically: Matthew 13 v. 1 – 9 & 18 – 23. Jesus passionately offered the love of God but he did not force people to believe, neither did he chase after them when they hesitated in order to offer more acceptable terms! - Luke 18 v. 18 – 30. Paul’s letters indicate that some believers fell away from their first commitment during hard times or through material distractions.

Sharing our own story of coming to faith is not a substitute however for explaining the Gospel message as set out in scripture. We must avoid making the story simply our story – it is bigger than all of us. Whilst telling our story does fit the spirit of our age with its interest in spiritual experiences, it will also engender the idea that we all have our own stories which are all equally valid. That is why we need to state the uniqueness of Christ as revealed in the Bible and his centrality to the message we proclaim.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would guide our witness for him – giving us the words we need, protecting us from harm, opening opportunities and hearts to receive him.

Hospitality is a good context for Christian witness – many of Jesus conversations in the Gospels took place at the meal table. He consistently ate and partied with the disreputable – but with all levels of society in order to share the love of the Father with them. Luke 7 v. 36 - 50 – Simon, Luke 19 v. 1 - 10 – Zacchaeus. In the UK over the past twenty years Alpha has been the most effective evangelistic tool – Gospel presentation and conversation over a meal.

Think out how you would express the key aspects of the Christian message – a suitable tract or Gospel leaflet may help you. Think how, having described what God has done in Christ, you would enable someone to turn to Christ as Saviour. You will need to be a good listener, giving

people opportunity to express their journey, views, doubts, concerns and needs, as they feel able. Be flexible in approach according to the needs and understandings of your hearer. However, some structure for sharing the Gospel and key points enabling someone to turn to Christ may be helpful:

One simple pattern is : A – Admit you are a sinner

B – Believe that Christ died for you and rose again to give you life

C – Consider that it will be tough to be a Christian

D – Decide to follow Christ

It is very important to listen carefully to the person you are speaking with. This is part of love and respect. Be aware that there are frequently asked questions / barriers to faith. Be ready to respond to these acknowledging that you do not have all the answers and that the nature of faith is to believe on the basis of compelling evidence but without complete proof in any scientific sense. A degree of trust is required – we use trust all the time in life so that act of trust is not alien to us – Often the battle for the will and the challenge of handing over control is the big issue. For Christ to be our Lord we must submit to him – and that is what many people, including church-going people are reluctant to do.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring people to conviction and new life but he uses our prayers and witness in this work. Though we are all fallen and sinful people, God is already at work in our lives enabling us to surrender to him ahead of our choosing to follow Christ. This is the great Wesleyan principle of prevenient grace – grace that goes before us.

Consider some of the key barriers to belief and be ready to ‘give a reason for the hope that is within you’ – 1 Peter 3 v. 15 - Apologetics. The most likely stumbling blocks to belief are:

- * undeserved or random suffering,
- * other religions,
- * relativism / pluralism,
- * scientific advance,
- * the weakness of the church/ bad past experiences of church / Christians....

These matters cannot be lightly dismissed and we have a responsibility to seek some understanding of these issues. Simplistic answers to complex questions are unhelpful. Be unashamed to say that you do not have all the answers to hard questions asked by enquirers who have very genuine and difficult questions. Also, be aware that some people may keep asking questions as a way of avoiding the challenge of commitment.

Prayer before your conversation and a prayerful attitude in general are important since evangelistic conversation is not about winning an argument or convincing someone of the truth

of the Christian message but a change of heart – a spiritual event brought about by your witness and God’s transforming power.

Personal witness is part of daily life but may be initiated by certain circumstances or events – bereavement, tragedy, joyful events, new directions / opportunities, mission events, worship, preaching....

What might be the essential personal ingredients for faith sharing:

- Sure – confident in what and whom you believe
- Simple – able to express faith in Christ in clearly so that someone else can understand
- Sympathetic – seeking to understand where the other person is coming from
- Systematic – knowing how to express the key elements of faith in Christ and how to receive Christ as Saviour.
- Surrendered – soaked in faithful and persistent prayer.

3. MODELS OF EVANGELISM IN THE GOSPELS

The New Testament is intended to be a missionary document – Luke 1 v. 1 – 4, John 20 v. 31. The biggest clue to Christian witness and personal evangelism is not simply in the lives of the first disciples and early Christians but in the nature of God himself revealed in his coming in Christ. Incarnation is at the heart of the mission task – the God who becomes one of us in order to draw us to himself. Atonement is the heart of our message – Christ died and rose again to bring us life.

