

Effective Evangelism Today

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Churches in Britain are finding it more and more difficult to engage in effective evangelism, with the result that fewer and fewer people are becoming Christians.

According to the *UK Christian Handbook for 2005/2006*:

"If nothing changes, Presbyterian members are forecast to drop 42% in the period 2000 to 2020, Methodists 37%, Anglicans 31%, Catholics 28%, Independents 22%, and the Baptists 17%". In 1980 11% of the British population went to church; in 2000 8%; and is expected to be down to 2% by 2040, with two-thirds of churchgoers then being 65 or over. [\[1\]](#)

On other hand, we mustn't get too down-hearted by these statistics. As G K Chesterton once wrote: "Five times in the last 2000 years the church has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each case it was the dogs that died" [\[2\]](#). Furthermore, the trend in church decline can be easily reversed: for if each year every Christian were to win one person to Christ, then the whole world would be won to Christ within six years!

Statistics can be misleading. Let's simply accept the fact that the churches in the West face a crisis. And the crisis is this: if we as churches are going to survive into the second half of this 21st century, then we are going to have to learn to evangelise.

Robin Gill has likened British churches today to the pelicans in St James' Park in central London, "awkward, out of place, angular, with a big mouth but little brain, demanding but inactive". He went on: "Churches in Britain need to make urgent choices about structure and direction. If they are to cease being pelicans, they need to be much clearer about how they might be effective in present-day Britain. They need to be more single-minded about growth... about how they might reach the nine out of ten people in Britain who seldom or never go to church". [\[3\]](#)

If that image doesn't grab you, then what about likening churches to dinosaurs? According to William Easum:

"Congregations whose membership has plateaued or is declining have much in common with dinosaurs. Both have great heritages. Both require enormous amounts of food...Both became endangered species. ... Like the dinosaur they have a voracious appetite. Much of their time, energy, and money is spent foraging for food (for themselves), so that little time is left to feed the

unchurched. ...Either their pride or their nearsightedness keeps them from changing the ways they minister to people...All around are unchurched, hurting people... But many refuse to change their methods and structures to minister to people where they are in ways they can understand. Like the dinosaur, their necks are too stiff or their eyes too near-sighted. Clearly God doesn't care if these congregations survive; but God passionately cares if they meet the spiritual needs of those God sends their way"[\[4\]](#).

So, what can be done? How can we engage in effective evangelism?

1. Be open to change

Churches must be prepared to change. Yet change is costly. As North American mega-church pastor, Leith Anderson, has written:

"There is a basic principle of church growth: For a church to grow, it must want to grow and be willing to pay the price. The price is least counted in dollars. It comes in the more costly currency of change. It is doing church in new ways, incorporating new people, moving out of comfort zones, and existing for others rather than for self"[\[5\]](#).

But change is never an option in life. We either change or we die. The seven last words of a church were: "We never did it that way before".

2. Realise that the West is now a mission field.

Churches need to realize they are now in a missionary situation, where the focus has to be on people outside, rather than inside, the church. This calls for a different kind of leadership, as also for different expectations of leadership. Let me be personal. When I came to Chelmsford to preach 'with a view', as we Baptists put it, I concluded my sermon on Romans 1.16 with these words:

"What kind of minister are you looking for? If you are looking for a chaplain to marry you, bury you and keep you comfortable, then forget me. But if you are looking for a leader with a passion for evangelism, who will constantly seek to mobilise this church for mission, who will never be satisfied even with a packed church, then maybe I am your man".

Churches need a mood change - they need to cease being pastoral units and become missionary congregations. If churches today in the West are to be effective, then they must shift from caring to themselves to caring for those who do not belong to any church.

It was a concern for people outside our church which led us in Chelmsford to re-develop our premises at a cost of £2 million to enable us to have a mission facility fit for the 21st century. At the time there were people in our church opposed to spending such a sum of money: "We don't need to change our church building, we are happy as

we are". But that was not the point: what counted was not how we felt, but how people outside the church felt. People outside the church are not prepared to put up with discomfort. Just as cinemas had to upgrade their facilities to attract a new cinema-going public, so too churches, if they want to attract a new church-going public, must do the same.

3. Adopt a variety of strategies

But, of course, churches can have the most comfortable of premises, and still fail to make an impact. The question is: how can we engage in effective evangelism? The Apostle Paul supplies the answer: "By all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9.22). There is no one way - rather we have to use a variety of methods.

