

Training for Evangelism

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Right up front I must make this perfectly clear: evangelism is a way of life for Christians and congregations; it is not a program, special emphasis, or discipleship option; while it is distinguishable from social action, it is inseparable (like the head and tail of a coin).

Current state of evangelism

What is the current state of affairs for evangelism training in North America? Let's face it: few churches (including evangelicals who hold high the evangelism flag) train people in holistic faith-sharing.

Why? In some traditions, evangelism is so misunderstood, maligned or objectionable (for valid or invalid reasons), that it is whispered as "the 'E' word." Some congregations and denominations don't want to be associated with evangelism, so they even ban the word.

For other Christians, they believe that evangelism happens by osmosis. Hang around them and you'll catch a dose of the gospel, as if it were a disease or environmental/atmospheric condition. Some strongly state that, "Everything we do is evangelism." Still others concede that evangelism is no longer a priority with us (almost hinting that they have grown beyond it).

There are conscientious Christians who claim that, "It's not my job/spiritual gift." They go on to say something like, "Why doesn't our pastor do more evangelism?!" or "I'm no Billy Graham!" Perhaps they honestly tried but have given up: "We've trained them but they all now have laryngitis." Or, attempting to be spiritually sensitive, they beg-off: "I want to be salt, but don't want to be accused of rubbing it in."

Some of the problems incurred by Christians come about *because* of their evangelism training. Some people are simply scared off by conventional faith-sharing instruction; that's why Dick Innes, founder and President of ACTS International, wrote the forthright book, *I Hate Witnessing*. He was honest enough to express a fear that some people have and are afraid to admit it even to their (perhaps less than honest) Christian friends. When I taught a class on this book, I (along with some of the attenders) was astounded at who showed up: elders, deacons, veteran church leaders. What Innes did, and what many training courses fail to do, was to acknowledge people's barriers, hindrances, phobias, and obstacles to faith sharing. We must do no less.

Other Christians have had a bad experience in evangelism training because they are taught that you must "do it by the book." A rigid method, usually propositional rather than relational in style, is touted. Stick to it equals success. Diverge from this 'proven' method and risk failure in faith-sharing. A similar fate awaits those who use a formulaic gospel presentation rather than freelance faith-sharing. This is understandable since many disciples prefer the 'comfort' of a canned presentation that's memorized, rather than risk the unknown of a free-flowing 'gossiping' of the gospel. Still others fall down on the witnessing-job because there is no on-the-job training and/or modeling for them. 'Show me' beats 'tell me' any day. When all is

said and done (and often more is *said* than *done*), an evangelistic method takes precedent, unfortunately, over an evangelism lifestyle.

A final problem in most evangelism training offerings is that they are simply not holistic enough. One, there is little emphasis on the kingdom of God; rather, the accent is placed on “a personal relationship with Jesus.” It’s not that we’re opposed to people having that relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus Christ, but much more is going on when a person enters the kingdom, experiences whole-life conversion, and relates to the cosmic Christ who is redeeming *all* of creation - not just little, individual creatures like ourselves.

Two, another ‘big picture’ theme like the kingdom of God is what some missiologists are calling the ‘missional church’ (cf. Newbigin, Guder, Van Gelder, et al). The priority of evangelism (not *over* but *with* social action as part of the full-orbed gospel) comes from a right understanding of and placement within the context of mission. Mission is not some we do ‘over there,’ nor is it a program. As David Bosch (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, p. 390) states it, “...mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God....Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world: the church is viewed as an instrument of that mission....There is church because there is mission, not vice versa.”

Paul Dietterich, Executive Director of the Center for Parish Development, and one of the leaders of the Gospel in Our Culture Network (www.cogn.org) says this about the missional church: “The identity and purpose of the church are rooted in God’s mission, in God’s intention to reconcile all of humanity and heal a broken creation. Evangelism is the proclamation of that good news of God’s mission” (*Transformation: A Newsletter of the Center for Parish Development*, “Mission programs or missional church?” Vol. VI - #1, Summer 2000, p. 1).