So we must ask: how did Jesus come? What were the characteristics of his coming? – Small, vulnerable, in poverty, in humility, alongside the ordinary people. Philippians 2 v. 6 – 11 describes the humility of Jesus who leaves the glory of the Father’s presence on a rescue mission. Whilst there are many vivid examples of faith sharing in the Gospels the ultimate model is that of the missioning God who ‘becomes one of us’ in order to save us.

Charles Wesley expresses it thus:

‘God comes down, he bows the sky, and shows himself our friend:

God the invisible appears: God the blest, the great I Am,

Sojourns in this vale of tears, and Jesus is his name.....

Emptied of his majesty, of his dazzling glories shorn,

Being’s source begins to be, and God himself is born!’

Hymns & Psalms 101

God sends his own Son in love – at great cost but freely to a broken world - John 3 v. 16. In the past he loved and sent, in the present we are invited to believe in him so that in the future we may have eternal life. This life begins as we trust Christ today.

The message is an invitation to: life – John 14 v. 6,

a party – Matthew 22 v. 1 – 10,

belief – John 20 v. 26 – 29.

John 1 v. 1 – 18 describes the coming of Christ, the Word, in terms of life, light and truth. Divinity is revealed to humankind. God becomes a human being in order to rescue his fallen creatures. Romans 5 – 8, 2 Corinthians 5 v. 14 – 21, Ephesians 1 & 2 describe this salvation plan focussed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus expresses the style of mission his followers are to exemplify: ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ - John 20 v. 21. We ask therefore, ‘how did Jesus come?’ and find in our response the beginning of true evangelism. John 17 also expresses the ideas of sending and being sent in Jesus’ prayer before his passion.

In inviting people to follow Christ there are some wonderful examples in the Gospels:

Mark 1 – The calling of the first disciples – from their work and familiar settings to follow him. There is a sense of urgency and excitement.

Luke 7 – The Roman officer expresses faith that Jesus can heal his servant and Jesus says he has never found this kind of absolute trust among the Israelites.

John 3 – Jesus and Nicodemus. The religious leader is challenged to start again with God (be re-born) if he is to receive eternal life.

John 4 – Jesus and the woman at the well – he knows all about her but still cares deeply for her and, having listened to her questions, offers her life. She goes away amazed to tell others.

Matthew 17 – Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured and hear the voice from heaven attesting to the real identity of Jesus. Truth is revealed directly to them on the mountain.

Luke 24 – Jesus, the stranger, reveals his identity to the two disciples after his resurrection as they journey to Emmaus and he breaks the bread in their home.

John 20 – Thomas’ doubts are answered as he meets and recognises the risen Christ.

John 21 – Peter expresses his love for Jesus and Jesus accepts Peter, despite all his failings.

These characters and many more provide us with illustration and inspiration. Relatively little is offered in the Gospels in terms of a manual of evangelistic methods. The disciples are told to ‘go into all the world and make all nations my disciples’ Matthew 28 v. 19 – 20. They are to teach and baptise in the knowledge that Christ will always be with them – after he has ascended to heaven the Spirit will be sent to facilitate the mission task.

Luke 9 v. 1 – 6 & 10 v. 1 - 20 show Jesus instructing and sending out the 12 and the 72 – a foretaste of what would be achieved later in the mission of the church in the Acts of the Apostles.

4. MODELS OF EVANGELISM IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts is our best missionary handbook, combining the practice of evangelism and reflection on practice (praxis) in a variety of contexts and through several key apostles inspired by the Holy Spirit. As Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles describes the continuing ministry of Jesus through his followers. It displays his interest in healing, miraculous signs, colourful characters, mission alongside the poor and the Gospel for all – specifically the Gentiles ('the outsiders'), as first expressed in the ministry of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit is fundamental: First the disciples wait – Acts 1 v. 8, then they receive – Acts 2 v. 1 – 4 and declare the message of repentance and salvation in Jesus name to the world v 14 – 42. Believers are baptised and the Great Commission of Matthew 28 v. 19 – 20 begins to be fulfilled.

