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**EDITOR'S NOTE:  
EVANGELISM AS BRIDGE-BUILDING**

Over the course of past year I have had conversations about religion with a wide variety of people. These conversation partners included a humanist who leads worship in an Episcopalian congregation, a person who grew up in the church, is married to a pagan of the same sex and who has begun questioning his own Christian beliefs, a pantheist who is married to an atheist, a member of a liberal mainline Protestant denomination who is in full agreement with the progressive political and theological agendas being brought forward in that denomination, and a self-described evangelical who is struggling to find a place as a church planter within a mainline denomination that has been marked more by its institutional upkeep than its creative outreach. Perhaps it is not surprising that a professor of evangelism would carry on conversations about faith with such a variegated group of people. What may be surprising is the commonality all these people shared: they are students in seminary seeking degrees that would give them the necessary credentials to be professional leaders in the church.

All of these students have another point in common: they have to make their way through my evangelism course. Most of them, as they readily shared with me, did not desire to take this course. Indeed, for a great many of them, taking it was a one of the least palatable aspects of moving through the seminary's curriculum. However, because of ordination and graduation requirements, these students swallowed hard and registered.

While various seminaries and schools of theology may have a more or less diverse set of students studying at them, my experience of ambivalent, if not uncomfortable, students in an evangelism course is hardly unique. The term evangelism is too often associated with negative connotations of angry

fire-and-brimstone preachers who seem far more excited about telling people to go to hell than telling people the good news of Jesus Christ.

What is true for seminary students is even more the case for the average Christian in North America, and likely even more so for those who do not subscribe to the Christian faith. Evangelism is seen as a divisive practice, pitting the evangelist's most cherished beliefs over and against the most cherished beliefs of other people. There is no capacity for common ground. It is a zero-sum game in which one or the other must prevail. It is little wonder that Stephen Gunter, Professor of Evangelism at Duke University, often describes the common view of evangelism as "Doing to other people what they don't want done to them."

It is in this climate that the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education proposed dedicating its Annual Meeting, held June 2013 at Wheaton College, to the topic of evangelism as a bridge-building endeavor. The presenters and ensuing discussion endeavored to show how evangelism could be taught and practiced in ways that foster relationships and helps reach across doctrinal divides. The two keynote addresses, by Rick Richardson and Mark Teasdale respectively, demonstrated how this could be done both in a post-Christian culture (Richardson) and in the seminary (Teasdale). Both of these addresses are viewable on Youtube. Richardson's is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlh3lr0ON-E> and Teasdale's is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKEJ0YKkSWc>.

This volume of the journal follows on this theme. The first article is a written adaptation of Richardson's address, which offers an overview of the various approaches to evangelism on offer in the North American context today. Considering the strengths and weaknesses of each, Richardson offers practical ways of synthesizing these approaches to foster unity among Christians and provide a better witness in the current American culture.

In the second article, Beth Seversen, with the aid of Richardson, discusses the implications of several recent studies on the faith life of teenagers and young adults for the practice of evangelism. From this, she presents several practical ways in which local churches can engage effectively with this demographic, and so build bridges to a generation that is deeply concerned with finding meaning. She describes her own experience of evangelizing at the Burning Man Festival in Nevada as an example of this.

The third article is an offering from our Australian colleagues Dale Stephenson and Darren Cronshaw. They deal with building bridges between congregations and the unchurched in an increasingly secularized Australian culture. Specifically, they consider how tools such as Alpha are less effective today because many seekers enter their spiritual explorations with less background knowledge about God and the Christian faith. They present and review the program “Ask Anything,” designed by the two and tested in Stephenson’s church, as a possible way forward in building this bridge.

Finally, from her bird’s eye view of local congregations as the Director of Evangelism for the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, Heather Lear argues that local congregations must reclaim the word “evangelism.” Central to this is the need for much more widespread critical education relating to evangelism for both pastors and laity. Drawing on Hal Knight’s typology of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy, she suggests that this education will help local churches be clearer about their own emphases in ministry and will help them build bridges within their denominational structures as they know what gifts they can offer and where they can receive help from denominational resources.

Our hope is that these articles will help to spur constructive conversations across the theological and cultural spectra within the church and beyond. As Christians learn to honor the variety of ways that those within

their fold practice evangelism, and as they learn to recognize and participate in the work of God in the culture around them rather than battle it, evangelism may well become a bridge-building practice. Rather than being the source of awkwardness, competition, and distrust, it can become a source of mutual support and respect. And, if this happens, not only the specific practices of evangelism, but also the ethic of how Christians approach evangelism, will bear witness to the good news.

Mark R. Teasdale, Editor  
Evanston, IL  
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# **EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE BRIDGE-BUILDING AND BRIDGE-BREAKING DIMENSIONS OF DIFFERENT PARADIGMS AND PRACTICES OF WITNESS**

Rick Richardson<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

In his book *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles quotes Catholic Bernard Lonergan in relation to the unity of the Church:

The church has three functions: cognitive over which most division occurs, constitutive based on the hidden gift of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ, and effective by directing efforts toward bettering people and the world through witness and service. The latter two form the basis for the unity that does exist (constitutive) and can be achieved (effective). Ultimately, Christian unity is eschatological.<sup>1</sup>

I found this quote by Lonergan to be very insightful. Ideas and theology (the cognitive) often divide. What helps churches come together then? In the first place, the constitutive, which derives from the fact that the same Holy Spirit dwells in all Christians. We experience this constitutive bridge subjectively, for instance, when we pray with someone we might normally distrust and then find out that they love God and show evidence which surprises us of the Holy Spirit in their lives and prayers. In the second place, the effective. Working together on things we care about in common can bond us, like when we work together to make people's lives better, make the world more conducive to human flourishing, and give witness to Jesus Christ. Although Christian unity is always partial, it is a sign and inauguration of the reality of the age to come that Christ will consummate at his return.

Based on these categories, evangelism is one arena in which the Church can often come together around common cause. When we come together for witness, we fulfill Jesus' prayer in John 17 to make us one that

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the world may know the Father has sent the Son. Our unity itself *becomes* our primary witness. In that way we stop being the scandal we have too often been with our many and intolerant and unattractive divisions, sometimes over what seem to be important issues, but often over worship style or dress or whether we dunk or drown people for baptism. When we come together, we can also strategically reach more people and have a larger impact on the world. I am connected to a group of churches in Gurnee, Illinois, for instance, that are sharing their mailing lists and training their people together to reach neighborhoods for Christ. They have discovered that by working together, they can form missional communities of committed Christians that can reach out in every single block of their entire city. So evangelism, witness, can often be an activity around which churches can cooperate and build bridges with one another and increase their impact through the social capital that grows through such relationships.

Social capital is the value of networks and relationships for getting by, getting ahead, and making an impact.<sup>2</sup> The more social capital we have, the more influence and the more resources we can access and leverage. Sometimes evangelism becomes the cause that connects, the tie that binds, and increases our social capital. But sometimes evangelism becomes the flash point, the issue that, because of our message or approach or methodology or style, divides us. So when does evangelism draw us together, and when does it pull us apart? This issue is a key one for the academy as we shape and invest in future leaders of the Church. Are we teaching evangelism in ways that prepare leaders to work together across denominational, economic, ethnic, gender, and racial boundaries? Are we giving them an appreciation for the different modes and methods of evangelism so that they build up the church and increase her social capital and her fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for unity?



