

# Mission And Evangelism

- practical principles that are local, global and holistic

## THE SCOPE OF MISSION

### Consensus and convictions

Thus far today we have explored several key components of our contemporary mission context. We have thought about:

- The shift from modernity to postmodernity
- The shift from Christendom to post-Christendom
- The shift of the church from the centre to the margins
- The shift from a sacral society to a plural society.

We have not really defined what our mission is in this context. From some of what we have looked at it might be thought that our mission is simply evangelism – this was the focus of attention in the session on Christendom. But there were indications in that session and many more in the session on plurality that our mission is broader than that.

During the past 50 years, many discussions have taken place in various church circles about the nature, scope and purpose of mission. There have been strong views and disagreements, but at the start of the 21st century there is a growing consensus around several convictions, such as:

- Mission finds its origin in God rather than the church. God is a missionary God, who is always reaching out in love to his creation. The church derives its mission from God and must be very careful not to limit the scope of God's mission.
- Evangelism is a vital component in mission but it is not the whole of mission. Mission includes such things as caring for creation, responding to those in need, working for peace and justice, building community and developing human potential.
- The division between evangelism and social responsibility that has characterised some mission initiatives in the past is giving way to a commitment to *holistic* mission, motivated by the biblical concepts of *shalom* and the kingdom of God.
- Mission today is global – from everywhere to everywhere. Old distinctions between sending and receiving nations, often rooted in and accompanying colonialism, have broken down. We in Britain are now the recipients of missionaries from other parts of the world.
- Mission is a mindset and way of life rather than a programme or activity. The congregation is called to be missionary in its priorities, attitudes and lifestyle, rather than to bolt mission on to other activities. Mission is not one item on the agenda – it is the agenda!



However, in this final session we will focus again on the subject of evangelism before finally looking at the role of the congregation. This is not because evangelism is the only important aspect of mission but because it is the part many Christians find hardest and the part that most clearly demonstrates the changes in our mission context and ways we need to respond.

## **EVANGELISM: LEARNING FROM THE 1990s**

### **Changes in thinking**

During the 1990s, which were designated by many denominations as a Decade of Evangelism, ways of doing evangelism and ways of thinking about evangelism began to change. This was partly because the old forms of evangelism were deeply unpopular (in the churches and in society) and obviously no longer worked:

- Mass evangelism in impersonal large meetings was ineffective and very expensive.
- Cold-contact evangelism through accosting strangers in the street or on their doorsteps was not only ineffective but was putting people off.
- Confrontational evangelism through trying to win arguments seemed arrogant and was less and less effective in a changing culture.
- Occasional evangelism through special mission periods or programmes was ineffective as people did not trust the integrity of such forays from otherwise uninvolved congregations.

And the changes in thinking and practice were partly the result of churches learning from research into how people actually came to faith – which suggested other forms of evangelism were more effective.

These new approaches to evangelism have begun to make a significant impact on many churches – helping them think about how to reach out beyond their own boundaries and also about how to be accessible and welcoming communities to those in search of faith. But before we consider this research and how it is impacting the churches, we need to think further about the way evangelism is viewed and see if it can be rehabilitated.

### **Rehabilitating evangelism**

Evangelism is deeply unpopular in many of our churches – as we have seen, this is in large measure a legacy of the Christendom way of doing evangelism and the recognition that this is inappropriate in post-Christendom. Most church members will not know the Christendom story but once they hear it they understand why they hate evangelism – and their instincts are sound. Their own memories of trying to ‘do evangelism’ are often painful and embarrassing, and they carry with them feelings of inadequacy, guilt and failure.

Evangelism needs to be rehabilitated. We need to be inspired, equipped and encouraged to think about evangelism in new ways and to see it as something we can do with integrity, something that might even be fun!

Reflecting openly on our own past experiences and on lessons from the 1990s really helps. Many feel guilty about not evangelising but do not know what to do. Discovering what does and does not work and that evangelism can be different may be liberating.