A friend once likened the church to a furniture store. He suggested that just as any progressive furniture store has 'special monthly offers' - so too churches must constantly be re-arranging their wares. There is some truth in this. Although we have only one basic message to declare, we must be prepared to alter our packaging if we are to reach the community for Christ. We live in a world where people are at varying distances from Christian commitment. In today's supermarket of beliefs a variety of approaches is called for.

4. Build bridges between the church and the local community

There need to be activities which build bridges of friendship with people outside the church, so that non-Christians can discover that Christians are normal fun-loving people, not peculiar sad people; and most important, people who are interested in others, people who know how to make friends.

Such activities can vary enormously. We have found that quiz evenings are extremely popular with 'outsiders', with the result that normally 50% of those present are non-church goers. Furthermore, they are so simple to organize - all one has to do is to hire a quiz master and provide food (ploughman's) and sell drink.

Other possibilities include Valentine dinners and Burns night suppers, family fun days and holidays at home for older people. When I was in New Zealand I discovered that fashion shows for women were the rage.

5. Make the most of Christian festivals.

Christmas is a great opportunity to invite people to church. Many non-church people are open to accepting an invitation to a carol service. But a carol service in itself is not enough: to be evangelistically effective it must contain an accessible Christmas message. For instance, I love the King's College Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols: it's a marvelous aesthetic experience, but in no way can one pretend that it is an exercise in evangelism.

Easter too is another special opportunity for presenting the Gospel.

So is All Saints Day (1 November), when Christians remember all those who have died in Christ. My practice is to write to the relatives of all those whose funerals we have taken over the past year and invite them to a service of thanksgiving for past loved ones. As a result there are always a good number of non-Christian families present. I also write to all those in our church who have lost a close relative in the year, but whose funeral we did not take. In addition I publicise the service, making it clear that we will also be remembering all those whose dreams were crushed with a miscarriage or a still birth.

The service itself is drawn up with the needs of the bereaved in mind. We sing traditional hymns associated with funerals. There is a sermon, in which we spell out the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying. The most moving part of the service, however, is the prayers. I begin by reading out the names of those whose funerals we have taken, and then give people an opportunity to silently thank God for other loved ones. We also remember in the silence those who have experienced a miscarriage or a still-birth. Then we invite people to come forward and light a candle in memory of a loved one. This is an immensely moving experience and many a tear is shed. We move into prayer, praising God for the living hope that is ours as a result of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and praying that God will comfort those who mourn, giving them strength and the courage for the living of their days.

6. Exploit the rites of passage

Here I have in mind not just weddings and funerals, but dedication and baptismal services (for non-Baptists, christenings and confirmations), which can be exploited for evangelistic purposes, in the sense that they can provide a congregation of non-Christians to whom the preacher can speak of the difference that Jesus makes.

In the case of a dedication, I encourage couples to bring along as many family and friends as possible. At one recent dedication service there were 50 guests, many of them clearly not accustomed to being in church. At another service, the father had invited all the members of his rugby club. On one recent occasion we had three couples on the fringe of the church bringing their children for dedication. Although in each case the father hadn't darkened the door of the church previously, they happily brought along their extended families. What a great Gospel opportunity!

Baptismal services too can be great evangelistic opportunities. I tell the candidates to make a list of all their friend, enemies and relations, and then invite the lot!

Teenagers will often bring most of their class mates along, and sometimes their teachers too. At a recent baptismal service one of the candidates, a nervous woman in her late 40s, invited all her friends and neighbours to the service and to a following lunch party; and, what's more, not to bring a bottle to the lunch party, but a gift for our

church's building fund. Some 60 people turned up, and several £100s were given! In summary, if a church is baptising, say, four candidates, there is no reason why the preacher cannot be provided with a 100 or more newcomers to preach to!

Do notice that the success of these gospel opportunities is not down to the preacher, but to the people concerned. Effective evangelism involves a congregational mind-set.

7. Put on seeker-friendly services

Seeker-friendly services are not to be confused with the 'seeker services' popularised by Bill Hybels of Willowcreek, which kick hymns and prayers into touch and instead are essentially 'presentation' services. Although for some churches this is an effective form of evangelism, in our context they have not proved greatly successful - in spite of all the effort put into them. Seeker-friendly services by contrast are services which contain hymns and prayers, but which nonetheless are accessible to non-Christians.

8. Engage in process evangelism

People today need an opportunity to reflect on the Christian Gospel before they commit themselves to Jesus. Explorers are starting further and further away from the Christian faith, so that the journey to faith takes longer and longer.

