Models of Parish Evangelism - Practice

By David Banting

Evangelism in Practice
I have tried to collate the ideas and convey the inspiration from many parishes.

Missions, etc.
From everywhere (eg Cheltenham, Sheffield, Oldham, etc) came the message that big evangelistic “rallies” are a thing of the past. There is little enthusiasm for evangelistic blitzes or hand grenades these days. At best, they are thought useful for morale but were mostly ineffective, dubious and even disruptive unless clearly part of a strategy, part of an on-going pattern of friendship and proclamation.

Many churches still did report on having mission weeks or weekends with speakers and/or teams from outside. Names mentioned were: Richard Coekin, Paul Weston, Jonathan Fletcher, Napoleon John (especially good in inter-faith context), J John, Hugh Palmer, Dennis Lennon, Philip Hacking, Rico Tice, Andrew Wingfield-Digby, Eric Delve, David Jackman, Vijay Menon (good for a PCC), John Blanchard, Peter Anderson, Peter Greystone and Steve Hutchison (both from SU)). This is not an exhaustive list, but it should encourage those who regret the shortage of good evangelists who are “good on biblical content and contemporary in style”.

Sundays
If “special efforts” are now far rarer, most people spoke of Sundays as a key focus and opportunity for evangelism. “We must rethink Sundays” (Walshaw). “Sundays are/must be evangelistic” (Hove, Sevenoaks, Bishopsgate). This means something other than simply being strong on a final “appeal”. It encourages care in preparation, content and packaging. “We review Sunday on Monday, with the outsider in mind” (Cambridge). “We start with our head in the Bible” (London various) “There is always something persuasive” (Dagenham). “Repentance and faith come each Sunday” (villages near Bishop Stortford). “Sermon series are planned with enquirers in mind” (Pickering). "Series are followed up every six months with Taking a Look, Just Looking (for teenagers), or Two Ways to Live” (Newcastle). Several mentioned the value of handling major festivals well (e.g. Hadley Wood). A good number recognised that a sense of welcome and belonging are more important than ever. So Welcome Teams and crèches now seem to be crucial ministries. They need thorough and sensitive training and should be seen as vital ministries rather than as rotas. More than one church spoke of establishing a regular crèche on Sunday mornings (with a small regular team of leaders, rather than a rota) as a key to family evangelism.

What goes for Sundays should be applied to all church groups. “We plan to integrate evangelism into all parish activities” (Tunbridge Wells). Groups should be encouraged to have their own strategy for growth and an eye to outsiders, and an understanding of how they might fit into the whole church’s evangelistic vision. Clearly groups or cells on a continual cycle are of great influence. Never were the use of the home and the gift of hospitality more important.

Good News Down The Street (GNDTS - some churches call it ITV, “In Threes Visiting”) is still used though rather overwhelmed by the vogue for Alpha courses. GNDTS’ principles remain perceptive:-

Teams of three ensure that any member of the congregation can take part with a minimum of training - it is learning by doing;

It has good content and expects to take some time, the best part of two months;
It uses people’s homes (i.e. the homes of enquirers themselves where they feel most comfortable) and gives personal time to the individual or couple concerned;

Friendship is built in - given and received. In Sevonoaks they speak of “Good News At Home”.

**Mission Statements or Strategies**

Several churches reported on the existence and value of mission statements or strategies: Muswell Hill, Wheaton, Wimbledon, Burlesdon, Dagenham (where the *Mission-Minded* booklet is explained in people’s home). Substantial strategy or vision documents are produced in Bromley (Reaching our Friends), Norwich (A strategy for evangelism in the 1990’s), Battersea Rise (Off the blocks) and inner city Limehouse (One man’s vision after 38 years for the inner city).

These are obviously very significant and stimulating to the churches concerned, and they have all expressed a willingness to share their ideas. If you want a full-scale book, R É Coleman’s *The Master Plan of Evangelism* was quoted as still being very relevant. “The concept of evangelism needs to be rescued from the realm of the special and occasional and be anchored where it belongs, in the essential ongoing life and witness of the congregation”.

It is good to see how clear we are now that much evangelism on past models really was “too much too quick”. It smacked of crisis rather than process, of programme rather than friendship, of conversion rather than enlisting into discipleship. One or two referred to the Engels Scale (see Appendix) and its diagnosis on the stages of progress into the light of Christ. It charts the many small changes over a long time. Much of John Finney’s recent research and writing has been illuminating here. His recent book *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (DLT) recognises how we are moving away today from the confident, rationalistic world of the Enlightenment and entering upon a world that is self-centred, experiential, pluralistic and skeptical of any overarching pattern of truth and order. Evangelism today emphasises the expectation of a gradual “Emmaus Road” realisation rather than the sudden, blinding “Damascus Road” conversion experience.

