

good idea!

A resource for evangelism and church growth

Volume 6, Number 4

Winter 1999

Contents

[Reviewing the Decade of Evangelism](#)

[A Bishop's-Eye View of the Nineties](#)

[Bible Study: The Already and the Not Yet](#)

[My Most Influential Books](#)

Reviewing the Decade of Evangelism

By Harold Percy

The Lambeth Conference in 1988 designated the 1990s a Decade of Evangelism, so now seems a good time to pause and review where we have come from and where we yet need to go. Complete objectivity is a luxury human beings do not have access to, so these are simply some personal observations from my own travels and conversations across the country.

What have we gained?

1. We have asked some tough questions

This Decade has provided the church with an opportunity to pause and reflect on who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. More specifically, we have been able to ask ourselves hard questions such as, Do we have a faith worth sharing? and, Do we have a church worth inviting people to? Questions like these can go unasked for long periods of time, but it is imperative that we ask them from time to time in order to stay focused.

2. We have widened our vocabulary

The most obvious example is that the word evangelism itself has been rehabilitated. One writer said some years ago, 'We have to reclaim the word 'evangelism' from the red-light district of the church and reinstate it on Main Street.' I think it is fair to say that we have done that. Some of the old negative stereotypes we had about evangelism have gone the way of the dinosaur. The Anglican Church's video on evangelism in the early '80s was called 'The E-Word': I don't think we would feel as inhibited these days about saying 'evangelism' out loud!

We have also learned to use the terms 'maintenance' and 'mission' to distinguish between different kinds of activity in our churches. We realise that simply administering the sacraments and providing pastoral care, while necessary and valuable, are not enough to build the church. The term 'post-Christendom' has also gained popularity, and helps us locate ourselves in relation to our culture.

3. We have reclaimed evangelism as the responsibility of the whole church.

Evangelism is no longer seen as the preserve of a few wild-eyed fanatics, something which no right-minded Anglican would be seen dead doing. We have understood that there are different ways of doing evangelism, and that every Christian has some responsibility in this ministry.

4. We are learning that mission and evangelism are distinguishable but not separable.

The church's mission is to live as God's people in the world. But that is not to equate mission with evangelism. Evangelism is not 'everything that Christians do.' Evangelism inescapably involves something verbal: the communication of information, good news, about Jesus and what he has done. Our mission includes working for justice, working with the poor, and giving pastoral care, and these create the context for evangelism. They provide credibility for the words of the Gospel. Thus evangelism and social action must go hand in hand, but they are not the same thing. To be involved in social action does not remove our responsibility for evangelism, just as our involvement in evangelism does not relieve us of the need for social action.

5. We have learned that evangelism is a process

If evangelism is a process which takes time, then as Christians we need to allow our friends and family time for that process to mature. We will give them space to ask their questions and to listen to Jesus' answers. We will do nothing to rob them of their dignity, and everything to extend grace to them. Our evangelism will be relational and invitational, not impersonal or aggressive.

6. We understand that evangelism is an expression of community

The Lone Ranger kind of evangelist is rare. More often, evangelism happens naturally as people are drawn into the life of the congregation, observe the life of the community, and hear Christian teaching week by week. But that means, on the one hand, that our churches must be welcoming places, and, on the other hand, that our members feel comfortable about inviting outsiders to come with them. Evangelism thus proceeds from community and it leads back into community.

7. We are coming to terms with a post-Christendom world

Many of our members grew up in a world where Christianity was the 'normal' religion, and religious minorities could be comfortably ignored. Now all that has changed. Christians no longer enjoy a privileged place in our society. As Don Posterski has said, 'There was a time when the culture had to come to terms with the church. Now the church has to come to terms with the culture.'

We are learning what that means, and, in some ways, returning to the minority status which was normal for Christians until the time of Constantine.

What challenges remain?

