

Going deeper

A theological introduction to Evangelism Year

AIM

To provide a stimulation for discussion for Synod meetings, elders and church meetings, as a help to thinking more deeply about Evangelism.

INTRODUCTION

These are notes that accompany a related Powerpoint presentation prepared by Francis Brienen – URC Secretary for Mission, and first delivered to Eastern Synod Ministers' Autumn Get Together on 13-15 September 2010, at Belsey Bridge Conference Centre.

BACKGROUND OF VISION4LIFE:

A three year process (adopted in 2007) to refresh our church spiritually through

- Repossessing the BIBLE as the people's book
- Refreshing PRAYER as sustaining conversation with God
- Rehabilitating EVANGELISM as honest expression of what motivates us.

VISION4LIFE YEAR 3: FOCUS ON EVANGELISM.

Vision4Life is doing well: 663 churches are part of it and so are 9 synods (East and West Midlands, Southern, Eastern, Wessex, Northern, Mersey, Yorkshire and Wales). It is unprecedented. And if you were at Assembly you will know the stories of how, in particular, the Prayer Year has taken off and how churches have engaged with it in a wide variety of ways and at their own pace. Churches are still joining.

When we started we all expected that V4L would take off with the Bible Year; it would get more difficult with Prayer Year; but the Evangelism Year, knowing the URC's historical unease with evangelism, would probably be the real challenge and it might peter out. The opposite seems to be the case – uptake still increasing – but that is not to say that the evangelism year will not be a challenge.

THINKING ABOUT EVANGELISM: CHALLENGES, DISCUSSIONS, AIMS

I'd like to share some of the discussions we had as the Evangelism Group, as a means of demonstrating the discussions and challenges we may face in the Evangelism Year. We were a group, representing people from the broad theological spectrum of the URC, so called evangelical and so called liberal: ministers, lay people, academic, local practitioners, etc. And the joy of it is that we found each other across the theological divide in our passion for evangelism.

We started with thinking about the essentials for an Evangelism Year and these centred around three main discussions (in random order):

1. BUILDING UP CONFIDENCE FOR EVANGELISM

Most of us agreed that there is a historical unease with evangelism in the URC, which with the recent turn to mission and through initiatives like V4L we are beginning to overcome.

I think this reluctance or unease can be traced back to five things in particular (but there may be more):

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Method: reluctance because of stereotypes of how evangelism is done: e.g. doorknocking or big mass meeting/rally – a 19th century concept introduced by Charles Finney (USA): his methodology of the big meeting with the big speaker continues to this day and has spread around the world. He was one of the first to use the altar call; was a systematiser (clear formula, set questions/stages: ABCD: Admit you are a sinner, Believe in the gospel, Count the cost of discipleship, make a Decision.)

Content: reluctance because of the narrow emphasis on private sin/penal substitution theory of atonement. Focus on the saving of souls.

'Sin' is a problematic concept for post-modern people. For many it is also not the entry point into/connecting point with the gospel. Finding Faith Today (Bible Society, 1992) found that 4/5ths of people (when asked about how they came to faith) did not find that the most appealing part of faith. Here are some of the statistics about what appealed to them in the Christian faith:

- 16% Nothing in particular
- 14% God's love
- 13% Particular bible passages
- 13% Forgiveness
- 8% Death of Christ
- 8% Life after death
- 7% Helping other people
- 6% God always there
- 5% Jesus' life and example
- 2% The resurrection

Church: embarrassment about one's church or feeling that it is not about the church (but about following Jesus/kingdom of God). But the church is important. In saying to the disciples 'Follow me' Christ was not only inviting them to share one-to-one spiritual intimacy, implicit in that invitation is the command 'Join them'. The disciples had to become part of that quarrelsome, bewildered group of men and women who were his followers. Like it or not the gathering of believers is an essential part of being a Christian.

There is also a sociological reason why church going is important. It does represent a degree of belonging. The most persuasive recent sociological work shows that the great majority of people who come to faith belong before they believe. Robin Gill has argued cogently that a decline in church attendance comes first and as a consequence there is a decline in faith. (Churchgoing and Christian Ethics, CUP 1999)

Context: and then there is our context that makes evangelism a daunting task, to do with church decline, our hostile/indifferent society and our inability to connect with our culture.

Church decline: (Tearfund Research 2006):

- 10% of UK adult population goes to church at least weekly
- 15% monthly, 26% yearly at least; 59% never/practically never.
- Between 1998 and 2005 half a million people stopped going to church on Sunday.
- 72% of the British population told the 2001 census they were Christian, yet 66% (32 mln) people have no connection with any religion or church.
- Churches in England have been in long-term decline since the 1950s.
- Growth is in migrant churches.

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Environment:

News (BBC website) last week: one third of population sympathetic towards religion and or involved; one third indifferent; one third hostile or negative. And we know that the media and our environment can be very hostile indeed (Dawkins, Hitchens etc.)