Leaders in the Church often get bogged down or derailed by division and argument. Often we spend more time criticizing each other's views than we do actually reaching out to people who don't know Jesus yet! Or as one InterVarsity<sup>3</sup> Evangelism Director, Paul Little, put it during a period when InterVarsity staff were spending more time criticizing Campus Crusade's approach to evangelism than promoting their own approach, "I like the way Campus Crusade does evangelism a lot better than I like the way we don't do evangelism! We may not be making their mistakes, but is that a cause for celebration? We are certainly not experiencing their gains either."<sup>4</sup> I know, even the language of "doing evangelism" carries assumptions and presuppositions about which we could argue. But sometimes such critique just paralyzes us and does not prepare our students to be an evangelist. The question before us is: Do we as seminary and graduate school professors prepare students to argue and critique more than engage and appreciate? That's the question I want to reflect on.

I want to explore bridges and barriers from several angles. First, I want to explore the bridging and polarizing dimension of the different understandings we have of the message we preach. If cognitive differences divide us (and unite us), as Lonergan suggested, then the first source of both bridges and barriers between churches and leaders lies in the area of how we conceptualize our message, the gospel. What is the gospel?

Second, I want to explore the bridging and polarizing dimension of the diverse models of evangelism we embrace and the consequent methods of evangelism we pursue. If strategy often brings us together, how might it also divide? How do we strengthen the unifiers and grapple with the dividers in relation to our models and methods of evangelism?

## **The Message: What is the Gospel?**

So what is the gospel and how does our conception of the gospel affect the bridges and barriers between us?

There is currently (and has often been in the past) a substantive and consequential debate on what the gospel is. If evangelism means communicating good news, what is the good news? Some believe that the essence of the good news, the most fundamental and core kerygma or proclamation, is that Jesus died for sins, paying the death penalty we deserved, taking our sin upon himself and giving to us his righteous standing before God. For many evangelicals and fundamentalists, this penal substitution view of Christ's death, is THE gospel and the basis for our salvation.

For others, the essential and core message and proclamation is that the kingdom of God, which sets all things right and overcomes sin and sickness and death and evil, has begun. We need to repent and believe this good news and enter into the kingdom. Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated this kingdom message, through healings and exorcisms and raising the dead and founding a new community. Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins is part of the advent of the kingdom, but only a part, one dimension or facet of the good news of the kingdom. The gift of the Holy Spirit is also part of it. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is part of it. Healing the sick is part of it. Healing creation is part of it. The new humanity we become individually and corporately is part of it. And we have a certain hope that all will be raised because Jesus has been raised and a new heaven and earth, filled with God's glory and justice, is coming, and even now shines out in the darkness.

Those who emphasize penal substitution as THE gospel tend to focus on the Pauline epistles and Pauline theology, especially certain passages in Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans. Those who focus on the kingdom as THE gospel tend to focus on the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus as

recorded in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Reformation Christian progeny, including evangelicals, have tended to focus on the Pauline epistles for their primary theological categories. Emergents, Anabaptists, and many Catholics, especially from among the monastic traditions, have tended to focus on the synoptic gospels for their primary theological categories and language.

One way some have summarized the difference between the synoptic gospels and Paul is to recognize the shift from a focus on what Jesus proclaimed and how Jesus lived to a focus on who Jesus was (human and divine) and what his death and resurrection meant. Some argue that this shift emptied the gospel proclamation of many emphases related to the actual content of Jesus's preaching and lifestyle. Themes important in the message and ministry of Jesus, like his table fellowship with sinners and prostitutes, his preference for the poor, his message of nonviolence, the importance of extending forgiveness to enemies, the liberation of captives, the healing of the ill, blind and lame, and the rejection of wealth and material objects as indicators of God's favor tended to disappear from many Protestant proclamations of the gospel.

There were different ways that Protestants justified these omissions. Some suggested that Jesus's message and ministry were aimed at Jews and were not for the church (e.g. dispensationalists after John Nelson Darby). Others, based on Luther's initial insights into justification by faith, have asserted that Jesus's teaching was merely preparation for the gospel (of penal substitution!). The ethics that Jesus preached mainly convict us of sin and prepare us to receive the grace and forgiveness of God. Another approach that effectively marginalized the ethics of Jesus for the contemporary Church was proposed by Albert Schweitzer in his seminal work on Jesus as eschatological

prophet who was convinced the world was about to end and lived an interim ethic that could not be sustained over the long term.<sup>5</sup>

Others, sometimes in reaction, have tended to go the other way, embracing the ethics of Jesus and rejecting the perceived “cheap grace” message attributed to Paul. People from emergent, neo-monastic, Anabaptist, and social activist churches or movements tend to interpret the change of focus from Jesus the proclaimer to Jesus the proclaimed to be a function ultimately of a Christendom church that sought to eviscerate Jesus's message of radically subversive social dimensions (for a discussion of some of these movements and their theological perspectives on the gospel, see Richardson, 2011, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Instead, critics maintain, the Christendom church offered a creedal account of the gospel that helps individuals in their beliefs and in their relationship with God, but that leaves society and social hierarchies unchallenged.

Here’s how N.T. Wright characterized this polarization in a personal e-mail written when he was Bishop of Durham:

I do think the 'Jesus or Paul' -- or perhaps 'gospels or Paul' -- dynamic is a major one to grasp in our time. I spend quite a bit of my time as a bishop living in between those who see what the gospels say about Jesus and respond, 'That's the man I'm going to follow/copy/imitate,' but they often don't see very much about why he needed to die; and those who read Paul as saying 'believe in Jesus' death and resurrection and you will go to heaven', but they don't often see what the kingdom of God coming on earth as in heaven is all about, or why Matthew, Mark, Luke and John needed to write all that stuff in between the virgin birth and Jesus' death!

To put it another way, how might one adjust 'atonement theology' so that it reflects what the gospels actually say in their whole narratives, rather than de-narrativizing them to find the 'nuggets' of apparently buried supposedly 'Pauline' theology, that is the key question. Or, again, one might come at it by asking: how then do we read Paul, if he is not 'the greatest of the gnostics' but rather the theologian of how the kingdom of

God-- or at least of Christ (1 Cor 15.20ff.) works out here and now?<sup>7</sup>

This difference in message than creates dissonance and division between people who fall on one side or the other of the divide. It is interesting to note the ways emergents, Anabaptists, social activists, and neo-monastics are making common cause and developing similar views of the gospel, social concern, Christian community, Christian witness, and Biblical hermeneutics. Similarly, many conservative Christians are banding together to fight the perceived loss of the gospel.

I would suggest with others that there is a way beyond the impasse. The good news of Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sin needs to be seen as an essential part of a bigger narrative frame about the formation, struggle, and renewal of a people for God and for God's mission in the world (see for instance Wainwright, 2000, 326, quoting Lesslie Newbigin; Wright, 1992, 320ff).<sup>8</sup> This larger narrative frame is the story of the kingdom or realized reign of God from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. In this narrative, there is also a compact historical center, the death and resurrection of Jesus, which brings into the middle of history the centerpiece of God's inaugurated reign, the final judgment on sin and evil and the resurrection to new life and a new world for humanity. Forgiveness of sins and the gift of new life and public incorporation into God's people are the ways people are initiated into this rule.<sup>9</sup> As such, these dimensions are core to the good news of the kingdom. But they are only the beginning of the good news, the initial step. The message of the kingdom of God is a message about what God has done, is doing and will do so that God's will may be done on earth as in heaven for salvation, justice, reconciliation, healing, and the fulfillment of history.