1. How much evangelism is actually happening?

We may have understood more about evangelism, we may talk about it more, but I am not convinced there is a great deal more evangelism actually happening in our parishes. Some have tried to lead their congregations into becoming evangelizing communities, but have discovered that motivating and mobilizing is tough. Often we say we want new things, but we are not prepared actually to let go of anything from the past in order to achieve them.

2. How can we bring about systemic change in congregations?

To some extent, we still perceive evangelism to be an add-on to regular parish life-like the tail in the party game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. The donkey can function perfectly well, but the tail is a nice extra!

Healthy evangelism, however, is systemic, affecting every aspect of a parish's life, and that, of course, is much more costly and more difficult to achieve than a once off program we might be involved in. Certainly evangelism may involve programs, but it is not itself a program: it is something rooted much

more broadly and deeply in the life of a congregation than that.

3. How can we avoid being intimidated by the culture?

Canadian culture insists that faith is a private matter, that all beliefs should be treated as having equal validity, and that trying to win someone to your religion is in poor taste. As a result, Christians are often afraid of witnessing to their faith for fear of causing offence or appearing intolerant. We need to work at finding ways of evangelism which are faithful to Scripture but also appropriate for our culture and within the reach of most church members.

It seems to me that the gains of this Decade have been significant: we are in a much healthier space than we were nine or ten years ago. At the same time, this Decade seems to have been a time of thinking about evangelism and preparing for evangelism more than one of doing it. This means that the real work of evangelism and congregational development still lies ahead. We are well positioned to rise to this challenge if we choose to accept it.

Canon Harold Percy is Rector of Trinity Anglican Church, Streetsville, and Consultant on Congregational Development for the Institute of Evangelism.

A Bishop's-Eye View of the Nineties

By Victoria Matthews

The Decade of Evangelism has been a time of consciousness raising. We entered the Decade at a time when we were only just beginning to recognize and name the loss of Christian memory and the emerging 'godless' spirituality. It used to be said that the Gospel was perceived by society as good, but not as news. In the years of the Decade of Evangelism, however, we have awakened to the fact that there is astounding ignorance about the Christian faith in society and even in our church pews: the Gospel is once again news!

The transition to being a minority is sometimes painful, but it has meant re-thinking what we communicate and how we communicate it, both theologically and practically.

A variety of approaches

Concretely this has meant an increased appreciation of story telling. A skilled narrator of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is able to bring people to faith as well as rekindle faith that has been dormant. Sometimes this means using an approach that allows people to 'overhear' the Gospel and at other times it means a more direct proclamation. Evangelism, we have learnt, can happen via music, drama and each of the creative arts.

Community has also been recognized as important to the people who come and see us in action. Frequently there is a desperate need to 'belong' in those who come 'looking'. Once these seekers find themselves secure in terms of belonging, they are able to grow in the faith and venture out in ministry themselves.

Learning the faith

Lastly, but most importantly, I believe the Decade of Evangelism has encouraged people in the reading and study of Scripture and the life of prayer. It may be simply because I have moved across the country, but I seem to hear everywhere about vibrant bible study and prayer groups in people's homes, in parishes and in ecumenical clusters. There is a new excitement about learning the Christian faith, and high on the list of what people want in their clergy are the gifts of 'a good teacher' and 'a person of prayer'. I celebrate and rejoice in this development.

Doers and not just talkers

On the other hand, we are still spending too much time talking to each other in churchland about our problems, and too little time engaging in evangelism. We need to become 'doers' as well as 'talkers'.

(At the same time, talking about problems may mean that we are in danger of becoming an issue-driven church. We can forget how much there is to celebrate; how much we hold in common; and how richly God has blessed us.)

Secondly, I believe we need to deepen our commitment to communicating the Gospel to children and young people. We know that Sunday/Church School reaches only a small number of children, yet we are doing very little about trying to reach them in other ways. We have talked about this for years. Now we need to act. With the end of the Decade of Evangelism upon us, I fear we may lose momentum and miss a Gospel opportunity.