When I was a child the classic way in which many people became Christians was by attending an evangelistic event and responding to an appeal to come forward at the end of the sermon. Faith for them involved very much a **crisis** in their lives. However, it is generally reckoned that the last major successful evangelistic event of this kind held in Britain was the Billy Graham Mission England crusade held in 1984. After that, things changed. People no longer responded to Billy Graham - or indeed to any other evangelist - in the way they did.

The fact is that we as a country had changed. Whereas at one stage there were many lapsed Christians and many people on the fringes of the church, today things are different. Now there is widespread ignorance about the Christian faith. There is no longer a harvest which evangelists can reap on a one-night stand.

Evangelism has had to change. Now process-evangelism is the name of the game.

So we have Alpha courses and 'Y' courses, lasting ten weeks or so, but even then these courses are often too short for people to make a commitment. If the ordinary physical birth process takes nine months, we should not be surprised if the spiritual birth process takes a number of months too.

9. Identify responsive people groups

Are there particular groups within our churches whom we should be seeking to mobilize? I believe that one key group is that formed by pregnant mums in the church.

Let me explain. When a woman gets pregnant, immediately her network of relationships changes and probably expands. As she attends ante-natal classes - and later hospital and clinics - she finds herself meeting up with a wide spectrum of people. Many of whom are open to exploring the deeper issues of life. Mothers at this stage are asking questions as to the meaning and purpose of life. The birth-process is a crisis period in life, when all of a sudden people are jolted out of the ruts of their previous way of thinking and are open to hearing the gospel. Pregnant mums are a responsive people group, and so if churches wish to be strategic they need to train their young women to share the Gospel.

Another responsive people group are older people, first because post-retirement years are often increasingly lonely years, and second because these post-retirement years inevitably cause people to reflect on their mortality. Death is no longer a remote possibility. It becomes an increasing reality. Here too is another 'window of opportunity' for effective evangelism.

10. Build relationships

The key to evangelism lies not in programmes or strategies, but in Christians building relationships with others. What a difference it would make if every Christian were intentionally to build relationships with non-Christian people with a view to leading their new friends to Jesus Christ.

Let me tell you about my mother. At her ripe old age of 82 she is in the business of building relationships with the residents of her retirement complex with a view to inviting people to church. But she is wise enough to know that you can only invite people to church once you have become a true friend. So most weeks she goes out to the theatre with her new friends in the retirement complex - not that she is desperately keen on the theatre, but how can you invite people to church without first being willing to share their interests too?

11. Don't worry about numbers

Let me close by telling you about my father. It was as a teenager that he first came into contact with a church. At the time he had a friend who was crazy on football, and a Baptist church not far from him had a team, but to play in the team one had to attend Bible class. His friend, not wanting to attend the Bible class by himself, persuaded my father go to the Bible class with him. My father was so impressed with the Bible class leader, that he began to attend church. It was just at this stage that the church held a mission led by two students from Spurgeon's College. My father, still fifteen at the time, was fascinated by the meetings:

"One evening the preacher took the theme of the meaning of Christ's death. For the first time in my life I, who had seen crucifixes since I was a child, learned that the cross was for my sake, that the love of Christ shown on it embraced me as truly as it did anyone, and that I personally could know forgiveness for ever and eternal life. When

that dawned on me it was like the coming of day. I could not hold back from Christ. I went forward to express my desire to receive Him - and went home walking on air"[\[6\]](#).

When the students went back to Spurgeon's, however, they reported that the mission had been a failure. Only one person had become a Christian, and he was a teenager at that. But how wrong they were! For the one person who came to Christ later brought many others to Christ - and was to play a key role in training others to win yet others for Christ.

Winning just one person to Christ can actually make all the difference! Although the animals may have gone two by two into the ark, when it comes to the Kingdom of God today many enter it one by one!

In today's climate effective evangelism is no easy task. But the reality we all have to face is: no evangelism today - no church tomorrow!

[\[1\]](#) Peter Brierley. *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 5* (Christian Research, London 2005) 0.4

[\[2\]](#) Quoted by Peter Brierley in *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 5* page 0.3

[\[3\]](#) *A vision for growth: why your church doesn't have to be a pelican in the wilderness* (SPCK, London 1994), 2-3

[\[4\]](#) *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry In A Hostile And Hurting World* (Abingdon, Nashville 1993)

[\[5\]](#) *A Church for the 21st Century* (Bethany House, Minneapolis, 1992), 192

[\[6\]](#) See P.Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth: A personal portrait of the life of George Beasley-Murray* (Paternoster, Carlisle 2002) 13