A partially realized eschatology, actualized by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, has immense implications for many of our polarizing debates about the gospel. For instance, a partially realized eschatology, in

which the judgment on sin and evil have occurred and the new life of resurrection has begun, erases the firm distinction between an imputed and an imparted righteousness, embracing and celebrating the inauguration and application of both simultaneously.

That specific debate is one example of the way in which eschatology comes first as the frame of the story, giving it form and direction and purpose: i.e., heaven and earth rescued, renewed and united at last and evil eradicated as God's plan for the world; then soteriology, the means by which that comes about, through Israel and then the representative Israelite, Jesus, by his life of liberation, death for sins, resurrection for new life, and gift of the Spirit for the new creation; then ecclesiology through which the church is shaped to be the people of the mission that proclaims and represents Christ in and to the world; and then ethics (including evangelism) through which the church lives the heaven-and-earth life before and into the world and bears witness. The flow then is as follows: Trinity->Eschatology->Mission->Soteriology/Christology->Ecclesiology>Ethics->Witness. And soteriology/Christology is the hinge point and compact center of history.

Holding in tension this narrative frame and historical center helps us toward a greater integration around the debates on what the message is that might strengthen our unity and cooperation, and lessen our division and polarization. Repentance and faith and Baptism, initial forgiveness and the gift of new life, are together the hinge point of our lives, marking our initiation into the rule of God and the mission of God and the people of God. Could more Christians and more diverse Christians embrace this approach and this framework for understanding the gospel, thereby decreasing the polarizing forces and increasing the bridging forces related to evangelism?

## What is Evangelism?

There is debate not just about what the gospel is, but there is also debate about what evangelism is. There are different models for understanding evangelism and what is its essential nature and characteristic expression. I will explore the dominant models of evangelism that have been formulated and propagated over the last fifty years and how that has had an impact on bridging and polarizing churches.

William Abraham in his book, *The Logic of Evangelism* characterized five recent historical approaches and then suggested a way to integrate and transcend the five models, oriented on the kingdom of God as overarching framework.<sup>10</sup> I have drawn from his five models, added two more that I think have come to prominence since he wrote, and then used his overarching proposal as one attempt to integrate all the historical models. I do not claim that these seven models are the only historical models in the last fifty years, but they are prominent and influential ones. By understanding and appreciating the strengths and the weaknesses of each model, we can grow in being bridge people as faculty and as influencers of students. Below, I will summarize the seven models and then unpack them in greater depth. The seven models are:

- Evangelism as the public proclamation of the gospel.
- Evangelism as the converting of individuals to the Christian faith.
- Evangelism as recruiting and making disciples of Jesus.
- Evangelism as church growth and planting.
- Evangelism as public acts of mercy, justice, and peace.
- Evangelism as the distinctive life of the alternative community.
- Evangelism as the demonstration of God's power.

*Evangelism as proclamation of the good news about the grace of God in Jesus Christ.*

Here the focus is on communication of a message, irrespective of results. Billy Graham and his crusades might be the most visible example of

this view lived out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Key insight: the good news proclaimed has power in and of itself to save when driven into hearts by the Holy Spirit. But the results are always in the hands of God.

It is informative to acknowledge the following dimensions of the ministry of Billy Graham to remind ourselves of the bridging and polarizing potential of this paradigm of evangelism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- Billy Graham insisted on local-level ecumenical support for his crusades. During his long career he modified his views on race relations, communism, America's standing before God, and nuclear war. In his 1957 New York Crusade at Madison Square Garden, which lasted 16 weeks, one of those who gave testimony and opened in prayer was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Billy Graham was the first major evangelist to desegregate audiences in the South, and he was unwilling to go to South Africa until South Africa was willing to integrate their services. He was not a radical voice. He did encourage King to slow down and he never marched or encouraged marching, but for his time and background, he endured significant criticism to live out the equality of every person before the cross.
- In December 1966, Billy Graham appeared for the first time before the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches in Miami Beach, extending a conciliatory hand across the chasm that seemed to separate evangelicals and ecumenicals. He affirmed the need for loving one's neighbor through both calls to conversion and social service. In his New York City Crusade in 1957, he had 1510 supporting churches across the denominational spectrum.
- As his ecumenical contacts increased with his global ministry he built bridges to Roman Catholic and Jewish communities. The American Jewish Committee bestowed its first "National Interreligious Award" on Graham, and some Catholic priests and bishops encouraged their people to attend his crusades (Reported in *Newsweek* 95 (November 28, 1977): 126).
- Graham asserted what he cared about was Christian faith, not Catholic or Protestant faith. Along with Nicodemus, all needed to be born again. What happened afterward could be left up to people, churches, and other believers (Pierard, 1992, 161).



- His greatest critics than were not Catholic or ecumenical Christians but fundamentalists, with whom he shared many beliefs and convictions. Bob Jones, for instance, declared in 1966 that Graham was “doing more harm to the cause of Christ than any other living man” (Pierard, 1992, 162) and others accused him of changing chameleon-like with the winds of the time and the convictions of the audience. It did not deter him at all.
- He also experienced criticism and rejection from more mainstream theologians who did not like his methods or message, believing he was reducing the gospel and limiting its social impact. Reinhold Niebuhr was a man with whom Billy Graham tried to meet for many years, but Graham could never even get an appointment with him, much less win him over.<sup>11</sup>

“Evangelism as only proclamation” can be and has been critiqued.

This paradigm can sever evangelism and discipleship from each other, focus on the individual to the exclusion of a social ethic and impact, narrow the evangelist to an impossibly small set of activities that no evangelist ever sticks to (i.e. only proclamation and not teaching, social concern, or discipleship). It can also promulgate an interpretation of the Great Commission that is distorted, leaving out the sacraments (the “baptizing them” part of Matthew 28:18-20) and deemphasizing the central command to make disciples. For all this, the very potent bridging and social capital building impact of culturally engaged and affirming proclaimers like Billy Graham cannot be overstated. Based on this potency, evangelism as proclamation of the gospel needs to be affirmed, embraced, passed on, and re-contextualized for each new generation.

The next three paradigms go beyond the proclamation act itself to focus more on specific outcomes or fruits of evangelism.

*Evangelism as converting individuals to the Christian faith.*

Here the emphasis is on certain religious experiences or intellectual operations that end in personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and

Lord. Soul winning efforts like those of Campus Crusade, as well as the historical revival movements are examples of this focus. Key insight: we all must be born again and must have that born again experience. You can't be physically born into the kingdom of God. It is a spiritual birth (John 3:16!).

By way of critique, this paradigm can over-emphasize human affective and intellectual processes rather than the actions of God in conversion and spiritual re-birth. This tendency toward an anthropocentric focus can lead to a distortion of evangelism that gets caught up in techniques and methods for eliciting particular emotional responses or engendering superficial signs of assent to a few intellectual propositions (e.g., "with all eyes closed and heads bowed, slip up your hand if you believe that Christ died for your sins"). Evangelism understood as converting individuals is also limited in the same way that the proclamation model is by an individualistic focus and a lack of integration into discipleship, the church, and social justice. But soul winning initiatives like the four spiritual laws of Campus Crusade (now Cru) have led millions to faith in Christ one on one, and have mobilized many Christian churches and organizations into joint efforts to go person by person and household by household with untold impact that has flowed out of this model.