The Rt. Rev. Victoria Matthews is Bishop of Edmonton.

Bible Study: The Already and the Not Yet

By Jenny Andison

One of my first experiences with evangelism happened in a rather backwards fashion. I was an undergraduate at a party where I was to have my first conversation with my future husband. Tim came up to me and said, 'I hear you go to church.' I was caught off-guard by this remark, especially considering the number of people who might have overheard what I considered a rather indiscreet and certainly embarrassing observation. 'Oh, uh, well, yes I do. It's an Anglican Church.' One thing led to another, and Tim and I are now married!

I like to think I have traveled at least some distance since that incident, because speaking publicly about my faith does not strike me with terror to the same extent any more.

The Decade of Evangelism will have affected each of us to a different degree. For some of us evangelism may no longer be the dreaded 'E word', but it may still not be something we feel equipped to engage in. For others of us, the Decade will have spurred us on to discover ways to share the gospel both within our personal relationships and through the Christian communities in which we serve. But what now? what next? As the Decade winds down, how are we to move forward with the ministry of evangelism?

Paul writes in Philippians 3:12-14 (NRSV):

'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'

The goal that Paul is talking about is true Christian perfection—knowing and serving Christ perfectly. The frame of mind with which Paul approaches his ultimate goal is helpful as we think about 'What next?'

The first thing I notice is that Paul sincerely loves Jesus Christ and wants to do all he can to serve Christ, including evangelism. Now this may pose a problem, because my guess is that not all of us are head over heels with the idea of evangelism. While we may desire to be faithful Christians, our private prayers may still be, 'Lord, anything but evangelism.'

I have a friend who, queasy at the thought of evangelism, nonetheless made it a regular prayer to ask for a love of evangelism. Because she knew she did not yet have a burning love for the task as Paul so

clearly did, she sensibly decided to ask for it.

Secondly, I find the refusal of Paul to live in the past very helpful: 'Forgetting what lies behind.' Our pasts, both as individuals as a church, can have spectacular moments of failure and times of triumph, either of which can paralyze us. It is easy for me to convince myself that I am not really cut out for evangelism and that my gifts clearly must lie elsewhere by recalling the many times that I have dropped the ball, kept my mouth shut, or (even worse) blundered in with some inane comment. Churches can also use their memory of evangelistic blunders as a reason for blocking fresh attempts to spread the good news that do justice to who Jesus is.

But maybe even more dangerous is the possibility that some previous attempts at sharing our faith have actually been 'successful.' Paul's evangelistic ministry was astonishingly fruitful, and yet he realized that he had not attained the goal of Christian perfection. Forgetting what lies in the past also means not allowing ourselves to be trapped in pride or complacency, patting ourselves on the back over and over again about the same shining moment when we actually said and did just the right thing. Past successes can blind us to present opportunities.

With all the people Paul had helped to encounter the living God, we would probably think him justified in taking a well-earned break. But Paul does not seem about to take a holiday! Using language probably borrowed from the athletic world 'straining forward . . . I press on'-- Paul describes himself as firmly focussed on the final goal, every muscle taut and every nerve ready for the race ahead.

As we come to the end of the Decade of Evangelism, we must not allow the past to trap us. Instead, the future is right in front of us, and Luther's words resonate both for us as individuals and for our church: 'The nature of a Christian does not lie in what you have become but in what you are becoming.'

The Rev. Jenny Andison is the assistant curate at St. Timothy's, Agincourt, Toronto.

Prayers for the Church's Ministry of Evangelism in the BAS, #2

Draw your Church together, O Lord, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and together witnessing to his love on every continent and island. *The Book of Alternative Services, page 676.*

My Most Influential Books

Members of the *good idea!* listserv were asked recently to nominate what for them have been the most influential books on evangelism during this decade. These are their responses:

Tim Chesterton wrote:

Well, I'd split my vote. My top two would be: Good News People by Harold Percy (Anglican Book Centre), because of Harold's gift for restating the ancient Gospel in accessible contemporary form, and for doing the same thing for the practice of evangelism.