Connecting with society/culture:

How can we connect in our consumer-oriented society? How to approach an 'it must fit me exactly' society? How when congregations are on average 15 years older than the average population (in the case of the CofE), can we connect with babyboomers, generation X, generation Y etc.

Personal: last but not least there can be all kinds of personal reasons why people are reluctant about evangelism: personal shyness/reserve; a sense that one's faith is not strong enough or that one won't have all the answers – N.B: "Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have" (1 Peter 3, 15) – a scary verse!

2. UNDERSTANDING EVANGELISM

One way of addressing reluctance, we thought/hoped, is to help people gain a better understanding of what evangelism is – as sharing one's faith story. One of the aims of Vision4Life is to develop the URC churches as communities of storytelling.

We had some discussion about definitions, but there are hundreds of definitions and we thought it important that people come to their own definitions. We attempt one at the end of the booklet, but it is only there to help people develop their own.

We hope that through the Evangelism Year people will have a greater understanding around four themes/questions:

a. **The relationship between Mission and Evangelism.**

I grew up with the old distinction (made by J. Verkuyl and others) that mission is what you did overseas with the not-yet churchd and evangelism is what you did at home with the no-longer churchd. Very dated! More recently mission and evangelism have frequently been seen either as synonyms or as competing priorities. This is because they have become associated with the different "wings" of the Church: liberals do "mission" (understood as social action) and evangelicals do "evangelism" (understood as converting people to faith). But mission and evangelism are neither synonyms nor competing priorities. Mission is more comprehensive than evangelism. It refers to all that the Church does to make God's salvation (in all its forms and contexts) a reality. Evangelism refers to the particular task and responsibility of calling people to discipleship of Jesus Christ.

b. **Biblical mandate**

We have a biblical calling to evangelism – not as a duty but as a response flowing out of the love and grace of God. We hope that people working with the booklet and the other materials will discover that from the many stories of those who find love, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, peace and fullness of life in Christ.

We decided to go with mostly passages from Matthew (and some from Acts) as that fits in with the lectionary readings of the year. We could have gone with Pauline texts – after all, he is the quintessential evangelist in the New Testament. But it is interesting that in his letters he speaks relatively little about evangelism. Even when

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writing to churches he had founded himself, he says little about his own work of evangelism amongst them. Apart from a few brief references there are only three which enlarge on his evangelistic ministry:

- 1 Thessalonians 1, 5
- 1 Corinthians 2, 1-4
- Romans 15, 18-20

(identified by John Finney in 'Emerging Evangelism', 2004)

It is interesting to note that in all three he mentions the word, so clearly the spoken word was an important part of his evangelism. He also mentions 'power', in each case closely linked to the Holy Spirit. Paul obviously expects his evangelism to have both components. If our evangelism is to echo that of Paul it must have both the word and the power of the Holy Spirit. As I said we did not go with these passages, but who knows....there is still a lot of web material to be written.

In the booklet we have included mostly passages/stories from Matthew. Stories that demonstrate the attraction of Jesus and the breadth of reasons why people came to Jesus. We hope that through studying them people will gain a broader understanding of what evangelism means and of the importance of sharing their faith story with others.

c. Who is an evangelist?

The inclusion of the biblical stories and the reflection on their own stories will hopefully also demonstrate that evangelism is something to which all of us are called and that it is a normal and practical part of being Christian. We say that at the beginning of the booklet, but we hope it's clear throughout.

There have been recent moves in the URC that may lead to making evangelists a separate category of stipendiary ministry and there is a place for that. There will always be people who have a particular gift for that. But ultimately we need to recognize that all of us ought to be equipped for the mission task of evangelism. One of the over-all aims of V4L and in particular of the Evangelism Year is to develop local United Reformed Churches as communities of story-telling, in the conviction that evangelism is something in which all disciples of Jesus ought to be involved.

d. What is it about?

What is the purpose of evangelism? There has been bitter division of this in the history of mission/the church between so called evangelicals and liberals/ecumenicals. We see this division in the URC too. Evangelicals have preferred to concentrate on the priority of bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ. Liberals, on the other hand, have preferred to concentrate on Christian presence and action to make society more just, i.e. on humanisation. But this dichotomy is false and ultimately unbiblical. Salvation is not about being saved from individual sin only; nor is it entirely about humanization, social justice and improved living conditions. Evangelism is not about one or the other, but about both/all. Salvation is God's transformation of this world into the Kingdom. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God's purpose for creation is Life – here and now. It is the life of the Kingdom – God's shalom.

Liberals and evangelicals need to abandon their passionately held positions, not for the sake of agreement, but in response to the common, more faithful, more biblical and more relevant commitment to a shared discipleship of Jesus Christ and a shared involvement in God's mission of Life. The United Reformed Church has already committed itself to being a Church-in-mission; through Vision4Life (which embraces

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the whole theological spectrum of the URC) it has the capacity to offer the wider Christian community something it desperately needs: a common commitment to evangelism that involves every Church member and adherent, and that transcends and makes obsolete the historical liberal/evangelical divide.