**Question:** What are the disincentives, the reasons we do not evangelise even if we believe we should?

A survey carried out in America several years ago by *Christianity Today* magazine may need to be updated a little and translated into the British context, but it is very revealing. Readers were first asked if they agreed that evangelism was the responsibility of every Christian: almost 90% agreed. They were then asked why they struggled with evangelism or avoided it. The main responses are as follows (several gave multiple responses, so the percentages do not add up to 100%):

- 49%: 'A feeling that I'm not able to do evangelism as well as the professionals'
- 43%: 'Too timid'
- 42%: 'The image of evangelists as religious showmen'
- 41%: 'Dealing with difficult questions'
- 40%: 'Fear of how people might respond'
- 38%: 'The idea of tolerance in our culture means it is impolite to question another's lifestyle or beliefs'
- 37%: 'Unable to explain how the gospel would benefit someone who is already moral or happy'
- 33%: 'Too busy'
- 27%: 'No support from others committed to evangelism'
- 23%: 'Few if any non-Christian friends'

The survey suggests most Christians have evangelism on their conscience but feel inadequate about sharing their faith. How can evangelism be rehabilitated?

### **Reconfiguring evangelism**

We need not only to rehabilitate evangelism but also to reconfigure it in light of what we have learned from recent experience. Five significant lessons stand out from the Decade of Evangelism:

- Evangelism is about process as well as crisis
- Friendship rather than events is critical
- Spirituality often connects before doctrine
- Belonging often comes before believing
- People come to Christ for other reasons than guilt.

We will examine each of these lessons in turn. Some of the research comes from a survey carried out early in the 1990s by John Finney, published in *Finding Faith Today*. His researchers interviewed in some depth people who had come to faith in recent years. It has taken some time for his findings to filter through into congregational practice, but there are some encouraging signs now that this is happening.

### **Process as well as crisis**

How do people become Christians today? Finney discovered that 31% of those interviewed reported a datable conversion – what he refers to as a ‘point conversion’. Even in evangelical churches (where there is strong emphasis on datable conversions) only 37% said they were converted in this way. Most were gradually converted.

What are the implications of this for evangelism today?

- We must not assume too much knowledge or understanding of Christianity.
- We should not assume the normality and desirability of point conversion.
- We must not attempt to move people too far too quickly.
- We must adjust expectations: people often feel failures if their efforts do not quickly bear fruit, but evangelism is valid and effective if it helps to move people towards faith, even if not all the way.
- We need to develop longer-term forms of evangelism that journey with people.

An increasing number of people in our society do not know the gospel story at all. In the Christendom era, evangelists could assume their hearers knew the story and could concentrate on calling them to commit themselves to this story. Many familiar, contemporary, local, church-based evangelistic strategies assume this. But we cannot make such an assumption today. Evangelism as explanation must precede evangelism as exhortation. Evangelism will mean starting much further back, telling the story in fresh ways, and giving people longer to respond to its challenge.

This does not mean that datable conversions no longer happen. Nor does it mean that there are no crisis points within the process of coming to faith. Nor does it mean that we should not challenge people to make a decision to follow Jesus. But it does mean we need to listen carefully, be patient, encourage people step by step and be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is doing. We gain nothing and lose much by pressurising or rushing people.

### **Friendship rather than events**

Another way of putting this is in terms of ‘come’ versus ‘go’ evangelism. Evangelism has so often consisted in inviting people to *come* to our events, programmes and activities in our buildings. There are several assumptions underlying this approach:



- The church building is a place where people will feel welcome and comfortable.
- Church attendance is a natural activity for people who have a spiritual interest.
- Our responsibility is to issue invitations and leave people to respond if they want.
- If people do not come to our events they are not interested in the gospel.

But there are problems associated with this:

- The Christendom mentality and the culture gap between church and community.
- Churchgoing is natural only for a diminishing minority.
- The church building may be intimidating and unattractive.
- People should not be expected to fit into our agenda or respond on our terms.

Perhaps it is a question of balance. A *come* approach may be useful for certain groups of people: those on the church fringe who are willing to attend events; personal contacts who are interested enough to attend events; confident, outgoing people not intimidated by strangers/crowds; and those whose social/cultural outlook is similar to that of the church. But this approach by itself will result in very restricted evangelism. Both forms of evangelism can be biblically justified. The approach in the Hebrew Scriptures is generally centripetal (*come*); that in the New Testament is mainly centrifugal (*go*). But this might suggest that the *go* approach should take precedence.

