

2011 Rural Evangelism Survey (REN)

Background:

Questionnaires were sent to those who represent members of the Rural Evangelism Network. The members are national or international Churches represented at national and/or intermediate level, plus mission agencies that are significantly active in rural ministry/evangelism. Some completed the survey on-line. For the purposes of this survey evangelism was defined as explicit and intentional, usually involving words but allowing for activities like drama, films, and exhibitions.

Because of the limited number of surveys sent out the responses can only provide an indication and this survey should not be interpreted as an accurate overview. However, most of those canvassed were among those who are likely to be very well informed.

We started by asking the respondents some question about themselves including their personal inclination as to whether they see evangelism more as implicit or explicit.

The next section was about their observations of the practise of evangelism undertaken during the last two years. 86% of them had been able to observe rural evangelism in action, with the majority of these able to observe several activities. They then listed the kinds of activities. The figures on the table indicate the percentage of respondents that had observed the activities listed. We also asked them to indicate outcomes from these activities. This survey was not able to link specific activities to specific outcomes. The outcome section of the survey form focused on individual and church related outcomes. Hopefully a later survey will also explore the impact on the local community in general.

The final section of the survey invited the respondents to indicate what, in their opinion, inhibited rural churches and rural Christians from engaging in evangelism within their immediate community. Recognising that these might vary with the size of the local community we asked the respondents to indicate their views as they affected (a) villages up to 1,500, (b) villages over 1,500 up to 3,000, and (c) villages over 3,000 and up to 5,000. We also provided a list of possible inhibiting factors under three headings: theological, ecclesial, and social.

Not one of the listed factors was universally considered to be irrelevant. Interestingly most of the factors were seen as reducing in significance as the population size of local settlement increased. It is probable that there also may be links to the size of congregation, the number of newer congregants, and the theological nature of the church, but that is something a more detailed survey will be addressing.

The results of this survey are, in my opinion, worth sharing with the caveat that it can only be understood as indicative and not providing empirical evidence.

Rev'd Barry Osborne 25 August 2011

	Percentage of respondents		
Respondent Details:			
Ordained	70%		
Not ordained	30%		
Incumbent/Minister with local church responsibility	50%		
Those having any kind of national/ diocesan/ regional responsibility	35%		
Agency officer	14%		
Sees evangelism more as implicit	68%		
Sees evangelism more as explicit	32%		
Role includes encouraging evangelism	79%		
Role does not include encouraging evangelism	21%		
Anglican	86%		
Free Church denomination/independent	14%		
Rural Evangelism Practise			
Aware of no churches active in the last two years	-		
Aware of 1-3 churches active in the last two years	29%		
Aware of 4-6 churches active in the last two years	7%		
Aware of 7-9 churches active in the last two years	-		
Aware of 10+ churches active in the last two years	50%		
Evangelism Methods			
Alpha/Emmaus or other courses	29%		
Men's Breakfast & other food related events	27%		
Children's events (e.g. Holiday Bible Clubs)	36%		
County shows, flower festivals, car boot fairs etc.	29%		
Use of regular church festivals	35%		
Messy Church, Fresh Expression (church or outreach)	50%		
Other activities included: Special outreach events (weekend or more), School-based activities, Traditional missions, Open Aairs, Literature outreaches, and film nights.			
Outcomes from evangelism:			
Personal 'conversions'	21%		
Increased regular church or children's activity attendance	57%		
Growth in home group(s)	28%		
New home group(s) started	28%		
Nothing discerned	7%		
Other comments included: raising the profile of the church in the community, encouragement and stimulus to life of existing congregations			
Inhibitors: Only the most significant are listed here. Less significant factors include the number of clustered churches (e.g. size of multi parish benefice), inherited tradition, living with mistakes, and the attitudes of clergy towards evangelism.	1500 or fewer	1501 to 3000	3001 to 5000
Evangelism is understood in terms of an unspoken witness	86%	57%	43%
Members of the congregation lack engagement with the gospel	57%	57%	36%
Members of the congregation are not well informed about evangelism	57%	36%	36%
There is a lack of confidence in sharing the story of Jesus	57%	36%	36%
Preoccupation with 'maintenance' excludes mission	57%	50%	36%
Lack of anonymity in village life	50%	29%	29%
Concern about the image of the church	57%	29%	15%
Uncomfortable about telling their neighbours they need the gospel	57%	50%	36%

Conclusions:

The Greek word for an evangelist occurs only three times in the New Testament but words that relate to the message of the evangelist and its declaration occur over 200 times in the New Testament. The story of Jesus – who he is and what he has accomplished through his incarnation, the life lived, the death suffered and the experience of resurrection – is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Within the New Testament, sharing that story begins in the ministry of John the Baptist, and characterises the ministry of Jesus, the sending out of his early disciples, and permeates virtually every page of the Book of Acts.

In contemporary British rural society it is common to find that evangelism has a poor image. This is partly because of bad practice either experienced or caricatured through the media. Sometimes even good practice is written off as ‘emotionalism’ (often unjustly) because as a route into Christianity it challenges the faith of those whose faith, such as it is, has come about mainly through a kind of osmosis. In a significant number of village churches evangelism is seen as inappropriate, irrelevant, and potentially dangerous.

In its place has developed the attitude that the silent witness is sufficient. Usually the church building is prominent. People speak about being known as Christians. What is usually described as implicit evangelism is seen as the ‘right approach’. This is sometimes reinforced by the words of St Augustine of Hippo regarding preaching the gospel and using words ‘when necessary’. Clearly a Christian witness that has integrity is vital in a rural context. But the duty to proclaim the story comes from the lips of Jesus Christ and cannot be considered an option.

Of course, not every Christian has the gift of an evangelist. Some research has suggested that 10% do have that gift, but trying to turn every Christian into an evangelist has often proved counterproductive. However, every local church should be appropriately evangelistic for this goes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. While some rural churches do engage in evangelistic activities (often very creatively) it would be difficult to dispute the fact that the rural communities of Britain need to be re-evangelised as ignorance of the gospel abounds.

The survey reveals that a major area of concern (if not the major area of concern) has to be the theological perceptions within our rural churches. If evangelism is to be rehabilitated then we need to model this in ways that are appropriate and culturally relevant for today’s rural populace in these islands. Those who attend our churches faithfully also seem to need to rediscover the vitality and enjoyment of the gospel story. If we are not excited by the story we run the risk of offering stones instead of bread to those beyond our walls.

Those among us who have the gift of an evangelist (and that is most likely to be in a humble and low-profile way) need to be discerned, affirmed, encouraged and probably trained. The skills and resources for doing this within the sensitive rural context are thin on the ground. I suggest that this is a matter for urgent attention. The Rural Evangelism Network was set up by the Churches in order to help enable this. It is its *raison d’etre*.

We not only have good news to share in the sense of the gospel message, there is also much good news among UK rural churches. That too needs sharing for it provides vital information, inspiration and encouragement to others.