It is also important to note that this emphasis on invitation to a decision and experience and some outward act of signification is almost always integrated into any practice of the first model of proclamation. However, the emphasis in the first model is the public proclamation of the gospel to groups, whereas this second model has often functioned well in both group and one on one relational contexts. This example of the integration of the first and second models is also indicative of the general pattern of combining and integrating models to better contextualize the gospel and its communication.

*Evangelism as recruiting and making disciples of Jesus*

Parachurch groups have traditionally focused here, with Dawson Trotman and the Navigators being especially illustrative.<sup>12</sup> 3DM and Mike Breen are a more recent expression.<sup>13</sup> The key Biblical insight is that the Great Commission calls us not to collect converts but to make disciples.

Jesus focused on this approach in the way he evangelized and recruited a group of twelve who then evangelized and recruited others, making disciples who made more disciples. It is a strategy of growth through multiplication of disciplemakers rather than a strategy of addition through the efforts of some one or more especially gifted and unique evangelists. The primary focus for discipleship in many of these groups is pietistic, that is, focused on developing a relationship with God through Bible reading and study, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, and giving testimony to one's faith. This view integrates evangelism and discipleship effectively.

This paradigm can be individualistic, see social change as merely the cumulative effect of making more individual disciples<sup>14</sup> and lack a broader social ethic based on the teaching and life of Jesus, especially in relation to the poor and marginalized. Groups that follow this view of evangelism can also create a kind of elitist and sectarian dynamic that never integrates with local churches and rarely offers grace or community to uneducated people and the poor. This is especially problematic given the emphasis on individual literacy with the Bible and facility with basic doctrines and even systems of doctrines as part of what making disciples emphasizes. The Mike Breen and 3DM emphases on imitation and extended family in mission as being at least as important as information and Bible reading and individual efforts in the discipleship process is a welcome corrective.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these parachurch movements have united broad groups of Christians across ethnic and denominational boundaries to embrace a vision of

discipling everybody on the planet. They have grown by equipping everyday Christians to equip other everyday Christians in witness and discipleship. Ultimately, their efforts to multiply disciples over time have a greater potential to reach and incorporate many more people into the mission of God than addition oriented strategies have, and are more transferable to everyday people, groups, and churches.

*Evangelism as church growth and church planting*

The primary concern in this model of evangelism is the incorporation of people into local fellowships of believers. The strength of the church growth approach (leading as well to some of its weaknesses) is that it has focused on pragmatic research results that identify the factors that most contribute to the growth of the church. Proponents, starting with Donald McGavran, embraced strategic priorities like focusing on relational bridges, concentrating resources on receptive people, and developing communities of homogeneous people because people will join a group made up of people that they are like much more often than they will join a group made up of people they are unlike.<sup>16</sup> This last strategy is called the homogeneous unit principle.

Since the church is at the center of the evangelistic task, the source and goal of all effective evangelism, church growth advocates have also focused on all possible means of attracting people to local churches. This has included developing leaders and communicators best suited for attracting people as well as adopting and adapting age-segmented ministry structures, management approaches, program strategies, sermon approaches, and worship styles that best facilitate attracting new people. The church growth, seeker church, and multi-site movements all illustrate this approach well.

By way of critique, this thoroughgoing focus on the pragmatic growth of the church numerically is sometimes pursued to the exclusion of biblical,

theological and ethical commitments and values. Distortions include the tendency to turn relationships into means to the end of church growth, an over emphasis on counting butts and bucks and buildings, and the chameleon-like nature of the church growth theological frame (it works whatever you believe in, Christian or not). This approach can also reinforce a consumer orientation to Christian faith, leading to church shoppers and hoppers instead of disciples. It also fosters primarily transfer growth to the latest “hottest” church in the religious marketplace instead of conversion growth. The homogeneous unit approach tends to reinforce race, caste, and gender separation and injustice, a violation of the intent of the gospel to reconcile people to God and to each other across the those kinds of divides (e.g. Jew and Gentile).

Nevertheless, church planting initiatives and even church planting movements abound all over the globe, and especially in “Global South” nations like China, Brazil, and Nigeria, in which church movements are experiencing exponential growth. C. Peter Wagner has famously said, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”<sup>17</sup> Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird add to the conversation and the research in their book, *Viral Churches*.<sup>18</sup> And as Cyprian of Carthage said much longer ago, “You can not have God for your father if you have not the church for your mother.”<sup>19</sup> Conferences and gatherings aimed at church planters (e.g. Exponential and Verge in this country) are proliferating and drawing large numbers of young church planters (e.g., 6000 attended the April 2013 Exponential Conference in Orlando, FL), making this paradigm of evangelism possibly the most domestically and even globally influential model of unity in witness, if it is also sometimes polarizing and controversial (e.g., in relation to pragmatism and homogeneity).

*Evangelism as acts of public witness, including acts of mercy, justice, and peace*

Any act of witness is equated to an act of evangelism. Liberal mainline Christians, social gospel advocates, and some Anabaptists, including some Mennonites, have been more associated with this view of evangelism. Our words mean nothing when our lives don't authenticate our words. And our witness is to be public and worked out in the midst of the progressive issues and movements in the contemporary world.

The great strength in this paradigm is the engagement with the larger society on a prophetic level concerning those things that undermine human flourishing. As the Church identifies with mercy, peace, and justice issues important in the larger society, she accrues moral credibility in a world in which the Church has too often been associated with oppressive social hierarchies and conservative social conformity. Ironically, those same denominations that have pursued evangelism as acts of mercy, justice, and peace can also achieve a social respectability that can work against pursuing and championing a radical ethic and a confrontational posture toward the powers that be (see Berkhof, 1962; and Wink, 1998 for a discussion of the powers that the gospel confronts and dethrones).<sup>20</sup> So these churches can become courteous critics, thinking about and talking about change more than actually bringing change about.<sup>21</sup> In addition, these churches can evidence a life far removed from the kind of vibrant and contagious spirituality, optimism, visionary prayer and bold proclamation of the Lordship of Christ over the whole earth and all people found in the pages of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, the witness of social justice evangelists across denominational lines, their presence in the halls of power, and their ability to engage the media and the church world in efforts to work for justice and human flourishing make this paradigm of evangelism an effective expression

of unity in mission for many, and particularly when they are not “tamed and domesticated” by their own success in the broader culture. This independence from cultural conformity of course is not just needed in this form of evangelism. All the paradigms can be subverted and diluted by economic and social success, as H. Richard Niebuhr so ably demonstrated in his classic *Social Sources of Denominationalism*.<sup>22</sup>

*Evangelism as the expression of the distinctive life of the alternative community*

This distinctive life is rooted in the spiritual, interpersonal, political, and economic ethic of Jesus. This view of evangelism has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years as Anabaptist writers like John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas have gained a broader hearing in the Church. Bryan Stone<sup>23</sup> has reflected on the contribution these writers have made to our understanding of evangelism. Stone suggests that evangelism is not an adventure in “winning friends and influencing people” but is a fundamentally subversive activity born out of the cultivation of such deviant practices as sharing bread with the poor, loving enemies, refusing violence, telling the truth, and welcoming into fellowship women, Gentiles, the lame, the blind, the poor, and the prisoner.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, evangelism is not primarily a matter of translating our beliefs about the world into categories that others will find acceptable. Instead, it is a matter of being present in the world in a distinctive way such that the alluring and “useless” beauty of holiness can be touched, tasted, and tried.<sup>25</sup> Sanctity of life in community that presents and poses an alternative to the powers that be and the ways of the world is the primary evangelistic “method” and influence of the church. The invitation is not to assent to propositional truths or to experience an inner moment of illumination or connection with God or to join a church whose members may or may not

live differently than others in the society, but to enter the alternative community in full commitment to her Lord and his very distinctive and subversive lifestyle, as possibly best represented in the Sermon on the Mount.