Three, most evangelism training is divorced from social action, service ministries and the macro issues of our world. The instruction centers on getting people to *say* simply the A,B,C’s - a conversion of the heart that comes through the head, but doesn’t take into account our hands and feet:

- A = acknowledge your sinfulness (usually defined in small, narrow, moralistic terms, with no sense of the larger, systemic sins that also have entrapped us) and repent;
- B = believe that Jesus died on the cross in your place for your sins; that, by faith, you can receive him as Savior and Lord; as well as enter into an abundant life now and on into eternity; and,
- C = confess to God and others what you have done in A and B.

The gospel is good news beyond “what a friend I have in Jesus.” It’s good news for the person trapped in prostitution and homelessness. It’s good news for the person engulfed in poverty and riches. It’s good news for the person enslaved by unjust economic structures and unfair labor practices. It’s good news for immigrants and migrants. It’s good news for people “who have it all” and for people who have nothing at all. It’s good news for the person and the people group. It’s good news for tax collectors and tax cheaters. It’s good news for lottery players and casino operators. It’s good news for welfare moms and absentee fathers. It’s good news for racists and terrorists. It’s good news for convicted killers and drug-cartel kingpins. It’s

good news for pornographers and hazardous waste-dumpers. It's good news for Americans and Africans. It's good news for rich nations and urban squatters.

Some people and people groups in the above litany might not initially receive the gospel as good news, and some might need to hear the bad news before they can hear the good news (as Bonhoeffer claimed). But the gospel is ultimately good news for all peoples at all times and in all places in all situations. One thing for sure: it's as simple as A, B, C, but not as simplistic as A, B, C. Our training *must* bring this out or we'll take our people down an unbiblical, impossible primrose path to ineffective evangelism. An even greater tragedy is what potential recipients of our truncated or one-sided gospel will receive.

Evangelism trends

What are some of the trends that we are seeing in terms of evangelism that might have a bearing on Holistic Ministry? One of the more obvious trends that blossomed at the end of the 20th century was presentational evangelism, particularly in the form of seeker services. Congregations, attracted by models of churches like Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, and Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, either were formed or re-tooled themselves to accommodate the needs of spiritual seekers. Churchy jargon was dropped, accessibility of facilities was enhanced, and liturgical scripts were stripped. While some claim that this movement “dumbed down” worship or created ‘gospel-lite,’ others insisted that they were only attempting to reach people “where they were at” and respond to unchurched peoples’ perceived (and even unperceived) needs. The jury is still out on the effectiveness and validity of such churches, but already we are seeing a shift to an evangelism that targets special groups and needs of people as well as the development of partnerships with urban congregations and ministries (cf. Willow Creeks Extension Ministries housed in the La Salle Street Church’s office complex in center-city Chicago).

Another trend is E-vangelism, that is, the communication of the gospel through the latest of Internet technology. Certainly there are the expected websites to a straight-out presentation of the gospel. There are also the ‘apologetic’ sites. But there is also the creative use of graphics, as users can send visual messages to their non-Christian friends in the hope of catching their attention in a way that’s not happening in church; it’s a 3rd millennium version of a stained-glass window movement, but with streaming video and audio. Another aspect of this phenomenon is the use of the Internet by collegiate Christians as they witness to their campus through ‘Jesus Week.’ Student union booths and sidewalk tables are not the only venues for sharing the gospel anymore.

This trend leads to another one that had an appeal to an earlier generation and has re-emerged as an effective tool for reaching people unfamiliar with or unwilling to step inside a church building: the coffeehouse. They are popping up in the usual places: college campuses and city-centers. But there also showing up in suburban shopping centers and malls (cf. Burlington Center Mall Ministry in Burlington, New Jersey, and Marketplace Community Church in Wayne, Pennsylvania). There’s even a twist to the normal scene of acoustic music and candle-lit tables. Check out the ‘Crossroads Café’ in ex-urban Brunswick, New York, that features an Internet café. Brunswick Presbyterian Church positioned their cutting-edge ministry in a strip

shopping center directly across the street from the local junior and senior high schools and next to the town's soccer fields.