A lively growing community of believers is established. Their life style is an expression of their message - Acts 2 v. 43 – 47. Identify some of the features of this vibrant early Christian community:

- Koinonia – fellowship, a strong practical and spiritual commitment to other believers
- Marturia – suffering through witnessing to Christ
- Diakonia – humble service, alongside those who were most needy, servant ministry
- Metanoia – transformed lives through the power of the Holy Spirit

The first half of the Book of Acts illustrates many features of a vibrant church: Chapter 3 – signs, wonders, explanation, challenge to believe; 4 - Opposition, apologetics, courage, prayer, unity, caring; 5 – Discipline, judgement, supernatural healing; 6 – Shared leadership, light and darkness; 7 – Biblical preaching, ultimate sacrifice. At several points we are told that the word spread – Acts 6 v. 7, 12 v. 24 & 19 v. 20. Opposition is severe but repression, initially by the Jews, and even martyrdom, as today, spreads the message further – Acts 6 & 7. The Gospel seems to spread beyond Jerusalem as much from the effects of persecution as by intentional evangelistic strategy. The Jewish Christians are slow to appreciate the implications of the Great Commission concerning the Gospel for all – persecutions without and dissention within continue but there are many evidences that the non-Jewish world is ready to receive the Gospel – Acts 10, 11 & 15. (Also, that the Jewish church of the first century exhibits some of the same problems as the institutional church of Christendom in the 21st).

Acts 8 involves the apostle and evangelist Philip and demonstrates an exciting expansion of the Gospel into Samaria and a remarkable example of personal witness to an Ethiopian official. Note the many supernatural instances aligned to human obedience and openness to opportunity.

Acts 9 opens a new episode of missionary advance with the conversion of Saul / Paul. Luke clearly believes this to be a key event since he records it three times (also in chapters 22 & 26 as Paul makes his defence before the authorities). Ananias is in the role of evangelistic counsellor and takes a big risk in offering the hand of fellowship to Saul, believing that his conversion is genuine. Without this risk taking obedience Saul might never have matured into the great missionary apostle he became.

Barnabas is a key figure in the missionary expansion of the church:

*In generosity towards the church's mission - Acts 4 v. 36 – 37,

*as a friend in need following Saul's conversion - Acts 9 v. 27,

*seeking out Saul to share with him - Acts 11 v. 24 – 26,

*partnering Saul in mission from a sending congregation - Acts 13 v. 1 – 3

*parting from him following disagreement - Acts 15 v. 36 – 41.

Acts 13 v. 1 – 3 sees the church at Antioch identify and send its best people for the work of evangelism in other places. (Not simply exporting its problem cases!) The extensive travels of Paul in the Gentile world begin here and continue to the end of the Book of Acts.

Acts 16 describes the entry of the Gospel into Europe at Philippi. It incorporates the establishment of a new congregation, liberation from demonic and unjust relationships, signs and wonders, confession of faith and baptism, demand for justice and public accountability.

Acts 17 describes the engagement of the Gospel with the philosophical elite of Athens where engages with the local culture, confronts points of confusion and speaks of resurrection. This appears to have been one of the less fruitful occasions.

The story, quite rightly, is incomplete by the end of Acts – the mission continues. Paul has eventually reached Rome declaring the Gospel for all – Acts 28 v. 28.

5. PAUL'S METHODS OF MISSION AND OURS

The Apostle Paul's missionary adventures and methods are described in the Acts of the Apostles by Luke and in the Letters of Paul himself. Here are some of the principles that emerge:

1. Adapted strategy to locality – 1 Corinthians 9 v. 16 – 23
2. Went to all strata of society – Romans 1 v. 14 - 16
3. Championed the cause of the Gentiles – Galatians 2 v. 11 – 21, 3 v. 28
4. Concentrated on strategic cities – Romans 1 v. 10
5. Used the local church as a base – 1 Thessalonians 1 v. 7, 8
6. Proclaimed a full Gospel – Acts 20 v. 26, 27, 1 Corinthians 2 v. 1 - 5
7. Complete confidence in the message – Romans 1 v.15, 1 Corinthians 1 v. 24
8. Nurtured believers towards maturity – Colossians 1 v. 28, 2 v. 6, 7
9. Consolidated earlier work – Romans 15 v. 20, Acts 15 v. 30 , 36
10. Set an example to be followed – 1 Corinthians 11 v. 1, 2 Timothy 3 v. 10 - 14
11. Trained young leaders – 1 Timothy 4 v. 8, 2 Timothy 4 v. 1 – 5
12. Maintained a pioneering spirit – Acts 28 v. 28, 2 Corinthians 10 v. 15 – 17

In discussing missionary contexts and methods we can learn much from Paul and his partners as they proclaimed Christ and planted congregations of Christian believers around the Roman empire of their day. It may be that, in the largely 'post Christian' (post Christendom) society of the West today, we need to engage again with these principles and to evangelise on the assumption that people do not know the Gospel (or have not heard in a way that they can relate to). Paul spoke out the message about Christ in a plural, philosophically and spiritually inquisitive but uncommitted sometimes cynical context.