Many churches and leaders advocating an “incarnational” approach to mission and ministry identify with this paradigm of evangelism, and simultaneously question and sometimes even discard the more attractional and consumer oriented approaches to evangelism. Many groups with a more monastic approach to Christian community also take this approach.

In this paradigm, proclamation can be under emphasized or even eliminated, and communities can become so alternative and isolated that they no longer have any bridges into the broader culture over which people can be brought to enter into the community. Evangelism then becomes merely an activity for the already incorporated, and conversion growth only happens through birth.

Nevertheless, efforts like the neo-monastic and emerging movements are striking a chord in many young adults and leading to a renewal in the church that integrates contemplative spirituality, engagement with the poor, and a strong social and communitarian ethic. This model is increasingly generating interest particularly in college students, leading to broader efforts toward unity in mission around a rule of life that includes worship and service and organic forms of evangelism.<sup>26</sup>

*Evangelism as the demonstration of God’s power to heal, liberate, and deliver*

Demonstrations of God’s power include healings, exorcisms, miracles, and words of knowledge and insight for people and groups. One proponent of this conception of power evangelism was John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard denomination.<sup>27</sup> Wimber translated many traditional Pentecostal emphases into the cool and laid-back vernacular of a Southern California



communication style. He taught and modeled making manifest the presence of the power of God's rule, to heal the sick, liberate the poor, deliver the oppressed, and free people from the power of sin and Satan. Pentecostals and charismatics and all those influenced by these movements across the globe have pursued and practiced this paradigm of evangelism. The emphasis on power has appealed to the powerless in many parts of the world.

The strength of this conceptualization of evangelism is the focus on God who acts, and the credibility and authenticity of the message when it is backed not primarily with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that faith may rest not on the wisdom of people but on the power of God (I Corinthians 2:4). This model of evangelism was clearly central and important throughout the pages of the synoptic gospels and the book of Acts and is being recovered by many groups, Pentecostal and charismatic, in the 2/3 world and in the West (e.g., the Vineyard, the Alpha course, InterVarsity, Bethel Church in Redding, California).

By way of critique, there can be a tendency to overpromise miracles, to blame the sick for their lack of faith when they are not healed, to explain everything away when healing does not occur, to manipulate people into claiming miracles that did not occur, to worship the miracle worker rather than God, to create an elite group that demonstrates certain spiritual gifts, making those who have other gifts second class, and to use the promise of miracles to raise money. The health and wealth gospel can be an outgrowth of this focus on God's power wherever there is not also the leavening impact of the call to embrace humility and redemptive suffering and the way of the cross. There is also a general skepticism among most Western Christians, often supported by the evidence, about how often God intervenes miraculously. Western skepticism is too often reinforced by malpractice, false

claims, and unethical behavior on the part of proponents of power evangelism. Nevertheless, in many parts of the developing world and increasingly in the West, this emphasis on the power of God as the primary means of communicating the message in evangelism has been integrated into the practices of many people and communities.

### **Synthesizing the Models**

One attempt to integrate all these different models into one overarching theological conception was proposed by William Abraham: Evangelism as any activity or set of activities aimed at initiation of people into the eschatological rule of God inaugurated in Jesus of Nazareth. It is not any specific act but rather intention that defines evangelism.<sup>28</sup> If the primary intention of any act or set of acts is aimed toward initiating people into God's kingdom or rule for the first time, that act is evangelism. Evangelism can then be prayer, proclamation, healing, seeker meetings, handing out tracts, preaching on the street corner, serving someone sacrificially, joining together with people who do not know Jesus to work for justice, inviting people to an event, integrating people into a small group, or many other activities.

I would agree with Abraham, but only partially. The presence of a claim to intention is not enough. Evangelism must include communication of the good news of the advent of God's inaugurated rule in Christ and the invitation to enter that rule and confess Christ. Otherwise actions can and will be misinterpreted. At some point in the process, that Pauline call to communicate and confess Christ as Lord and believe in one's heart that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10: 23-25) must be clear and present or the intention to initiate people into the kingdom will very rarely come to fruition. In that case of omission of the call to enter the kingdom and confess Christ, I would suggest that some other intention has become primary. In other

words, some version of the first model must operate adequately in all of the models for evangelism to take place.

In his conceptualization of evangelism, Abraham finds a place for his five previous historical models (1 through 5 above) explicitly, and presumably would also find a place for my additions (6 and 7). Proclamation in word (Model 1), the public witness of good works of service, love, and justice (Model 5), and signs of God's power (Model 7) are all dimensions of communicating and authenticating the good news of God's inaugurated reign that Jesus proclaimed and passed on to his community. Incorporating people into the life of discipleship (Model 4), into growing and evangelizing churches (Model 3), and into communities that live in contrasting ways to the larger society (Model 6) are all dimensions of being initiated into the ongoing life under God's reign. And conversion as the experience of encounter with God and affirmation of God's message are dimensions of the reign of God influencing the inner life of individuals (Model 2). Abraham sought to posit a larger framework that theologically ties all these expressions and conceptions and methodologies of evangelism together, although particular churches and ministries and movements rarely integrate effectively or even appreciate all of these emphases.

Another attempt at synthesizing a number of these models is the missional community strategy that today has many proponents including Mike Breen,<sup>29</sup> Neil Cole,<sup>30</sup> many of the neo-monastics (e.g., Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove), and leaders in many other churches and networks of churches.<sup>31</sup> Missional communities are focused on living out the gospel of God's love, compassion and justice in the networks that are part of their lives, whether neighborhood networks, workplace networks, under-resourced community networks, issues and interest networks, or even virtual networks. Missional communities are formed by groups of believers who

have “real life” connections and choose to form inclusive and inviting faith communities in the midst of these places of natural connection with the world and with people who do not yet know Jesus. This “incarnational” model of the alternative community carries on its missional life not at some church building but as an integral part of the place or space that the network occupies. People do not live their lives and then share their faith as some separate activity but rather live out their faith in relationship with the people in their networks, and then organically share their lives, inviting people into their community. Their sharing can include meals, hospitality, prayer, worship, healing, acts of compassion and justice, and communication and invitation to enter the kingdom and trust and follow Christ. And their community, in a very simple and biblical sense, can be considered a church, an ekklesia. These rooted models fit mission in the West better and better in a post-Christendom context in which more attractional models are no longer adequate.

I would suggest that our challenge as professors in the academy is to teach and facilitate exposure to the best examples of all of these models, affirming and celebrating the gifts they bring, and appreciating them. We do not neglect critique, as I have hopefully shown above, but our focus is on celebrating and embracing whatever we can learn and put into practice from each paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

How can we then as professors and teachers and modelers of evangelism help form our students academically and spiritually so that they become bridge builders of unity in and for witness? I end with a few recommendations.

1. We can help our students do the hard work theologically of integrating the fullness of the gospel. We can help them recognize the gospel as focused on Jesus’ death for the forgiveness of sins and the gospel as

focused on the inauguration of the end times rule or kingdom of God. We are forgiven, given new life, and integrated into God's mission to heal the world when we embrace and experience the biblical gospel.