The research evidence confirms what most of us already know – that friendship is crucial. Most people who become Christians do so because they see the reality of Christian faith lived out in the life of someone they know and respect. This is both encouraging and daunting: encouraging, because we do not need to search for new methods of evangelising; daunting, because evangelism cannot be left to experts or events. It also has implications for church life and programmes: effective evangelism will mean releasing people from excessive church activities to make friends.

This emphasis on friendship rather than events removes evangelism from the programmatic to the personal, from confronting strangers to conversations with friends and neighbours. But there is a real danger here, best summarised many years ago by David Watson: ‘Do you love people because you want to see them converted; or do you want to see them converted because you love people?’ The term ‘friendship evangelism’ points us to something important but can suggest manipulative and insincere relationships – developing so-called friendship only as a means to evangelising people. This is both ineffective (because people see through it) and unworthy of the gospel.

**Question:** How can this danger be avoided?

## **Belonging before believing**

This sounds as if it contradicts the previous point – belonging must surely involve coming rather than going. Actually it is a further stage in the process of coming to faith. Historically many churches have assumed that the correct order for newcomers is believing/behaving/belonging. First people need to decide what they believe; then their behaviour starts to change; and finally they are invited to join the church. There are fairly clear boundaries between members and non-members. Anglican and Catholic churches have often not made these assumptions, but many other churches have, including those with strong commitments to evangelism.

But in contemporary culture it is becoming clear that the order is often different – belonging seems to be coming before believing. Many people start to get involved with the life of a congregation before they have worked out what they believe and while they are living in ways that are different from the accepted norms of that congregation. The boundaries are more blurred than they were. Churches that are committed to evangelism are becoming more open and welcoming. Those who are exploring the Christian faith are making friends and getting involved in church activities as they consider what they believe and the implications of their beliefs for how they live. They may not ‘belong’ in the sense of being committed church members, but they are valued as members of the church community.

Why is belonging preceding believing? It is generally not the result of churches changing their minds about whether belief or belonging should come first, although experience is beginning to challenge some long-held views about this. There seem to be two main reasons that are related to the two shifts in culture we looked at in earlier sessions:

- In post-Christendom the Christian story is unfamiliar and it takes time for people to connect with it. Involvement in Christian communities helps them learn the story, explore its meaning, assess what they think about it and reflect on its implications.
- In postmodernity there is deep scepticism about words alone – the story needs to be lived out if it is to be convincing.

This understanding of how people come to faith makes for messy but much more accessible Christian communities. It results in churches that are less bothered about maintaining their boundaries and more concerned about the core values at the centre that define what really matters.

## **Spirituality rather than doctrine**

There is much evidence in our society of real spiritual hunger and the failure of secular modernity to satisfy the deepest needs of human beings. Interest in spirituality (rather than religion) is apparent in many different forms, ranging from serious searching to what seems little more than ‘designer-spirituality’ as an extra fashion accessory for cool postmodern people. This results in openness to conversation about spiritual realities and interest in sharing experiences that was unthinkable during modernity. But this interest in spirituality is combined with



scepticism about religious institutions and systems and strong resistance to making commitments or to belief in absolute truth.

What are the implications for evangelism of this new interest in spirituality?

- We need to recognise the limitations of traditional apologetics. Rather than attempting to convince people that Christianity is true, we will need to find ways of responding to other questions: does it work, will it be true for me, does it feel good?
- We may want to engage people in conversation about their spiritual experiences rather than their religious beliefs.
- We will need to affirm the search for spiritual reality, building on rather than dismissing or denigrating spiritual experiences.
- We will want to take seriously what the research indicates about the significance of dreams and visions in people's journey to faith.
- We will need to reflect on the importance of sacred space, mystery in worship and the search for transcendence in our culture.
- We will be challenged by the complaint of many young people – no longer that 'church is boring' but that 'church isn't spiritual enough'.