The salt and light principles of Matthew 5 v. 13 – 16 apply again here: We are to be connected with our society but distinctive from it in order to be effective witnesses to Christ. Sometimes we have been connected where we need to be distinctive and distinctive where we need to be connected. The task is enormous. Every generation and society needs to hear the Gospel in a language or form that is understandable and appropriate. The Holy Spirit will help us to get this right but it will involve risk – the expression of faith in action.

These principles can be implemented personally and in the local church. The purpose of the church is to worship God and to bring others to faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. Sometimes this simple goal is ignored or forgotten and the church looks more like a yatching club existing for the entertainment of its members rather than a life boat station out there to rescue the perishing. Ask the question: 'What on earth are we here for?' Ten years ago British Methodism described its four-fold purposes as: worship, service, learning and caring, evangelism.

The local church needs to express its purpose in a mission statement that is Biblical, understandable, transferable and short embracing the ideal that the church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members (William Temple) – eg:

- Elm Ridge Methodist Church, Darlington: ‘Compelled by Christ’s love to be God’s church in today’s world’ (2 Corinthians 5 v. 14).
- Darlington Methodist Circuit: ‘By all means to save some’ (1 Corinthians 9 v. 22)
- Eastbourne Methodist Church, Darlington: ‘Open at the edges – committed at the core’
- Thrum Hall Methodist Church, Rochdale: ‘This church exists to be the people of God: worshipping him, sharing the Good News, serving others’.
- From Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Chicago: ‘All people matter to God so they must matter to us’.

The mission statement must be simple and clear to be memorable, defining what our church exists for and what it does. Growing churches find their focus outside themselves as ‘engaging faith communities’ (Robert Warren). We are called to be the joyful bold disciples of a Jesus led counter culture, called into being by the Father and empowered by the Spirit – our purpose must reflect this.

Go on to expand your church’s mission statement in terms of how this objective and purpose can be achieved. This is strategy and it can only be tackled once the overall purpose is clear. Once we have clarity there we can begin working out our purpose in practice. To achieve effective and relevant strategy we need an up to date understanding of:

- Our community – areas of change, growth, need and opportunity in the catchment defined by geography or networks.
- Our church – our calling, identified strengths and weaknesses
- Our Gospel – what we believe about God and people, how we express this
- Our values – what is most important to us about God and people, acceptable means to achieve our goals.

It is necessary to return to these foundational principles regularly in order to check out what we are doing against our stated aims and beliefs.

Our strategic goals should be:

- Specific
- Measureable
- Ambitious
- Realistic

- Time bound

Another way of coming at this would be to use the Parable of the Sower and other Parables of the Kingdom – Matthew 13:

- Break up the ground
- Sow the seed
- Reap the harvest

How will we accomplish these three tasks?

How will the innovators pass on their vision, confidence and enthusiasm to the implementers, remembering that it is Jesus who will build his church? – Matthew 16 v. 18

Strategic directions might look something like this:

- Developing eventful, inclusive and participative worship
- Growing as an open, welcoming, learning community
- Engaging the wider community
- Making more faithful disciples

Ultimately however what most churches need is not a new strategy or a new idea but new life through the Holy Spirit. One psychiatrist asked a church leader, 'If I gave my patient a prescription for love, could they bring it to your church?'

6. MOBILIZING THE LOCAL CHURCH FOR MISSION

'The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning' Emil Brunner

'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist but I am afraid less they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power and this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out'. John Wesley

History and experience tells us that some of Wesley's concerns have proved to be well founded. The historic denominations in the West have been in decline for a century. We see the symptoms of decline in many situations: Low expectations, negative attitudes, nominal faith, unwillingness to

change, disconnected to the community it is called to reach, institutional, bureaucratic, leadership tensions ...

