

## Evangelism from Small Churches

For the purposes of this paper I am assuming that we are thinking about evangelism from small rural churches as this is inevitably distinct from small suburban and most small urban churches.

Evangelism is not an option for any Christian or church. Proclamation of the good news is a responsibility that rests on every Christian, even those for whom it might not be a special ministry gift or might not suit their personality. However, the biggest problem we have with evangelism in the UK is that we have so many unhelpful models for evangelism that most Christians feel discouraged and uncomfortable by the E-word.

Before I address that particular issue it might be helpful to identify what might impede engagement in evangelism from a small rural church. Here are some of the main aspects:

- The small congregation might well not have a natural evangelist within the congregation;
- Those that make up the congregation might already have plenty of church responsibilities more suited to them;
- The lack of anonymity seems to make the idea of evangelism rather embarrassing.
- Limited understanding of the topic.

### A Story to Share and a Person to Meet

The Bible presents us with four accounts of the life of Jesus. It might well be that you grew up hearing the stories within the Story. If so then you were the subject of evangelism but probably did not realise it. Whichever of the four gospels you read it is full of engaging stories. Some are accounts of people being healed, or forgiven, or fed, or given water that turned into wine, or even being raised from the dead. Other stories are just that, such as the story about the Good Samaritan. Of course, the ultimate story within the Story is what happened around the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Almost everyone is capable of telling stories. Indeed most of us relate what has been happening - or sometimes not happening - in our lives. Or we pass on bits of news or an opinion about something we have seen on TV. Stories do not have to be told with every precise aspect recounted. You won't find much about the birth of Jesus in either Mark's or John's Gospels, for example.

The most important thing is to know the Story well. Even if you have been a Christian for years it is not a bad thing to sit down and read one or two of the Gospel just as we might read any other book. In the process you will get to know far better the central character. I recommend reading it in a contemporary version with which you are less familiar. "The Message" version is excellent for this. It is amazing how things impact us when we hear then told in unfamiliar words.

Here's a challenge - you might like to try this out with a friend from your church, and both have a go:

1. Tell someone about a book you have read recently (perhaps a novel) or a film you have seen. Hopefully you will choose something you enjoyed. Is that difficult? If so why?
2. Tell someone about somebody else you know well. You might be able to include some things that only you would know. Think about what their personality is like, their attitude to something, their likes and dislikes, for example. Is that difficult? If so why?
3. Pick an incident from one of the Gospels and try telling this to someone as if they have never heard it before BUT try not to use Bible words. Use your own words and start the story somewhere other than the beginning (you can add the beginning later like a flash back in a film). Is that difficult? If so why? Maybe it will need some practice.

### **Whose story is it?**

If asked who Mark's Gospel is about, most Christians would answer, "Jesus Christ". But Jesus is not the only character in the story. The Gospel (good news) only occurs where the story of the life of Jesus overlaps with the story of Mary and Martha, or Bartimaeus, or Peter, etc. Similarly, there is a sense in which the good news about Jesus is still happening as his story overlaps with life stories of people today.

Take your life story for example. You might not have had a sudden conversion like Paul on the Damascus Road but at some time in your life, presumably, the story of Jesus and your life-story overlapped. Can you remember when that was? Was it in childhood, or perhaps at a crisis time in your life? Was it unexpected? Was someone else involved who told you the story or introduced you to Jesus? No matter how your experience might contrast to Saul on the Damascus Road, it is still part of the contemporary gospel today.

Imagine you were asked to give a three minute talk on three things that make Jesus special to you in your experience. I have often asked people in churches to think of three things and then team up with two or three others and listen to each other explain what is on their list and why. Often the discussion is lively and the church usually buzzes with animated conversations - especially if I ask them to consider whether they think something on another person's list is more important after all than something on their own list.

Often people who have never spoken to others like this talk about things like, "I can talk to him anywhere and any time, or "He accepts me as I am", or "He's an unchanging and faithful friend".