Me, an Evangelist? by William McKay (Stephen Ministries). This to my way of thinking is the definitive book on relational evangelism and is the textbook for the Stephen Ministries course 'Caring Evangelism' - a course we'd do well to pay a lot of attention to.

Tim Chesterton is currently rector of Emmanuel Parish of East Smoky, serving the Anglican congregations in Valleyview, Fox Creek and Goodwin, Alberta. In January of 2000, he will be moving to the Diocese of Edmonton.

Barry Parker wrote:

I nominate D. A. Carson's *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996). It offers a close look at the big picture with respect to culture, and helped me better understand the context in which we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. I found it particularly relevant to those of us in the Anglican Church of Canada.

When a book like this is combined with one of the many excellent resources on following Jesus, such as Percy's *Following Jesus*, the British Bible Society's Emmaus program, the Australian Scripture Union's *Christianity Explained* and any of the material from Matthias Press in Sydney, you have a great resource combination.

Barry Parker is Rector of St. Paul's Anglican Church, Bloor Street, Toronto.

Ross Gill writes:

These are a few books which have contributed to my approach to ministry and helped me order my priorities. In the order of the year published, they are:

Evangelism Through the Local Church by Michael Green (Hodder). This is a major work of over 500 pages that appeals to me as an Anglican because of the importance Green places on the local church as an evangelizing community.

The Purpose Driven Church by Rick Warren lays down some key principles for how a church can reach out to the 'pre-Christian' people in the surrounding community.

Turn Around Strategies for the Small Church by Ron Crandall was also significant for me because it was aimed at the church which averages an attendance of less than 100 on Sunday--a category that describes the majority of Anglican churches in Canada.

Growing Spiritual Redwoods by William Easum and Thomas Bandy emphasized the organic quality that churches must have in order to reach into the post-modern culture we find ourselves in.

Ross Gill is co-rector with his wife Julia of Christ Anglican Church, Listowel, and St. Paul's, Palmerston, in the Diocese of Huron.

John Bowen writes:

Apart from those titles already mentioned, I found *Jesus for a New Generation* by Kevin Ford (InterVarsity Press) very helpful. Ford combines cultural analysis (based on work with focus groups across the continent) interspersed with a dramatic semi-fictional story-line to create a winsome primer for evangelism among people under the age of 30.

Future Faith Churches by Don Posterski and Gary Nelson surveys churches across Canada that are growing and asks why. A refreshing mix of sociology and story, showing how evangelism that is set in the context of healthy church life attracts outsiders.

John Bowen is editor of good idea!

Where can I get these books?

Most of these books are available at reduced prices from the Wycliffe College bookstore, as follows:

Good News People (Percy) (pb) reduced from \$11.95 to \$9.95

Me, an Evangelist? (McKay)

The Gagging of God (Carson) (hb) reduced from \$38.99 to \$23.39

Evangelism Through the Local Church (Green) (hb) reduced from \$48.95 to \$24.95

The Purpose-Driven Church (Warren): hb reduced from \$28.95 to \$13.95, pb reduced from \$15.95 to \$9.95.

Turnaround Strategies (Crandall)

Growing Spiritual Redwoods (Easum/Bandy)

Jesus for a New Generation (Ford)

Future Faith Churches (Posterski/Nelson)

For details of how to order, see page xx.

Sharing your good ideas

If you would like to share your 'best reads of the decade' or anything else of interest to good idea! readers, you can still subscribe to the listserv<the email mailing list. Simply send a message to listserv@listserv@utoronto.ca in the form 'subscribe [your first name] [your last name]' (no quotation marks needed in the actual message). It is as easy to unsubscribe as it is to subscribe, so don't be afraid that you will be stuck with a life membership.

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