Rather than dwelling on problems however, we will do best to see the characteristics of growing and healthy churches:

- Anointed and enabling leadership, prophets more than managers
- Recognised and released gifts in all God's people
- Passionate spirituality, faithful prayer, eventful worship, Holy Spirit renewal
- Functional structures, people not programme orientated, open to change
- Holistic small groups, cells, Alpha courses, disciple training
- Appropriate evangelism especially through friendship
- Loving relationships, compassionate service

(adapted from C. Swartz – Natural Church Development and from my research)

Most churches work on a 'come' model of witness – come to us, meet us on our ground, engage with our programme, do things our way – and you will be welcome. This model assumes that people know what the church stands for, accept those values and merely require invitation. This has been the Christendom model and is now ineffective in a society where less than 10% of the population have any meaningful contact with church. We might visualise the situation as akin to being cut off in a meander loop which becomes an isolated pond instead of being in the flow. There is need to reconnect with the flow for the pond will soon dry up.

Be aware of credibility gaps – integrity; cultural gaps – values and practice; communication gaps – style and language.

A different approach to local church evangelism is needed, one that takes into account the widening gap between pew and pavement and engages with a plural, secular, spiritually inquisitive but doctrinally ill informed society. There are many ways in which the first century model takes this into account and can be adapted for today: A changeless message for a changing world.

Even in overtly secular societies some churches are growing and effective in evangelism today. We need to learn from models that work without simply replicating their methods in a different context. Many, though by no means all, of these examples are found in the new churches. They are generally:

*light on structure, cell based, positive and direct on leadership,

*Biblically conservative, charismatic, prayerful

*independent, post denominational,

- *contemporary in worship style,
- *not majoring on pastoral care,
- *gathered rather than neighbourhood congregations,
- *intentional concerning personal witness,
- *seeker sensitive activities, especially attractive to younger / non-church people,
- *anticipating high levels of commitment expressed through sacrificial giving,
- *engaging many in ministry but fewer in decision making.

Some steps towards becoming an effective mission focussed congregation could lead us back to our roots as

- One – diverse in expression but united in Christ – involved in community
- Holy – dedicated to living entirely for Christ – upward in worship
- Catholic – universal, inclusive – rooted in history
- Apostolic – true to the founding dream and beliefs – outward in mission

This is expressed practically and authentically as sharing, encouraging, supporting, forgiving, truth telling, respecting, trusting and committing – adapted from Rick Warren. We need to move away from a model where 80% of the people are passive and 20% do everything (and give most of the money), towards the ministry of all God's people.

7. CONNECTING WITH CULTURE

Over the last twenty years in Europe and America we have been emerging painfully from a secular modernist world of 'enlightenment' into what has been termed postmodernism with new challenges and opportunities for Gospel witness. Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to define but exhibits interest in

*spirituality without commitment, *environment without a Creator, *words without agreed meaning, *Individuality without belonging, *present without future, *choice without responsibility, *tolerance of all approaches to faith and life (Peter Brierley). Faith is not excluded entirely from this mindset but tends to be unfocussed. In Christian witness and observation of the media we will quickly encounter the 'spirit of the age' to be: *Unaware of the story of the Bible and of basic Christian belief. *Pervasive pluralism. *Seeking relevance and individualistic satisfaction in the present. *Conscious of doubt more than guilt.* Influenced by science more than creed. *Negative images of the church as an institution. *Alienated by dogmatism, authority and formality. *Untrusting and sceptical because insecure, apathetic, in constant flux. *Upholding individual freedom of choice as the ultimate virtue.

This sounds depressing and negative but there are opportunities for Christian witness. A major difficulty is that in Britain we are often trying to present a message to people who think they know what the message is (though they don't in fact) and have already rejected it on the basis of unsympathetic media coverage and bad personal experiences of church. People may still acknowledge a spiritual need but there is a huge gap between the church and the search.

We are all influenced by the culture around us – it is part of who we are. Recognising this and working with it is part of an incarnational approach to evangelism. Too often Christians are in a ghetto of their own making, shouting their message from a distance and wondering why no one listens.