This emphasis on spirituality as the doorway to faith does not mean doctrine is unimportant, but it does suggest that experience rather than intellectual assent may be the starting point for many people in a postmodern society. How we can all find a healthy balance between doctrine and spirituality remains an important question and challenge.

### **Other reasons than guilt**

Christendom was a guilt culture. For centuries in the West evangelists have assumed that *guilt* and *death* are the two crucial points and have offered forgiveness and the hope of eternal life as the good news. This is the traditional gospel message, the way of presenting the good news that is familiar in our churches and evangelistic literature.

But many people today do not feel guilty and many are not particularly interested in life after death. Much of our evangelism assumes people feel guilty because they are aware that they are sinful. But do they? The research indicates of the sample of those who had become Christians that only 19% felt specific guilt; 21% felt general guilt; 12% were unsure. Almost half (49%) had no sense of guilt at the time when they became Christians and so were drawn to faith for other reasons.

How do we respond to this? We might feel deeply concerned about this lack of conscience in our culture, this lack of awareness of the issue of sin. We might try to make people feel guilty so that we can then tell them about God's love and forgiveness. Or do we look for another contact point? Do we accept that they do not



feel guilty but have other felt needs? Is it possible to present the gospel in other ways, as a response to other aspects of the human condition?

What are the felt needs, longings and aspirations of our contemporaries? Suggestions have included alienation, loneliness, the search for meaning and purpose, interest in spirituality, and resources for this life rather than hope for the next. There are many other possible starting points than guilt and death: loneliness, suffering, injustice, insecurity, shame and insignificance. What is our message for the sinned-against? For the happy pagan? For the moral crusader? Postmodernity is a fragmented and plural society, unlike the unitary society of Christendom and early modernity, and there will be many different answers to this question.

In order to engage with this issue we need to give up idea of a gospel package, a 'pure gospel' free from cultural elements. The gospel is always enculturated, even in the New Testament. This is the same principle as the incarnation – Jesus was a first-century Jewish male. His message needs to be transculturated afresh into all cultures. We are seeking a middle way between relativism and absolutism.

It helps if we recognise the variety of themes in the New Testament – where we find a very broad spectrum, many messages, focal points and applications, rich resources rather than a narrow message. The New Testament itself offers examples of enculturating the message from a Jewish to a Gentile audience (e.g. justification as law-court image, redemption as slave-market image, *logos* as philosophical concept).

So we need to listen carefully to the culture in which we are working. Evangelists are quick to speak, but need to listen more carefully. What questions are being asked? If Jesus is the answer, what is the question? What issues are important? What are the felt needs? What biblical themes are relevant? Where are the contact points? What can be affirmed in a postmodern, post-Christendom culture? What needs to be challenged?

Our search is not for a comfortable, diluted or acceptable message but for a challenging and relevant one. Nor does this mean that issues of sin and guilt can be ignored. It is just that they may not be the place to start the conversation.

### **Evangelism is not easy**

Evangelism in post-Christendom is not easy. It may become easier as memories of Christendom fade and there is new interest in an unfamiliar but captivating story. But until then we will struggle to win a fresh hearing for a story widely regarded as out of date and uninteresting.

Evangelism in postmodernity is easier than in modernity – but discipleship is harder. Renewed interest in spirituality means that conversations are easier and more relaxed (if we are), but there is reluctance to be committed to systems, institutions or settled ways of living.

At present we live in a time of cultural overlap: some of us were brought up in the dying years of Christendom and still think in Christendom categories; some of us are children of post-Christendom, trying to find our bearings in a different world. Some of us are postmodern in the way we learn, make decisions and relate to others; some of us still operate as if we were in the ordered and rational culture of modernity. The dividing line may be somewhere between 35 and 45, although all of us live in both worlds. So we need to be bilingual.

This is a time of rediscovering evangelism – rehabilitating and reconfiguring it. This is not easy but the alternative is oblivion. And some ways of doing evangelism today might even turn out to be enjoyable and as challenging for Christians as for those we are trying to share our faith with.