Well, if it's coffeehouse-redux, another evangelism trend is 'taking it to the streets.' This tried and true method (while not adopted by all Christians and churches) has returned, but, like the coffeehouse, with a few new twists. Steve Sjogren's "Kindness Conspiracy" (www.kindness.com/index.html) has invaded the streets of our cities. Churches unleash 'low risk/high grace' evangelists to share the love of Jesus in practical ways: toilet washing at local businesses; delivering batteries for smoke detectors; birthday parties of impoverished children or residents at a shelter; collecting trees after Christmas for proper disposal; coffee giveaway during holidays at busy bus and rest stops; radon or carbon monoxide detectors. Have fun, meet people, open doors for faith-sharing.

Other churches are taking the gospel to the streets with the performing arts. Worship bands are performing at community events; mime and drama players are catching people's attention on street corners. Still other churches are showing up at the performing arts. Of course, there are the usual tract passers-out. But there are also churches providing free rides home to stoned or sloshed concert-goers. Volunteers from Belmont Church park its specially outfitted bus ("Isaiah 58 - Ministry-in-Motion") under the bridge in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, on hot summer evenings for "Dancing in the District." As a variety of secular and Christian bands entertain the tourists to and residents of the Nash-Vegas area, volunteers from Belmont provide a meal and counsel to the band members and roadies. Later in the evening, they serve a hot meal and offer medical services to homeless people who live along the river front.

And speaking of the arts, visual arts are making a comeback. Numerous churches are seeing that artists are more than singers, songwriters, instrumentalists, and the occasional banner-maker. Poets, painters, sculptors and photographers (now equipped with digital cameras that can enhance a church's website ministry) are being affirmed as they use their talents to God's glory in congregational life as well as in the public arena. Again, Belmont Church is characteristic of a growing number of congregations; they cover both ends of the art spectrum with a basement recording studio (what do you expect from a church on Nashville's 'Music Row') and an art gallery in their narthex.

What all of the above trends have in common (and I would include the seeker service because quite often it's done 'off campus'), is that they go *against* the prevailing premise of evangelism: "Build it and they will come" works only in the Iowa cornfields - as evidenced in the movie, "Field of Dreams." As we've stated before, most churches don't train for and/or do evangelism. If they do, it's based upon the Field of Dreams adage: launch an evangelistic outreach program and the heathen/pagan/non-Christians/un-Churched will come. Baloney! Not any more (and perhaps they never did come, at least according to our anecdotal research of most Sunday evening evangelistic services, "revivals," and crusades).

What the churches behind these trends do is obey the call of Christ as found in Jesus' Great Commission: "Go!" They also take seriously what theologians call the church's 'incarnational witness': Go!" They heed the ecclesiology of the missional church which mandates: "Go!" And, if it's in their polity, they pay attention: such as three of the six 'great

ends of the Church' (“...the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind...the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world”) as claimed by the Presbyterian Church/USA in their Constitution (*Book of Order 1998-1999*, G-1.0200).

Overcoming the evangelism malaise

How can a church, seeking to engage in Holistic Ministry, overcome the evangelism mess and malaise they might find themselves trapped in?

Stop...what you're doing

Evaluate what your church is doing in evangelism. What is happening through the ‘front door’ ministry of your church. By ‘front door,’ church growth theorists and practitioners mean your worship service(s). Is evangelism a ‘point’ in the service? An altar call or call for decision? Or is it a ‘process,’ one that begins in prayer prior to anyone entering your property; moves through the parking lot (get those ‘guest parking’ signs out!); includes how worship guests (note that word - not ‘visitors’ - it makes a difference) are greeted; includes what happens in and through the service itself; and, how guests are followed up after the service.