Effective Christian witnesses are those who

- Understand modern culture – connected and often positive about society
- Live by the faith they commend – integrity, an attractive holiness
- Have a passion for a missionary church and express faith naturally but intentionally outside church
- Care deeply about the people they are called to reach – mirroring Christ's love for the world.
- Witness in word and deed – show positive outcomes to believing.
- Are gripped by a core of convictions – what beliefs and values motivate us?
- Engage in Christian apologetics – use the scientists, engage with the big questions

(adapted from George Hunter)

Contextualisation of the Gospel message and method is not compromise it is starting where people are. Look for good examples of this, possibly from other cultures and contexts. You do not need to replicate these but you can learn much from them. A whole church which is open at the edges and committed at the core embraces this concept. Vincent Donovan states: 'An inward turned Christianity is a dangerous counterfeit, an alluring masquerade. It is no Christianity at all.... A Christian community is basically in existence for others. A church that turns in on itself will die'.

Our major and essential task is to re-connect with the younger generation, working people including the growing range of ethnic minorities. For this to happen the church must change its mode and mindset from that of a 'come and join us' institution to that of a radical living on the edge community with a clear sense of purpose.

Six characteristics of a missionary church (or of a missionary):

- Being before doing – less activist, more reflective, enjoy God not just God's work
- Human before Christian – approachable, vulnerable, relational

- Belonging before believing – growing into faith within a family of believers
- Listening before speaking – hear the questions first
- Travelling before arriving – pilgrimage is a missionary paradigm
- Spirituality before creed – seek an experience of God then interpret it

(adapted from Robert Warren, Sheffield, UK)

The task of mission and evangelism is holistic – it always has been: Luke 4 v. 16 – 18: Jesus in the Synagogue reading Isaiah 61 v. 1 – 3: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when God will save his people’.

Rick Warren (Saddleback Church, California) identifies Christ’s five purposes for his church: Magnify – Celebrate God’s presence in worship; Mission – Communicate God’s word in evangelism; Membership – Incorporate God’s family in fellowship; Maturity – educate God’s people through discipleship; Ministry – demonstrate God’s love through service.

8. CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF MISSION CHURCH

Churches grow when disciples are made. This is the work of the Holy Spirit released through prayer and planning. We need to develop a strategy for evangelism in the local church and to keep this under review in an on-going process of developing ways of being church in a changing context:

- Establish the facts – about the Gospel and the community we serve
- Identify the task - overall strategy
- Set goals – identify specific objectives
- Equip the members – provide opportunities for training and experience
- Review the progress – and adjust the strategy in the light of changed circumstances

Often a SWOT analysis is employed as a simple tool for evaluating the mission context and effectiveness of a congregation:

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

Our image of church will define our approach to mission: army, body, castle, community, family, life boat, school, team, club, orchestra

George Carey identifies the characteristics of a growing church as

- Prepared to face disturbing news

- Concerned with God's mission not its own existence
- Geared to the deepening of faith
- Harnessing the ministry of all its members
- Aiming for quality in worship

Clarity of purpose is very important. For instance, a railway does not exist fundamentally to run trains but to transport people and goods. Similarly, church does not exist fundamentally to run programmes but to declare and live the Gospel in such a way that people become disciples of Jesus Christ.

We must ask 1. Why are we here? – Purpose

2. What is our aim? – Goal

3. How is this accomplished? – Method

Churches growing through evangelism are often looking out for what God is doing and seeking to join him in it. They have many characteristics in common:

+ a passion for God, + people orientated values and vision, + awareness of the prevailing culture, + agreed evangelistic strategy, + financial commitment to outreach, + regular teaching to equip the congregation for mission, + involvement in and accessibility to the local community, + discipleship programme, + seeker friendly worship and events, + identifying and releasing gifts for mission, + inter-church co-operation, + dissatisfaction with transfer growth, + engender a stakeholder rather than a consumer mentality, + willing to risk failure, + imagine new possibilities – dreaming the Kingdom dream....

We can see this put into action clearly in some new forms of church which find their origins in the earliest Christian communities where new wine required new wine skins (Luke 5 v. 38). Cell Church comprises: small primary units of Christian belonging which express New Testament models of discipleship, church planting and evangelism designed for the multiplication of congregational units as communities of the Kingdom based on every member ministry. These cells provide an informal atmosphere where the Gospel is expressed in varied accessible ways without pressure. The overriding concept is that the cell is there to multiply – either a cell grows and multiplies or it decays and dies. There is a cell group leader but the emphasis is on every part of the cell being involved. This is a more dynamic model than most house groups and has some social implications similar to the South American base communities. The format and intention of a Cell Group meeting owes much to the Wesleyan Class Meeting: Welcome – ice breaker, introduction, explanation. Worship – Prayer and praise. Word – Understanding and applying the Bible. Witness – Testimony to what God is doing in our lives and resulting actions.