### **Where have we gone?**

An Anglican Bishop had sent me to one village church adamantly opposed to evangelism. We ran through some exercises similar to those mentioned above and including the listing

things that make Jesus special. I had a real task to get them to stop talking before it was lunch time. I then invited people who wished to do so to feed back in an open session what things were on their joint lists. Group by group they did so. I then asked them what they had been doing during the previous twenty minutes. There was a short pause and then one very surprised person stated, “We have been evangelising!”

At this point another man spoke up and said, “So you are not going to suggest we all go door knocking?” I assured him and everyone else that I considered door knocking in their village would be unhelpful, but that there were other ways of evangelising that they might find more comfortable.

### **Meet my good friend...**

Imagine that you have made a new friend - perhaps someone who has only recently moved into the village. Because you are a caring person you would like to give them the opportunity of meeting some of your other friends with whom you think the new friend would get on well. How would you arrange this?

You might arrange a meal in your home? You might suggest joining up for a shopping expedition, or going on a walk as a group, or sharing in a day’s fishing. I guess it would be something you know your new friend would be likely to feel comfortable about. I am sure you could be incredibly inventive.

Can you think how that might relate to helping someone meet up with Jesus? If you discounted encouraging them to come to a church service (sadly, usually a very inappropriate way), when where and how would you do that. In what context might your “new friend” feel most comfortable? It might be over a meal or barbecue, or in an informal home gathering. Do you have any friends in the village who as far as you know do not know the best Friend of all?

### **Closing Thoughts**

High profile evangelistic programmes work well for some but often have an unseen negative affect on others. Usually they do not work well for small churches and, if fruitful, they are usually difficult to sustain. But small churches are inevitably strong on relational issues, so relational evangelism is the ideal.

Here is a real challenge but if you pray about it you are most likely to be surprised by the outcome. Make a note of no more than three people you know quite well but who, as far as you know, are not yet committed Christians. Pray for them daily (perhaps several times a day) for a week or so. Then, when you have a discreet one to one opportunity, ask him or her if you can tell him or her something that is important to you. They are certain to say yes. Now explain why you are a Christian and include those three things that make Jesus special in your experience.

Thank them for listening and ask them what they think about this. Don’t rush this and don’t argue with them. The worst thing you could do is to press them if they are clearly

unresponsive or uncomfortable. Simply thank them and say something like, “I hope you didn’t mind; I just wanted to share something special with you”.

If they respond positively you could have ready a suggestion to make to them. It might be to read a book, or watch a DVD on the life of Jesus with you, or perhaps to come to church (include a meal with you either before or afterwards), or to try out your home group. If you are really brave you might even ask if you could say a prayer. Here is a simple example prayer you could adapt.

“Dear God, I thank you for all you mean to me and what you have done in my life. Thank you for loving me and forgiving me when I needed it. I ask you to bless *Margaret* and help her to come to know you in a wonderful way. Thank you that you promise never to turn away anyone who comes to you. Amen.”

There are two simple unthreatening programmes that work well for small churches. One is called START and is published by Church Pastoral Aid Society. The other is Christianity Explored. Both are somewhat easier than ALPHA and more suitable for small rural churches, according to many who have used them. But these programmes are for people who have already expressed an interest in knowing more. So your “introduction” challenge described above is the important first step.

There are lots of people who can give short interesting talks about their life and faith. Some can relate this to their work or a dramatic incident in their life. Even small churches can arrange events such as men’s breakfasts, ladies suppers etc with a guest speaker. But be sure that whoever you invite as a speaker is aware that people who live in the gold fish bowl of village life will not be comfortable in making any kind of public response. It is better to have follow-up booklets for such occasions that can be discreetly picked up from a table. If the speaker has prayed a prayer of commitment (quite commonly done) then it is better to suggest that anyone who prayed that prayer with them or said a personal “Amen” to what was prayed finds a Christian friend and tells them that they did so.

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