What is happening through the ‘side door’ ministries of your church? Is there an evangelistic spin to your Sunday school or education hour(s)? How are small groups turned ‘inside out’ so that spiritual navel-gazing and holy huddles don’t exclude your unchurched acquaintances? Can your church handle some (perhaps even controversial) recovery groups? Most churches make room for AA, but what about SLAA (Sex/Love Addicts Anonymous, a.k.a., St. Augustine’s Society)? How about an evangelistically-infused job seekers support group or welfare-to-work class.

Evaluate what your church isn’t doing in evangelism. *Is your church training people on how to effectively, creatively and biblically share their faith?* If not, get going. Are your printed materials (mission/vision statements, brochures, road sign, etc.) saying something that’s not, in fact, true? Does every program, but more importantly, the whole life of your church exude evangelism? This doesn’t mean that you are constantly ‘speaking’ the gospel; it does mean that you are looking for creative crevasses in conversations where you can offer a verbal witness. Do you have any tools for your congregants? Most people need something in their hand to pass along (even if they say, “My pastor told me to give this to you!”). Provide the dirt-cheap “Jesus” videos (call 888-JESUS-36 or hit www.jesusvideo.org). Offer low-cost Bibles and scripture portions targeted to population segments. The Burlington Center Mall Ministry uses God’s Word in different wrappings: Bibles with sport and youth themes; quality tracts for women, men, children, and grieving persons; translations in different languages. Contact the International Bible Society (719/ 488-9200) and the American Bible Society (1-800-32-BIBLE).

There is a paradox, though: get your tools ready, but rely totally on the Holy Spirit. The power is in the Spirit, not the package. We don’t make anything happen, and neither does all our paraphernalia no matter how creative or cool it is. God does it; we don’t. Yet, God graciously uses us as conduits of God’s good news, and gives us abilities, talents, and spiritual gifts to ingeniously share the gospel.

Listen...really listen

Listen to unchurched people. Take them, their lives and their situations seriously. Most of us act before we think; we also have a tendency to speak before we listen. Focus on what a person is saying. Ask them good, open-ended, non-inquisitional questions. Don't pose questions like your conducting a litmus test. People can figure you out. They won't be honest and reveal what they truly believe or what they're honestly feeling inside.

And listen to groups of people, not only individuals. Pay attention to what they are talking about while you're sitting in the t-ball bleachers or standing on the soccer sidelines. Invite a focus group on unchurched people for dessert. Listen to your co-workers around the water cooler. Pay attention to what's being said at the cafeteria. This exercise will give you clues that will help you connect with people when the opportunity for a verbal witness comes along.

Listen without an agenda. Many of us, if we do engage in proclamational evangelism, want to take the conversation where *we* want to go (this is particularly problematic with the formulaic gospel presentations). We're more interested in 'getting it done,' than getting inside the heart and mind of the person God has placed in front of us. Perhaps we're afraid of where the other person will take the conversation - and, we might not have all the 'right' answers (as if we have to have an answer for everything!). Trust the Spirit. God's in this, so relax and let it flow. Don't get uptight about forgetting a key doctrine or failing to recall a memorized verse. You do believe that God is fully capable of giving you the right thing to say at the right time, don't you?! A person's salvation is not on the line because of you. It's God's gracious gift to save people - you can't, we can't, save anyone. You can't, we can't give them anything. It's God's work alone.

Listen in prayer. We've saved the best for last. Prayer must permeate any contacts we make with people. Prayer comes before we meet someone; prayer goes out that we will meet someone; prayer continues while we're meeting with someone; prayer doesn't stop after we've met someone. When God does bless us with an opportunity to share our faith with the person placed in our path, in a sense we should carry on a three-party conversation. "Lord, what do You have in store with this encounter? How can I serve You while serving this one who is loved by You? What is she or he really trying to say? Is there more going on here than meets the eye? Help me to listen and not finish their sentences or start working on my 'great' answer until they've completed what they want to say."