**Personnel**

It is excellent to see the clergy recognised as key in evangelism. “Clergy are to be liberated to act as models in parish evangelism, especially in any innovative directions, and to train others”. Their regular ministry of teaching the gospel is central. Such gospel teaching is not in the narrow sense of issuing appeals - congregations that hear them too often just switch off or end up hardened - but in the unfolding of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) with the constant application to repentance and faith (Acts 20:20-21).

Pastorally the clergy are door-openers and are usually in the best position to recognise and identify newcomers. Visitors books and welcome cards, not to say welcome or newcomers' evenings, were often mentioned. Folk were clear that “The vicar must be freed (from administration etc) to teach/train/preach”. Full-timers are the “thrust for evangelism”.

As a result, the need for other members of staff becomes obvious: e.g. Administrators, Youth Workers, Directors of Evangelism (Bromley), even a Thinker (for cultural and philosophical reflection - I detect Schaeffer’s influence). Many such posts were lay and non-stipendary: eg co-ordinator of local mission (Muswell Hill), lay evangelism co-ordinators (Hawkwell, Leyland). At Wheaton, a PCC sub-committee’s brief is “to keep evangelism on the agenda” (eg the “one-bring-one” tactic is reviewed annually). The congregation as a whole are to be involved. In Dagenham they seek to explain Mission Mindedness to members in their homes. *Person to Person* and *Evangelism Explosion* were mentioned. People need to be the sort of Christians who are able to answer questions because they are always asking their own. They need to be able to explain the gospel to others because they have a clear grasp of it themselves. Even magazine rounds were commended as a way for anyone to build bridges.
With such a personal element in evangelism it was natural for people to talk of bridge building opportunities: Community involvement (one man was writing a history of the local community), places to meet (eg church bookshops/cafes, holiday clubs, flower festivals, pub evenings), eating together (Food for Thought has some good ideas on this - meals now seem as indispensable as just tea/coffee once were!), parish newsletters (as opposed to just church magazines), leaflets introducing the local church (eg Join Us - Muswell Hill); thinking about slick publicity and advertising (Walshaw). Whitehaven in Cumbria offer some particular thoughts on rural evangelism, while others remind us of the incalculable importance of youth work (Walshaw) and ministry amongst the twenties (Cambridge, Oxford - perhaps a particular phenomenon of such research and training centres).

**Premises**

Much of this touches on or affects church premises. One reply urged us to get the theology right if we were embarking on church plants. As regards our existing plant we may not all have the church premises we want or the site we want, but many seem to have adapted their buildings ready for the twenty-first century. Most see money well spent in this area if it leads to premises which are more and better used: i.e. more welcoming and user-friendly, more comfortable and less alienating. It is amazing the difference warm colours, a carpet, comfortable chairs, flexible space, can make. It makes people feel “at home”.

Of course, there are considerable advantages, as many explained, to meeting off church premises - in the home, local schools, pubs and clubs, often with food and drink involved. Sometimes it was a deliberate invitation for today’s “Lions” to have a go at the Christians, otherwise it was an opportunity for sharing friendship and exchanging ideas and experience. Some titles that stick out were: A Prayer and a Pint; A Drink and a Think; Food for Thought, etc.

**Materials and Resources**

I simply record what people mentioned as helpful:

John Chapman’s books: (SU Australia)

*Know and Tell the Gospel*

*A Fresh Start*

*Discovering Christianity*

*Two Ways to Live* - a key outline of the gospel, more God-centred than most. (St Matthias Press)

*Mission Minded* (St Matthias Press Publications) (ideal in multicultural area too e.g. Leytonstone)

*Fellow Workers*

*Christianity Explained*

*Good News Down the Street* M Wooderson (Grove Booklet)

*Mission Count-down* (CPAS: out of print)

*New Life with Jesus* Church Publicity Organisation (CPO)

*Growing in Knowing Jesus* Church Publicity Organisation (CPO)

*Called to Serve* (TIME Ministries International - Hawkwell)
Local Church Evangelism (ed. David Wright, Alastair Gray: St Andrew Press 1987)

Alpha Course material (see also below)

Video/films:

Jesus

Journey into Life

Church
We are in a Decade of Evangelism and much is made of the “call for a dynamic shift from maintenance to mission”. It is, therefore, good to hear evidence of the balance in which the church is both missionary and magnetic i.e. it reaches out and draws in. We need to be careful to avoid polarising maintenance and mission. One church’s strategy was to get people to church but to ensure that the church to which they were brought was a healthy church.