2. We can model evangelism and witness in ways that our students can experience and imitate. We cannot give to others what we do not have in our own lives. Imitation is often what helps bring real change. And information alone is often a very poor catalyst for transformation. Too many of us in the academy, teaching evangelism at seminaries and in other more Christian contexts, model evangelism far too little to have any significant impact in catalyzing evangelistic engagement and leadership in our students.
3. We can endeavor to bring healing and hope to our students in relation to evangelism. Many of our students come from a place of hurt, mistrust, and brokenness based on what they have seen and experienced in the area of evangelism. I know I too have been hurt and turned off and asked to be something I am not many times in my life by well meaning advocates of evangelism. We can share those hurtful and repellent experiences with our students as a way to begin the healing, and the help them share theirs. And only then can we move into proactive and creative approaches to teach and encourage students to take steps forward in their own lives and with their churches, steps they can take with authenticity and integrity, given who they are.
4. We can expose our students to various paradigms of evangelism, and in particular, to the best and most winsome expressions of those paradigms. Stereotypes abound here, and it is so easy to set up the straw man of insensitive and invasive evangelism and create critics and skeptics and even cynics in our teaching on evangelism. I think of so many positive examples that could speak to the hearts as well as the minds of our students:
  - a. A modeled Alpha meeting (proclamation, conversion, and power paradigms especially) (see [www.alpha.org](http://www.alpha.org)),
  - b. A showing of a Billy Graham event (e.g. his trip to China or the ABC documentary or Defining moments from the My hope campaign:  
<http://myhopewithbillygraham.org/programs/defining-moments/?>),
  - c. Shane Claiborne discussing neo-Monastic patterns of evangelism on one of his many visits to Christian colleges that

are on YouTube (for instance:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfOGLXwtyCU>)

- d. The video tape on Viva Cristo Rey about a vibrant Catholic Church in El Paso, Texas that integrates many of these paradigms, including public acts of mercy and justice coupled with God's power. The latter is demonstrated in an experience of God multiplying loaves and turkey in a Christmas day feast among the poor! These multimedia pieces and many others are examples of how we could demonstrate for our students the power of different paradigms when they are pursued in ethical and effective ways. The video of the Christmas day feast is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKZKXOCE43k>
5. We can challenge our students to get beyond mere critique and into creative contextualization. For instance, many people claim the Billy Graham model of large event evangelism is no longer relevant in a post modern, post Christendom context. I would agree if people merely mean trying to reproduce what Graham did and expecting to get the same results. But there are many people who are pursuing creative contextualization using Graham's paradigm of public large-scale proclamation events as a base from which to develop new forms. For instance, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is holding campus wide and even city wide events which drawing many and diverse students. These events integrate the proclamation style of Graham with a public witness for justice, in this case focused on the area of the sex slave trade, and with deep and broad impact (<http://priceoflifeny.org>). Efforts like these that integrate several different models are especially helpful.
6. We can help our students find their own paradigm and mode of evangelism, and thus to find evangelistic authenticity. It ought still to include the call to confess Christ as Lord, believe God raised him from the dead, and seek first God's loving rule in our lives and world. But the diversity of ways that this desire to invite people into God's gracious, loving, and healing rule are broad enough to create a niche for every Christ follower in whom we invest.
7. Then, having moved toward evangelistic authenticity, we can encourage them toward evangelistic generosity: to celebrate the diverse ways people and churches reach out, and to create unity and leverage social capital toward the increase of God's love and the spread of God's good news in the world.

Can we contribute to the kind of unity that will honor Jesus and build valuable social capital in the Church and reach more people in more ways? Can we equip and challenge students to find their way into evangelistic authenticity and generosity? I am hopeful, given a growing consensus on what the gospel is, at least in evangelically sympathetic communities, and the demonstrable ways that affirming and celebrating a diversity of evangelistic models serves the Church and the world best.

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000a), 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is a non-denominational campus ministry organization on 800 campuses in the U.S. and is part of a federation of national campus ministry movements in 120 countries in the world.

<sup>4</sup> From a conversation with a good friend of Paul Little's, Pete Hammond, who was InterVarsity's Director of Evangelism after Paul Little's untimely death.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Schweitzer, W. Montgomery, tr. Robinson, and James McConkey, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus; A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Rick Richardson, "Emerging Missional Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Witness: the Journal for the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education* 26, (2011): 93-116; Rick Richardson, "Emerging Missional Movements: An Overview and Assessment of Some Implications for Mission(s)," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no 3 (2013): 131-136.

<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 1<sup>st</sup> North American ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Wainright, *Leslie Newbigin: a Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 326; Wright 1992, 320ff.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 95ff.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham 1989, 40-94.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Pierard, "From Evangelical Exclusivism to Ecumenical Openness: Billy Graham and Sociopolitical Issue," *Modern American Protestantism and Its World: Historical Articles on Protestantism in American Religious Life* 13, ed. M.E. Marty (Munich: Saur, 1992) 284.

<sup>12</sup> Betty Lee Skinner, *Daws: The Story of Dawson Trotman, Founder of the Navigators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1974)

<sup>13</sup> Mike Breen, and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People like Jesus Did*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Pawley's Island, SC: 3 Dimensional Ministries, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Michael O. Emerson, and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 115-134.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Breen, Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities a Field Guide* (Pawley's Island, SC: 3 Dimensional Ministries, 2010).

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- <sup>16</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God; A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Distributed by Friendship Press, 1955); Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).
- <sup>17</sup> Aaron Coe, "Why Evangelistic Church Planting," *North American Mission Board Blog*, July 8, 2011, <http://www.namb.net/nambblog1.aspx?id=8590116936&blogid=8589939695>
- <sup>18</sup> Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters become Movement Makers*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 11-30.
- <sup>19</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. M. Bevenot (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1956).
- <sup>20</sup> H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962); Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
- <sup>21</sup> Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Richard H. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1929).
- <sup>23</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).
- <sup>24</sup> Stone 2007, 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 21.
- <sup>26</sup> See for instance Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006); Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).
- <sup>27</sup> John S.K. Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986).
- <sup>28</sup> Abraham 1989, 95, 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Breen, and Absalom 2010.
- <sup>30</sup> Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
- <sup>31</sup> See for instance Dave Ferguson, and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends can Start a Missional Church Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).



## EMERGING ADULTS AND THE FUTURE OF EVANGELISM

Beth Seversen and Rick Richardson<sup>1</sup>

This article reflects on what the most recent research is telling us about the spiritual lives and interests of emerging adults and what implications there are for the future of the evangelistic mission of the Church.

There has been a recent spate of studies on emerging adults (for our purposes, ages 19-29), especially focused in the U.S. Scholars have focused on the spiritual and religious lives of high school teens (ages 14-18)<sup>1</sup> and on young twenty-somethings (ages 19-23).<sup>2</sup> What's more, some of the implications of this research have been developed for the spiritual formation of high school age young people<sup>3</sup> and twenty-somethings.<sup>4</sup> However, very little has been written on the implications of this research for evangelism more broadly. Although various books and articles have been published on undertaking evangelism, apologetics, worship, preaching, and other church activities in the postmodern era,<sup>5</sup> these works were written prior to this significant recent research. They draw on anecdotal, personal, and regional observations and insights, and on a "logic of postmodernism and its consequences" as the authors saw them rather than on study of the upcoming generation being shaped by postmodernism. Indeed, the new statistical and empirical research has not yet figured prominently in any work on evangelism of which we are aware. And yet, the delineated national shifts in emerging adults have profound consequences for evangelism, not to mention spiritual formation, and how both evangelism and spiritual formation are then integrated into a coherent ecclesiology and overall approach to ministry.