Look...before you leap

→ Look for a way to serve. After you've *listened, really listened* (carefully and prayerfully), look for an avenue of service that will touch the heart of the person or group of people. Try and place yourself insider the shoes of the other person(s), and see if there is a practical way that you can respond to a need in that person's life. Be cautious: don't assume you fully understand their need(s); don't come storming into their lives as "you needy person - me helper"; don't paternalistically presume "you have the problem and I have the answer."

Also, recognize that not everyone you meet that has a need is a ‘down-and-outer.’ Some people, at least on the surface, have life going pretty good for themselves: no debts, no dysfunctions, no domestic problems, job going well, enjoying leisure-time, etc.. They still might have some needs: the need to serve, the need for a challenge, the need to make a difference in their world, and the need for salvation.

For those who do have needs, the surface or presenting needs might not be the greatest needs that they have: eating too much or not enough might cover an addiction; laziness might be depression, a mental or emotional disorder or disability; a broken arm might be one of a series of ‘accidents’ that indicates abuse; no food might be more than not enough cash at the end of the month - it could be that the person was fired or laid off; a persistent health problem might mean an unsafe work environment; fits of anger might be the tip of an iceberg related to violations of a civil or human right in their neighborhood that the person has repressed; a poor self-image might come from a confused sexual identity.

At the same time, don’t be shy either. Otherwise, you’ll never get around to doing anything in Jesus’ name with and for them. Take a Spirit-directed, prayed-up, human-to-human risk. What is an appropriate way for me to minister to this person or these people? In the context of church, it’s best not to try this alone (although in an emergency, that might have to happen). Seek out a partner(s) who can come alongside you as you seek to come alongside someone else. Do the ‘good deed’ simply to do the good deed. Don’t worry about how she or he will respond. Don’t panic or feel like a failure if, on this occasion, God does not open a door for you to go through in terms of a verbal witness to accompany the action witness. Trust God that, over time as your relationship with that person develops, you will be able to share personally, deeply, and intimately, why you do what you do and in whose name you do it. Also realize that you are not the only person in that person’s life. The Lord has other servants who will have an impact on their lives.

→ Look for a way to connect with Jerry Seinfeld, Ally McBeal, Mulder and Sculley. That is, no two people are alike. Which means that no two ‘gospel presentations’ are alike. We know this truth about human beings, but somehow we’ve lost this truth about witnessing through words.

In the gospels, Jesus never related the gospel to any two persons in the same way. He only said once, to Nicodemus (a religious leader), “You must be born again.” He told the rich ruler, “Sell all you have. Give to the poor” (we’re glad he only said that once!). He told the woman caught in adultery, “Go and sin no more.” He told the healed leper, “Go show yourself to the priests.” He told the Roman Centurion, “Never have I seen such faith in all of Israel.” And who knows what he told Zaccheus, but the crowd saw he was a transformed man after that dinner party.

I do an evangelism exercise as I trained volunteers at the holistic evangelism endeavor I helped launch: the Burlington Center Mall Ministry (www.mallministry.org). It goes like this:

- A. Name a favorite, fictional, non-cartoon television character (thus the earlier mention of Jerry Seinfeld, Ally McBeal, Fox Mulder and Dana Sculley).