Authentic marks of the mission church are to be self propagating, self governing and self financing (Henry Venn). The leadership of such churches, whether cells or church plants reaching beyond a

culture familiar with conventional church , is less about laity and clergy, presbyters and deacons but rather :

*apostles, *prophets, *evangelists, *pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4 v. 11 – 12)

The cell church model will mean a re-think of the nature of church where the small unit rather than the whole congregation is the primary unit of church and the commitment of the members is first to the small group and secondly to the larger unit. This allows great flexibility in the styles of worship and community that can be created, reaching many different people and needs. Many new spiritual movements have begun in this way through history and today.

9. EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

It is sometimes assumed that one preaches to the converted but in most churches there are those who are uncommitted or enquiring into faith. Therefore explaining the Gospel and calling people to commitment through preaching both inside and outside the church is both appropriate and relevant. Paul states in Romans 1 v. 16 – 17 that he is ‘unashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to those who believe’. Later in Romans 10 v. 13 – 15 he says ‘For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they hear without a preacher’

William Abraham declares: ‘In announcing the Good News, we need to abandon the image of proclamation that is so prevalent in Protestant tradition. That image, represented by the solid, tripartite sermon, usually read from a manuscript, is a culturally relative phenomenon. What matters is that the Good News of the Kingdom be transmitted with flair and in culturally fitting forms. That announcement, furthermore, is to be heralded less in the church and more in the market place and in the world at large. Moreover as the Gospel is made known formally and informally it will spill over into other acts of speech. It will lead into basic instruction, into offering relevant explanations, into dialogue and conversation, and into offering a reason for the hope that is within one. It is artificial to limit this to formal acts alone or to some hygienic act of preaching fashioned according to some standard mode, although there is an obvious place for the well planned, formal heralding of the Good News in appropriate places.’

The message of the Gospel requires response offering a balance between what God has done in his sovereign will, the Calvinist emphasis, and his desire for us to trust and follow his Son, the Arminian emphasis. The preacher can, following a declaration of what God has done, enable this response. This includes the unpopular concept in today’s world of conviction of sin leading to repentance as well as emphasising the love of God for sinners shown in the cross of Christ.

William Sangster referred to preachers as ‘vulgarizers’ – making sublime truth accessible to ordinary people. John Stott states ‘the preacher is a herald charged with the solemn yet exciting responsibility of proclaiming the Good News of God, the apostolic kerygma.’

A clear sense of calling is essential to the preaching ministry – this comes in a huge variety of ways but it should always be checked out through prayer, reading Scripture and advice from mature believers. Jesus must be central to the proclamation, especially his death and resurrection as the atoning sacrifice for sin.

We learn much from Jesus' methods –

- he taught mainly through story (parable) – Luke 15
- he used every day situations to declare the message with clarity and vitality – Matthew 13
- he caused alarm by saying the unexpected or controversial – Luke 13
- his words were accompanied by actions including compassion and miracles – Luke 13
- he appealed to all levels of society – John 3 & 4
- he encountered severe opposition – Matthew 23
- he gave more detailed / difficult teaching to the inner circle of followers – John 17
- he encouraged others to declare the same message – Luke 9 & 10

The preaching of the Apostles emphasised the death and resurrection of Jesus and challenged people to believe – many thousands did and joined the fellowship: Acts 2 & 4. This was a continuation of the prophetic proclamation of men like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel whose oracles are recorded at length in the Old Testament.

Harvey Cox states ' The effectiveness of preachers such as Billy Graham and Festo Kivengere has been their ability to interpret the Gospel vividly into the experience of their hearers. This is not about the communication of ideas but the use of vocabulary which illuminates and interprets aspects of people's world. An inner dialogue takes place between God and people through the preacher.' Therefore evangelistic preaching, birthed in prayer and study, must include:

- Information – about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, clarity, reasoned faith
- Ownership – personal sincerity, conversational style, common ground
- Conviction – conveyed passionately, dramatic tension, honesty
- Response – expected and enabled for various needs

Maintain good eye contact – do not read from a script but use some well thought through notes as a guide. Be faithful to scripture but key into your hearers' experience by using appropriate illustration. Be passionate – and be yourself. Vary pace and volume. Avoid unnecessary repetition. Use story remembering that Jesus taught in parables.