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We will start by exploring two broad interpretive ideas that help give a picture of the trajectory of the spiritual lives of emerging adults today, ending that section with an illustrative story from our experiences at Burning Man, a 60,000 person arts and self expression festival held every year in the Nevada desert. Then we will explore more specifically the social factors and forces that have shaped the spiritual and religious trajectories of teens and twenty-somethings. At the end, we will draw out implications and make some recommendations for 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelism.

### **Spiritual Lives of Young Adults in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America**

#### *MTD*

Christian Smith and Melinda Denton have suggested a significant interpretive description of the spiritual and religious lives of teens ages 14 to 18 based on extensive empirical research. They call the dominant religion of teens in America today “moralistic therapeutic Deism” (MTD).<sup>6</sup> It is moralistic in that teens today believe that being a good and moral person, and especially being kind and fair to other people, is central to living a happy and fulfilled life. American teen religion is also therapeutic in that religion is about providing therapeutic benefits, making people feel good, helping people with pain, and giving them tools to deal with life’s traumas. And American teen religion is Deist (though not pure Deism) in the sense that God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to solve a problem. Otherwise people are on their own to pursue the endless activities and virtual and real social and relational connections that are such a ubiquitous part of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Kenda Dean compares MTD to a symbiote, a parasitic being that draws its life energy from a stronger host, which she identifies as the historic Christian faith, and in the end corrupting and deforming the host beyond

recognition.<sup>7</sup> MTD, say Smith and Denton and Dean, seems to be “colonizing many historical religious denominations and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.”<sup>8</sup> For Smith and Denton, this is a moral indictment on American congregations, not so much teenagers, since teenagers have gotten this alternative faith often from their parents and their churches. Therefore, Smith and Denton draw an astonishing conclusion: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in America. Although not all sociologists of religion agree with Smith’s MTD social descriptor,<sup>9</sup> nevertheless the MTD interpretation has found deep resonance for many leaders and observers of culture and the American church, especially as it seems to fit not just teens but many older adults across the spectrum of churches in the U.S.

If that is where a majority of teens, including most churching teens, are in their faith, what happens to people when they reach their early twenties? Christian Smith in his follow up book on the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults (ages 19-23) had this to say about the fate of MTD as the cohort has gotten older:<sup>10</sup> “there has been a shift toward diluting the concentration of MTD among emerging adults over these years. They exhibit somewhat more variety and originality than did the teenagers.”

### *Bricolage*

As MTD becomes diluted post high school, Robert Wuthnow has suggested another overarching interpretive image that may work better to describe the twenty-something cohort in America: tinkering or bricolage.<sup>11</sup>

The single word that best describes young adults’ approach to religion and spirituality—indeed life—is tinkering...The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote of the importance of the bricoleur, the tinkerer, in the societies he studied. The bricoleur in preindustrial societies is a handy person, a do-it-yourself crafts person who uses the

tools of his or her trade and the materials that happen to be at hand to fix things and keep them in good repair.

The spiritual tinkerer creates a do-it-yourself faith that cuts and pastes and patches together convictions and beliefs that work and that help one get along, get ahead, and do what one wants in life. Wuthnow adds that the likelihood of tinkering only “increases with the expansion of available information and exposure to diverse cultures and networks” in a globalized context. In the end, bricolage presents as a “jumble of orthodoxy,” relativism and civility. Although bricolage is not unique to this age group, emerging adults have been steeped in and influenced by this culture of tinkering.

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of twenty-somethings as spiritual bricoleurs that the authors have experienced was at the 2012 Burning Man Festival while engaging in spiritual conversations with Christo-pagans who borrow a little of this and a little of that to create their spiritualities. They were churchd, dechurchd, and unchurchd. The commonality is that they borrowed and practiced a variety of spiritualities, including shamanism, belief in the power of a mutually shared energy or force that ties everything together, the special meanings and powers of crystals or rocks, the expanded consciousness brought on by hypnotic dance to African drum music, and the benefit of using psychedelic drugs to accelerate growth in alternative forms of consciousness. But it is not just New Agers or Neo-pagans who practice this approach to their spirituality. Many people involved or formerly involved with churches practice bricolage.

In line with this bricolage approach to faith, twenty-somethings tend to embrace doctrines that make sense in a society that celebrates tolerance and scorns exclusion. Beliefs in hell, judgment, the seriousness of sin, and the lostness of people without Christ tend to get short shrift among younger Christians, except for those younger Christians who are becoming

increasingly conservative (see below). Conversely, doctrines about God's love, inclusion, reconciliation, and social justice, are embraced and cobbled together, making for an eclectic, engaging, tolerant, and reinforcing collection of convictions. In addition young adults often prefer personal experience over explanation as the best way to encounter God.<sup>12</sup>

These theological moves have significant implications for evangelism and for motivating people to be involved in evangelism. Traditional motivations for evangelism such as the lostness of people and the imminence of divine judgment find less and less resonance among many emerging adults. Moreover, a gospel that focuses on the seriousness of sin, the inevitability of God's judgment, and Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins is not perceived or received as good news, either by non-Christian recipients or even by many Christian communicants.<sup>13</sup> The truth of the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to God engenders doubt in nonbelievers and even in some believers.

What's more, experiences of what classical Christianity would term personal sin are often woven into the narrative journey of emerging adults in ways that embrace those experiences as an important part of their lives that they would not want to have missed and would not want to call sin.<sup>14</sup> God's judgment does not exist or have much importance or relevance in the mind of many emerging adults (except possibly for those emerging adults who have become increasingly traditionalist or conservative). There is really nothing to be saved from, and no consequences or accountability or judgment to avoid.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, research reveals some emerging adults do have a desire to overcome addictive and destructive behaviors and sometimes turn to religion for help.<sup>16</sup>

### *Evangelistic Responses*

So how might we respond? For one, MTD and bricolage are not the Christian message. Consequently, finding ways to merge (and submerge) the gospel in these ways of being will ultimately be self-defeating and self-destructive to the Church and to believers.

Second, self-reflection and self-awareness is vital. That wing of the Church most associated with evangelism, the Evangelicals, has too often reduced the gospel solely to good news about *the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins* (see first article by Rick Richardson in this volume for more on this). Although the gospel includes, and can even be argued to begin with the forgiveness of sins, it goes beyond penal substitution. People need to hear not just that “God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life,” but also to hear (and see) that God loves the world and has a wonderful plan for its future, a message that goes well beyond the version of the gospel that only focuses on the forgiveness of personal sins. God is healing the world, including broken and addicted emerging adults, and God has begun this redemptive work within history. So Christians point to this reality, both within history and beyond history, when they collaborate with God and his Spirit for the sake of justice, compassion, and human flourishing.