- B. What are two characteristics (positive or negative) of these TV characters?
 Seinfeld: can't get serious (comedian on and off stage); womanizer.
 McBeal: professional (attorney) demeanor; charmingly quirky
 Mulder: open to paranormal; persistent.
 Sculley: rational (doctor); has to do things the right/orderly way.
- C. What are two obstacles, hindrances or barriers that would make it difficult to engage in an effective faith-sharing conversation?
 Seinfeld: can't talk without cracking jokes; if you're a woman, he might try and hustle you.
 McBeal: nod head and "listen objectively," but not fully enter conversation; fear of intimacy (with God and Christians).
 Mulder: jump into fantastical accounts in Ezekiel and Revelation; might jump to conclusions.
 Sculley: want proof for everything - step of faith hard to take; paralysis of analysis from asking too many questions.
- D. What are two points of their lives that would either give you an entree into a witnessing situation or connect with an aspect of the gospel that you would want to share with them?
 Seinfeld: begin with the Old Testament and connect to Matthew's gospel of the Messiah, because Jerry's Jewish; share a humorous story (parable) from Jesus' teaching ministry.
 McBeal: God's justice; "What would make you a happy person?."
 Mulder: miracle story from Jesus' ministry (not magic or something weird performed by an alien - although Jesus *is* from out of this world!); once he starts on search for truth/Truth, will seek until he finds it.
 Sculley: story of Thomas (Jesus' doubting disciple); as a victim of cancer, she might be open to 'prayer evangelism.' [or quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th century German theologian: "If you have trouble obeying, believe; if you have trouble believing, obey."]

→ Look for a way to invite. Ask the Lord if there is a way that you can help that person with whom you are cultivating a relationship to "take their next logical step in their relationship with God" (using Dr. Ben Johnson's phrase). This next step needs to be invitational, not coercive or demanding. We can't force the gospel on anyone, nor should we attempt to. We are not just talking about something as simple as inviting this new or old acquaintance to a covered dish dinner, nor something as life changing as inviting this person to enter the kingdom of God by placing their trust in Jesus Christ and their Savior and Lord. Both invitations are valued and used by God at appropriate times in a person's life.

According to Dr. Richard Armstrong (in *Faithful Witnesses*), professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, there are scores of invitations that

can graciously be offered to help a person take their next logical step in their relationship with the living God. Steps like...

- “May I take you to next week’s craft class?”
- “We have a great single’s group that meets at the restaurant downtown. May I pick you up next Monday night?”
- “Would it be o.k. if I pray with you right now about what you just told me?”
- “Next week we start another round of new member groups. May I sign you up?”
- “Would you like the Lord to help you overcome your addiction?”
- “Since your spouse died, would you be willing to attend the grief support group?”
- “What’s hindering you from making that choice?”
- “Do you want to ask Jesus to help you carry that burden?”
- “God’s Spirit can empower you to take a stand for what’s right. Do you want to tap into that power source?”

Your invitation to a decision, along with all the other marker moments in a person’s walk with God (some starting the journey from as far away as atheism and agnosticism), will be but one of a long series of invitations and decisions a person makes in his or her life. Thank God for giving you the opportunity to serve the cause of Christ in this small but vital manner.

→ Look for a way to follow up. Don’t use hit-and-run tactics. Make yourself available to them in good and bad times, small and big moments, public and private times. People need us (and sometimes know they need us) and expect that if we want to be involved in their lives that we will come through for them. It’s like in the business world: customer service or client cultivation are expected, appreciated and looked for, in terms of whether or not they will choose to associate themselves with you. The same is true for people who are looking for a ‘good deal’ - in this case, a quality relationship. You can’t and they won’t tolerate it if you come in, do your ‘Christian’ thing, and walk away while patting yourself on your spiritual shoulder. It’s not courteous, acceptable, appropriate or ethical...let alone truly Christian.

One way to develop a quality relationship is through discipling someone - or in more contemporary terms, mentoring someone. Lots of people, young and old, rich and poor, maladjusted or well-adjusted, long for someone to come alongside them in life’s journey. For good or less-than-good reasons, they’re looking for tips, wisdom, insights, handles, connections, or whatever it will take to move them along in a positive direction. As Christians we can offer ourselves in a way that others might not, because we will, hopefully, stick it out when other mentors might pack it in due to exasperation or exhaustion. But this will require huge amounts of our time and energies, sacrifices of ‘blood, sweat and tears,’ as well as money and resources - yes, it might even cost us our physical lives or the lives of our loved ones. But, oh the inexpressible joy of seeing someone grow in the understanding, appreciation and relationship with God, God’s family and God’s mission.