I found John Pearce’s testimony after a life-time ministry in the inner city (East London) and Guy Thorburn’s reflections on rural ministry and mission (from Cumbria) illuminating. Both papers are available from me. (Rev. David Banting, Christ Church Vicarge, Block Lane, Oldham, Chadderton, Oldham OL9 7QB)

Alpha
It is obvious that Alpha courses are sweeping all before them. There is so much that is of God and of the moment - the context of food and friendship, the use of teaching and small groups, the weekend focus. A booklet like this can suggest a whole range of approaches and initiatives that God will bless. Several churches are producing what are in effect their own Alpha courses - FAX from Muswell Hill, Brass Tacks from Fulwood, and others at Hove and so on. A fair number wish the material of Alpha to be modified and improved, and indeed one or two suggested this as a task for Reform. I will only comment that there is no copyright on the gospel. Under God we may work with our own outlines or explanations, though we may need to be careful with names/titles and to give credit where credit is due.

Scriptures that inspire
Several scriptures have been cited as formative and directive. Some were quoted regularly. Matthew 28:16-20, John 5:17 & 19-20, Acts 2:42-47, Acts 20 (Paul’s farewell after three years mission in Ephesus), Romans 1:16, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

Special thoughts
From Ted Pratt:
We have quite a number of folk living in bedsits and other people’s bedsits in this area, some of them with drink and drug problems. In 1990 we appointed a youth and community worker, partly to minister to them and to folks sleeping rough, and before long he started two weekly lunch clubs. From September 1994 we have invited those who come to the lunch clubs and members of the congregation to a light supper on Sunday evenings: soup, bread and cheese, fruit, tea or coffee; often augmented by church members' baking of cakes. We begin with a couple of minutes of prayer and in the middle we have a five minute talk which we intend should be interesting, relevant and include some aspect of the gospel. We have been particularly focusing on the ministry of Jesus, assuming they know nothing of him. Four teams of four or five church members prepare the suppers in rotation and 40-50 come, of whom most are not church members. We have had the occasional problem with somebody who has had too much to drink, but we are meeting both physical and spiritual needs. We are beginning to see some fruit in terms of three people having completed an Alpha course. At least one of them will be confirmed. Another one or more will start the next Alpha course. It is slow going, but very
worthwhile. We have encouraged more church members to come but many think conversing across the cultural divide would be too difficult for them.
(Ted emphasises that he wishes his words to be subject to copyright but not of course the idea.)

Graham Todd writes:
First, we need to research and understand what, why and how people in our culture think ... Schaeffer suggests that churches consider adding to their staff someone “who has been trained to think in a total cultural apologetic”.
Second, churches must encourage their congregations to ask serious questions and work towards answers ... non-Christians will see through sales talk and pat answers. They want to talk with someone who has asked the big questions and come to some answers (and no doubt more questions) ... modern Christians' politeness and timidity before God (unlike the Psalmists) only reveal and maintain a weak faith. Modern people see this - it is not attractive.
Third, churches must encourage their members to ask questions of their friends about their beliefs and the implications of the philosophies they have adopted in order to maintain their autonomy from God.
Fourth, the value of teaching congregations simple but accurate outlines of the gospel which can be easily personalised and memorised.
Fifth, hold events in places where talk flows naturally like pubs. Church premises can be an obstruction or distraction to explaining the joy of knowing the living God in ordinary life.

Andrew Bradley writes:
Does our focus on Sunday restrict our vision for what could be attempted or achieved?

- Midweek kids clubs, GNDTS, senior citizens clubs, newsletters, youth events ...
- Free the clergy by other staff (e.g. administration, youth and children’s worker) and by releasing other ministries especially among the young and elderly.
- Churches could learn from C.U.'s about “low-cringe evangelism” and the use of “neutral” premises.
- Equip congregations to be evangelists by nature, rather than occasional evangelism by the few in a restricted setting. Face the challenge of bringing God back from the margins of daily life (see God in the Wasteland by David Wells) into the very centre.
- The Anglican church has a particular challenge (not least with its buildings) to move from maintenance to mission. But we must be “wise as serpents” in our use of money and our strategies - e.g. money spent to make better use of the media available to us.

John Pearce writes:
The Inner City - one man’s strategy after 38 years. It is a wonderful document available personally from him. (Preb. John Pearce, Limehouse Rectory, 5 Newell Street, London E14 7HP). I quote only the headings to give you a feel.

Presuppositions:
built an indigenous church
build a church which is able to pastor itself
the priority of the church must be church growth

Work of the clergyman:
bring people to God
do not concentrate on the sick or the sad
go for the working class man
-teach the congregation to look after each other
be prodigal in time spent with potential leaders
aim to build a locally led church
build a community church
bring in God
build bridges
ensure worship is relevant
come to terms with the ignorance that exists

Notes:
recognise “base” communities and work with them
recognise the difference between the suburbs and inner city.

The whole document is six pages and I have found it moving and golden.

**From Christ Church, Bromley:**
A ten page booklet *Reaching our Friends ’95-’96*, containing principles and strategies for evangelism and a whole year’s calendar of events and opportunities. There are 4 key “entry levels” to help friendships develop and introduce non-Christian friends to the gospel.