## **EVANGELISING CHURCHES**

### **New challenges and opportunities**

The kind of evangelism we have been considering places new challenges and opportunities before churches. Evangelism is not left to expert evangelists but depends on all of us building friendships, listening carefully, journeying with people, making our communities accessible, etc.

One attempt to help churches engage more effectively in evangelism is an approach by Laurence Singlehurst in his book, *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping*. Drawing on the research we have referred to and in light of the shifts in our understanding of evangelism, he presents a simple evangelistic strategy that can be freely adapted by churches. It is not a list of methods but an approach that encourages churches to think carefully about the process by which people come to faith and are incorporated into the Christian community.

What kinds of churches can evangelise in this way? In this final section we will look at some of the ways churches are responding to these challenges and some of the issues that need to be faced. But first we need to address a serious problem many churches are facing.

### **Listening to the disaffected**

In a postmodern and post-Christendom culture we are not only struggling to develop appropriate forms of mission to engage with those outside the churches. We are also witnessing a massive haemorrhage of church members. The forms of church we have inherited from Christendom do not appear to be good news for those inside them, let alone those on the outside! Decline is leading to meltdown in some denominations.

Books and reports on the issue of why people are leaving the church are developing into a significant genre of contemporary Christian literature. From these and from conversations with disaffected Christians a number of things are becoming clear:

- Current forms of church life are not working for a very significant number of Christians;
- Many of these Christians have left the church in recent years and more will leave in the coming years;
- Many other Christians feel similarly about church life but remain out of loyalty, habit or inertia;
- Those leaving include deeply committed Christians, who were at the heart of the church and often in leadership roles;
- There are various reasons for disaffection, but some dominant themes emerge from the literature and conversations;
- Some of those who have left have abandoned their Christian faith; but many have only abandoned church;
- Some of those who have left are not interested in returning to church; others miss their church involvement, in spite of everything, and want to find a way back;
- Some do eventually return to church, often to a very different tradition from the one they left or to a newly planted church;
- Some are disillusioned and bitter, critical of the church as an institution and with no expectation that things can change; others are longing for authentic church life and hoping for something new to emerge;
- The numbers involved are very large – it has been suggested that those who have left may now account for as many as 50% of Christians in Britain;
- This exodus is impacting all denominations and all kinds of churches – including new and growing churches and networks.

**Question:** Does the above summary square with your own perception of the situation in your area, denomination or local church? What factors are missing? In your experience, how do local churches respond to members leaving? How candidly do church leaders discuss this issue as they meet and reflect together? To what extent do those involved in church planting consider this issue?

### Reflecting on the situation

It is important to reflect on this situation in light of wider cultural trends, for it is not just churches that are suffering from diminution of participation. Political organisations, voluntary associations, community groups and other institutions requiring commitment to regular activity are all struggling to maintain their membership and activities. There seem to be several factors at work here, including:

- The scepticism and cynicism that pervades postmodernity discourages enthusiasm for involvement in organisations;

- The distrust of institutions in contemporary culture further discourages such involvement;
- Contemporary culture has been described as 'post-commitment', with many preferring to keep their options open. Thus, in some denominations and churches attendance is substantially higher than membership and many regular participants refuse to become members;
- The consumer mentality that dominates our culture militates against commitment to an organisation and encourages shopping around;
- The multiplicity of choices available in contemporary society discourages regular involvement with any one option;
- Spectatorism within our culture discourages active participation and encourages non-participatory allegiance (thus organisations that require a subscription rather than attendance are growing).

However, it is important not to get this decline in institutional membership and wariness of participating in groups out of perspective. As Michael Moynagh notes: 'Membership of trade unions, political parties and other organisations is in decline. Exodus from church reflects this shift from a joining to a stand-alone society. Yet a number of organisations have increased their membership by leaps and bounds – Friends of the Earth and other environmental groups, for example ... People have not abandoned groups, they have fled particular types of group – and church is one of them ... This is largely because church is increasingly disconnected from people's networks – from their friends and workmates, and from shops, clubs, health clinics and other places they visit.' Some kinds of groups are flourishing in the West. What can we learn from these?