3. TRANSFORMED FOR EVANGELISM

A way of life

What we hope the booklet will convey is that evangelism is not about doing one-off activities or about communicating a formula. It is 24/7; it is a way of life – taking place at any time, place and under any circumstance. It happens in the ordinary activities in one's life (it is a life ministry) and in the activities of the church. That doesn't mean that there won't be a number of 'how to' questions (about skills, techniques, things you can do) and we intend to produce materials to address those. Examples are how music/hymns can help in faith sharing and how activities in the church and the community can be places for conversations.

Sharing the story

Crucial in evangelism will be the ability to share the story of Jesus, but to do so in connection with one's own faith story, so it is about understanding the Jesus story and learning to tell it (and that is about confidence to articulate it) and about understanding/valuing one's own story and telling it. Our hope and aim is that people will be able to tell their stories, honestly/truthfully, in ordinary language and ordinary ways.

Understanding the faith journey

It is also important to understand that everyone's faith journey is different and that people are at different stages (if there is such a thing). Our discussions in the writing group inevitably touched on 'conversion' and that led us to contemplate people's experience of faith. For some in the group it was a Road to Damascus experience, sudden, dramatic; for others the process of coming to faith was more like the Emmaus road experience, longer, gradual, accompanied. Both are valid and real. We see both in the New Testament: in Paul's life and letters we see the dramatic, life-changing experience; in John we see a very different process often in those who are already counted as disciples. Think of the questions and doubts of Thomas and Peter, and yet in the end both of them come to the most profound confessions of Jesus as Lord.

One of the biggest debates in the writing group was about the Engel scale, which represents the various decision-making steps that a person goes through before they become a Christian. It depicts the process of conversion from 'awareness of a supreme being and no knowledge of the gospel' to 'communion with God and stewardship'. Some in our group found it a difficult concept and far too linear, but it can be helpful in understanding that not everyone is in the same place on the journey of faith and that our engagement in evangelism is often just about one step on the journey. Often our efforts are unfinished... We will put the Engel scale, with commentary, on the website.

The life of the church

Last but not least, evangelism is about all of life. It addresses the person, but it also addresses the social structures and the communities that we find ourselves in. If the Church is truly the Church through participation in God's mission, then the Church will be always and indispensably evangelical and always and indispensably deeply immersed in the struggles for justice and peace, the eradication of poverty, health and education, and sustaining the life of the planet – all with equal fervour. And, very important too, a church that is equally concerned about evangelism and justice/care for the poor will in its lifestyle back up the message that its members share with others. And that is key in evangelism: that there is a church living out the gospel and in doing so backing up the faith sharing of

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its members. Paul worked on the same principle!

IN SUMMARY:

The overall aim of Vision4Life Year 3 is TO BUILD CONFIDENCE IN TELLING THE JESUS STORY.

The overall aim of Vision4Life as a whole is TO DEVELOP THE URC AS COMMUNITIES OF STORY TELLING.

WHAT IS COMING?

1. The booklet, (Set-up: five sections, each containing stories, bible studies, practical steps, next steps and prayer. Sections follow on from each other, starting with getting used to sharing one's own faith story to being engaged in evangelism as a church.)
2. Transition exercise already on the website (from Prayer to Evangelism: suggesting a prayer activity in November to prepare for Evangelism Year)
3. More webmaterial

Here are the things we have received so far and which are likely to be put on the website, incl.:

- Bible study on Acts 8:26-40 (full version of what is in the booklet)
- Bible study on Peter with activities
- Getting in the way (story of the man born blind)
- Reinhabiting the Easter story

Other:

- Introductory conversation exercise
- All are welcome (short act of worship)
- Let me tell you stories
- Stories of unfinished evangelism
- Covenant prayer
- Engel Scale
- Songs of personal commitment
- 'The Good man Jesus' for reading groups
- Healthy Church material

Other ideas are still under development, but new material will appear regularly. This will include further material to support the Charter for Evangelism on the back cover of the booklet.

4. Thinking Ahead events:

An evangelism conference in July 2011 in Bournemouth, organised by the Ethnic Minority Lay and Ordained Ministers Association (EMLOMA).

The URC Evangelism and Advertising Campaign: will be launched internally in April 2011 and publicly in September 2011 and will offer practical ways of getting into evangelism more deeply, with its focus on being a welcoming church.

Francis Brienen - September 2010

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

Take a look at the website for new materials appearing

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Francis Brienen for contributing this material

HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the evangelism year, you can email the V4L evangelism year coordinator via evangelism@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 1 – Transformed by the Bible: bible@vision4life.org.uk

Year 2 – Transformed through Prayer: prayer@vision4life.org.uk