Learning and Leisure- essentially fun and friendship
Connections events- first contacts with the Christian message, and food.
Just Looking- a 3-week taster of what Christians believe
Alpha- a 10-week introduction to Christian faith and life.

**From Holy Trinity, Norwich:**
An eight page Strategy for Evangelism document in 8 sections:-
Introduction
Core strategy for Evangelism
Scope for Evangelism
Contacts with non-Christians
Seeking, learning, nurturing
Resourcing Evangelism
Conclusion
Implementation

**From St. Mark’s, Battersea Rise:**
They have developed a 4-stage plan called Off the Blocks (referred to earlier in this booklet) to help the process from initial contact to evangelism to nurture discipleship and maturity.

**From Whitehaven, Cumbria, Guy Thorburn writes with reflections on rural ministry and evangelism:-**
think long-term
remember the strong relationship between evangelism and fellowship
maintain an active visiting ministry
deliberately organise bridge-building events and services
lay a foundation of expectant prayer
constantly encourage committed Christians in their ministry to family/friends.
Guy would like to meet up (at a Reform conference perhaps) with other rural ministers.

**David Banting writes:**
Starting with the idea of *Read, Mark and Learn* from St Helen’s Bishopsgate and the experience of an eight day university mission called Question Mark I decided to teach through Mark’s Gospel in our church. We took about nine months (September to Pentecost) linking expositions most Sundays with follow on studies in housegroups.

During Lent, in the course of that nine months, we cancelled every mid-week church meeting (unless it was clearly outreach or real bridge-building with the community - only Playgroup and Mums and Toddlers survived!) to concentrate both on prayer/waiting on God and on more space/time for family and friendships.
The outcome of such a season of prayer and of being re-evangelised ourselves through the gospel, as Mark preached it, was to want to share the gospel with others. The following Lent we again cancelled all internal church meetings. We simplified Sunday services, and, after a careful broadsheet to every door in the district laid on a series of eight talks over the seven Thursdays of Lent, following the gospel according to Mark. We began with simple hospitality but the focus of each week was the next presentation from Mark. We aimed to take time and emphasise explanation. We ended with the Cross on Maundy Thursday and the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. On each occasion those who wanted more stayed behind for a final ten minutes.

Through the whole experience of prayer, being evangelised afresh ourselves and sharing that same gospel with others, the church grew - in confidence and direction and by some 15%.

The birth of our first child triggered the need and desire for a creche. Within four weeks we found a granny whose full-time ministry (after her own 8.00 am Communion) on Sunday was the creche. Our growth in reaching young families could be traced straight back to a regular and very special creche on Sundays.

Since then we have observed the immense value of seeing the connections within all the various initiatives with young families: creche, Sunday school, Mums and Toddlers, Playgroup, baptism preparation and follow-up. Perhaps a fundamental commitment for me in two big parishes was the many hours that were given to baptism preparation (the sacrament of the gospel), the heart of it being one family at a time in their own home, a whole evening at a time. Folk have begun to see and experience what it means to belong to God and to his family. I myself will never regret the high profile that baptism preparation has had for me - in two parishes now it has been raw and glorious evangelism week after week after week.

**Postscript**

Whatever and however we play our part in evangelism the gift of new life in Christ is God’s alone. Perhaps the way we most acknowledge that is in prayer. In everything we are and do as Christians we are to be a people of prayer. I do not need to say more than that, prayer is at the heart of evangelism.

Anything to encourage individuals or groups to pray for all aspects of the church’s mission is to be welcomed. Prayer triplets were mentioned by a number of churches as a continuing means of stimulating and focusing prayer. Three Christians meet regularly to pray for their friends, each praying for themselves and three others who are not yet Christians.

As well as a word on prayer, I would like to leave the last words to one who wrote from retirement after 40 years of ministry:

“I am convinced that the most effective way to evangelise is for men and women of the congregation to demonstrate, by life and lip, the saving power of Christ where they are ... I myself have found the preaching and teaching ministry and the daily round of parish visiting to be the most effective way of soul winning ... it is not easy, there are no quick fixes. It requires consistency, much prayer and hard work. It requires us to live a life of holiness and righteousness, backing up what we proclaim, and in God’s time he will give the increase.”

**List of people/churches who answered the original questionnaire**

I conclude with a very practical suggestion that comes out of both this simple booklet and the Reform Council’s thoughts for 1997. Is there any way we can make this New Year a year of mission throughout the Reform network? I think the best way to put Reform’s aim of “winning the nation for Christ” into clear profile is for the like-minded folk to meet locally for encouragement and stimulus to keep evangelism at the top of the agenda.

From the list below of participants (better still the Reform membership directory), seek out folk nearby to meet with, pray with, stir up and support in the Great Commission to make disciples.