Blaming those who have left the churches for disloyalty or attributing their departure to deficiencies in their character, faith or relationships is an attractive option for those who do not want to ask searching questions about contemporary church life. But it does not do justice to the evidence, which suggests that there are multiple reasons for disaffection and that churches should take responsibility for the reasons many give for leaving. Nor does it facilitate the discussion needed if this accelerating trend is to be slowed or even reversed. Whether the renewal of existing churches or the planting of new churches is regarded as the more appropriate strategy for mission in contemporary culture, this issue of disaffection needs to be addressed.

## **Reinventing church**

Some are responding to the failure of many churches to retain their own members and to engage with those outside their community by exploring different ways of being church. Experiments are taking place in many parts of the country, and in other western societies. Some are high-profile models, such as cell church, seeker-sensitive church, purpose-driven church, alternative worship, etc. Many others are small, isolated and tentative. Some are focusing on a particular age group, ethnic community or subcultural network; others are attempting to reach diverse communities.

This creativity is surely to be welcomed in a changing and plural culture. No one form of church will be able to incarnate the gospel in such a complex situation. Some of the emerging forms of church may be short-lived or flawed; others may contain vital clues about the church of the future. As yet, none of the new forms of church have proven themselves either more evangelistically effective than the kinds of church we are familiar with or anything like as durable. But we need to listen and learn as pioneers explore new ways of building community, gathering to worship and sharing the story of Jesus. Some of these pioneers are church planters; others would not think of themselves in this way – they are just desperate to find a more authentic way of being church.

## **Missionary congregations**

A different response to the challenges facing the church today is the attempt to transform existing churches into missionary congregations. Impetus towards this was given by the 1988 Lambeth Conference calling for 'a shift to a dynamic missionary emphasis' in Anglican churches. Anglican missiologist Robert Warren, in his books, *Being Human, Being Church* and *Building Missionary Congregations*, has begun to explore the implications of this shift and to make recommendations for its achievement. He defines the concept in these words: 'A missionary congregation is a church which takes its identity, priorities, and agenda from participation in God's mission in the world.'

He sets out his suggestions of ten marks of a missionary congregation:

- *Celebration*. This is taken in its widest sense and refers to the ability and desire to enjoy life and the gifts that God has given, and to participate in celebrating the new humanity modelled for us in Christ, opened up to humanity by his death and resurrection.
- *Whole life Christianity*. Expressing faith in God in the whole of life. The focus of church life would shift from 'church organisations', to daily life – to the home, work place and community life. The emphasis would be on personal growth, relational growth, and obedience to God 'in the market place' – with all its ambiguities. The church needs what has been called a 'hippopotamus spirituality – a spirituality suitable for surviving in the mud!'
- *Simplicity*. Both in lifestyle ('enough is enough'), and in church structure. The institutional aspect will need to be significantly trimmed, as the church's life becomes outer-directed. Familiar landmarks will go. There will be no room for resources without vigorous pruning.
- *Community*. Only a community living by a different set of values has the strength to witness prophetically to modern society. It cannot be done by lone rangers. Such 'community' involves building loving, honest relationships which stand out against the 'fragmented relatedness' of consumer culture.

- *Empowering*. A missionary congregation is one that has broken out of the provider/client relationship into collaborative ministry and equipping individuals to make their contribution.
- *Doing things differently*. The pastoral and maintenance church tends to be marked by doing different things (church groups and activities). A missionary church will be marked more by doing the ordinary things (work, leisure, family life) differently.
- *Engaged*. A missionary church will be strongly engaged in the local community, and deliberately working with 'all people of good will'.
- *Distinctive*. Such a church multiplies the number of points of contact with the surrounding culture as its members live Christianly. This happens as effective initiation evangelises the whole person, including their worldview, value system, personal identity, and lifestyle.
- *Dimensional*. Enlightenment Christianity functions in separate compartments; spirituality and mission rarely connect. A missionary (and 'post-modern') congregation thinks of the depths of whole-life issues, and of the spiritual dimension within every issue.
- *Still*. A missionary church will be an oasis of peace and quiet, in a frantic world, able not to be driven by doing but reflecting on experience before moving on.

## Reading and Resources

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