Be ready to explain the reason and need for response early in your address, returning to this in your final challenge. Give time to allow this to happen at the end and have suitable people and literature

prepared beforehand and available to help in the conversation and prayer situations that result. Local and culturally appropriate follow up of new believers or those who have received a new experience of the Holy Spirit is vital.

10. STYLES AND CONTEXTS FOR EVANGELISM

There is no single approach to evangelism and the mission of God that is appropriate in every situation. Here are several styles and contexts, you will think of many others. Traditionally we have thought of context and network in terms of geography, so our most obvious and natural context would be those who physically live near us. This may not be the case now as community is defined in a huge variety of ways – workplace, leisure grouping, electronic / internet groupings....

People come to faith more by friendship than programme, however one can complement the other and the local neighbourhood is still a significant factor in mission strategy. Beware of quick fix solutions – great trees grow from small seeds – but it takes time!

Vision and creativity are spiritual gifts. It is good to dream the Kingdom dream : ‘Wouldn’t it be great if God’ (Complete the sentence). Vision is caught not taught – but it does need to be clearly explained and it is not simply the latest bright idea. Vision looks to the horizon and seeks to take others there. Keep returning to the vision and tease out the values that underpin it. When the values are agreed the vision will be clearer and will be owned – a mission shaped church forms.

One of the most effective evangelistic tools over the past 20 years has been the Alpha Course, pioneered by Nicky Gumbel at Holy Trinity, Brompton and spread internationally. Alpha incorporates key elements in evangelism: invitation on the basis of friendship, hospitality, informality, opportunity for relaxed enquiry, experiencing the Holy Spirit, good quality presentation leading to the challenge of commitment....

Other small group activities for enquirers are also effective – short courses, Cell Groups, informal presentations and ministry....

Short term missions led by visiting teams are helpful supplements to a local congregation’s evangelistic efforts even when team members are inexperienced and in training. An extra boost of personnel with particular skills and enthusiasm can attract others, train the team themselves, boost confidence and ignite new life in the congregation. This can be extended by planting a team in a communal house for a limited time in a neighbourhood to create a missional community witnessing to others, building trust and friendship to reach people who would never normally come to a church building.

The proclamation of the Good News with Sunday worship or at special events has traditionally been one of the main contexts for evangelism. We cannot assume that all those present in a church setting are Christian but if such presentation of the Gospel is restricted to this we will miss 90% of the population. Seeker services usually of a relaxed contemporary style provide opportunities to hear the message but this does assume that people come onto our territory and do things our way – assumptions to be challenged. Good quality presentation in preaching, drama, music, projection is important. Although this is a visual age, many people still listen to and are moved by powerful

oratory. Therefore the crusade / revivalist style of evangelism still has a role alongside other methods depending on the context.

Local and national media provide opportunities where there is a compelling story or event. The electronic revolution opens up huge possibilities for good or ill. For outdoor witness on the high street or in the park the emphasis needs to be on sound bite rather than sermon, praise songs more than seven verse hymns.... The cross of Christ was a public event: To reach un-churched people we must be alongside them and on 'their turf' not ours. Take care to avoid the 'cringe factor' – be gracious not abrasive, make the event fun – not just traditional church outdoors!

Children, youth and family focussed activities have a great variety of forms from holiday clubs to sports, hospitality, camps and party events. Varied locations and social contexts provide opportunities / limitations. You will need to take some risks in finding what works where. Be ready to recognise when something isn't working and change the approach.

Other expressions of evangelism include outreach connected to social action; healing ministry; Labyrinth – an interactive spiritual journey. 'Biblefresh' – interpreting the Bible in practice to mark the 400th anniversary of the translation of the Authorised Version. Prayer backs up these events and is an integral part of the evangelistic strategy. This can be expressed in a great variety of ways: prayer triplets, walks...

New people will change your church presenting challenges to those who have been comfortable with conventional but unfruitful patterns. The leader's main role is to hear what God is saying to the church and to move the church towards God's purposes in God's ways. This is a vulnerable place to be. It will take courage, ability to communicate a vision and to bring people on board with it, then to implement it without waiting for the laggards. Jesus did not wait indefinitely for people to decide and change. He worked with a dedicated group of learners – sometimes slow learners – and they began a movement that changed the world. You are part of this movement - There is no limit to what God can do.