### *Polarization*

We should mention one caveat related to MTD and bricolage. Not every emerging adult accepts them. Wuthnow discovered from the data that people age 18 to 45 are polarizing at the extremes, with conservatives becoming more conservative and liberals becoming more liberal. Putnam, too, elaborates on religious polarization.<sup>17</sup> In particular for the 19-29 year olds, Wuthnow found that approximately 9% of the twenty-something population is very conservative or traditional (double the number fifteen years earlier), and

getting more so, and 19% of that twenty-something population is very liberal and getting more so.<sup>18</sup> That means that there is a minority, but an increasingly significant and vocal minority, of twenty-somethings that are embracing more traditional and conservative doctrines and beliefs and, at least in principle, lifestyles. This growing group of increasingly conservative young people fuel movements like the neo-Reformed expressions of church that are increasingly influential (e.g. Mark Driscoll's Acts 29 network, Tim Keller's urban church planting networks, John Piper and the Gospel Coalition, Austin Stone Church and the Verge Conferences).

The conservative/liberal polarizing then is significant in that many conservative church movements are experiencing much more success and growth than some of the writers about the consequences of the postmodern and post Christian culture shift expected (e.g. McLaren 2001; 2010; Tickle 2008; 2012).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, more emerging adults are becoming increasingly liberal than are becoming increasingly conservative. Furthermore, even among those emerging adults who are becoming increasingly conservative, conservative beliefs are not necessarily leading to conservative lifestyles. Many of these conservative twenty-somethings report traditional morals but consistent failure in living them out, as might be expected in an increasingly permissive and tolerant society. They need substantive help to live up to their personal ethic, as consistent failure undermines their confidence and faith in the power and reality of the gospel to transform.

### *A Story from Burning Man*

So how might people on the journey from MTD to bricolage be reached? We offer a story from Burning Man, an event mentioned previously in this article. Burning Man has been an adventure in entering the worlds of

some emerging adults that are exploring alternative forms of consciousness, connectedness, and spirituality. Rick got involved with Burning Man through the invitation of his son, and has attended Burning Man for four years, gradually involving students and others in these trips. Both Beth and Rick have had numerous witness and prayer experiences at Burning Man that are illustrative of many of the implications in this article. One of Beth's experiences especially illustrates the changing character of connecting to spiritually interested people who practice MTD and then bricolage.

Imagine with us for a moment the Burning Man festival - 70,000 people, many young adults, creating a city on the Nevada playa where there is only desert. It includes smoke signals, flying machines, big beautiful moving art cars and animated creatures. It is also a place where dance and song and speeches and art and creativity and beauty are valued and celebrated, where the 10 core values<sup>20</sup> include no consumerism, leaving no trace, and community, where everyone participates and no one is left out, and where when you meet someone they immediately kiss you on both sides of your cheek and begin talking and moving quickly to things of the heart, of weighty things that matter.

Burning Man is also a gift-giving community. People will walk up to you and give you all kinds of things. Often it is the jewelry they are wearing, their scarf, food, or anything they think will bless and encourage you. It is quite remarkable. Burning Man is much like the kingdom of God, though it is a fallen kingdom.

We taught a Cultural Hermeneutic Practicum there the last week of August and over Labor Day in 2012. In the mornings we had class and in the afternoons we engaged in spiritual conversations and ministry. One afternoon we were involved in ministry at Center City – think of a large top tent filled with people milling around, acrobats tumbling, children face painting,



multiple stages where people are performing and long lines for a cup of coffee.

Beth saw a woman who was rather scantily clad who was watching one of our students pray for people. It seemed as Beth watched her that her interest turned to a sense of longing. The line was getting deeper and deeper to be prayed for by our student. So Beth walked up to the woman and asked her what she always asks, “Tell me about you, I would love to hear your story, where you are in your journey and what brought you to Burning Man.” Beth learned that the woman’s husband had recently abandoned her and that she was starting life over. Beth asked if she might give the woman a gift of prayer for her. The woman was open and welcoming and interested. As Beth prayed for her, God gave her an image of the Prodigal Father.

So Beth simply prayed over the woman what she visualized, this image of a dignified middle-eastern man in an arid context (like Burning Man!). This man was running to welcome home his son and his robes were flapping in the wind (again, reminiscent of being in the middle of this windy playa). The father embraced his son and was eagerly welcoming and forgiving him for his waste and his self-destructive lifestyle. There was no shame and blame in this story. The Father was welcoming home his son and celebrating his return. Beth prayed for her that she might know and experience in the same way God as Father, as the forgiver of anything she had done that troubled her, as the restorer of her life and repairer of it, the one who can put her life back together again and make it beautiful and transform her pain.

As Beth prayed, she felt her hands getting wet and she looked up startled. This abandoned woman was weeping – tears were streaming down her face onto Beth’s hands. So after she prayed, they had this wonderful time of unpacking that picture, that story from the gospels – a lens Jesus gave us so we might know what the Father is like.

Beth's reaction to that evangelism experience was: "Jesus, you are so utterly amazing!!!"

Here is Jesus, the master bricoleur, putting the broken pieces back together and healing. Here is the Holy Spirit speaking and leading and creating connection and ministering in power. Here is experience before explanation, and meeting someone a long way away from openness to the organized church in a way that speaks to where she is on the spectrum of spiritual openness and in a language she could understand. Here is a word from God, from beyond herself, that spoke to who she is and that she is loved and connected, and that there is hope. All these practices in evangelism are pointers toward the pattern of evangelism and the openness of emerging adults in our contemporary world.

### **Social Factors Influencing Young Adults**

Three additional research findings concerning young adult participation in organized religion along with three new social trends in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America provide a fuller framework for our discussion of emerging adult evangelism. The three findings about religious involvement are: the significant drop out rate of emerging adults from church; the growing number of people who identify themselves as "nones" on surveys; and a segmented delineation of the religious categories of emerging adults. The three social trends are: delayed marriage and fewer kids, economic factors like the changing job market and increasing debt, and changing forms of relationship.

#### *Young Adult Religious Participation*

Religious faith and practice decline by a significant percentage between the age periods of 13-17 and 18-23.<sup>21</sup> According to David

Kinnaman's and Gabe Lyon's interpretation of research by the Barna group,<sup>22</sup> 60 percent of Christian youth will drop out of church for a significant period during their twenty-something years, and one-third of Christian youth will lose their faith or significantly doubt it at some point during that period. Whereas teenagers today are some of the most religiously active Americans, twenty-somethings are the least religiously active. Questions for further research include: How did churches lose the generation of teenagers that were the most church-ed within such a short window, and is this phenomenon anything new?

Christian Smith suggests that there is little difference between the religious affiliation of 19 to 23 year olds in 2006 when he gathered his data and 1972 when statistics for that age group in relation to religious affiliation were initially collected. So although there is a significant dropout rate when high school students begin full time work or college, this dropout rate has remained consistent over the last 40 years. Rodney Stark goes as far as to assert that when teens leave home they stop going to church for a much more mundane reason than doubting their faith. They just want to sleep in.<sup>23</sup>

Another interesting and significant research finding is the rise of the "nones." Putnam describes the "nones" as people who, when asked if they have any religious preference, respond by saying, "none" or "nothing in particular" on the General Social Survey (GSS).<sup>24</sup> "Nones" have doubled in size since 2000 and are increasing rapidly and, according to Putnam, make up 27% of emerging adults.<sup>25</sup> This finding needs to be nuanced as well, though. Many of the nones still say they pray, believe in God, and have a personal spiritual commitment that is important to them. They just do not affiliate with any organized expression of their personal spiritual commitment.<sup>26</sup>

Putnam suggests that many "nones" purposefully reject the organized church for the church's stance on homosexuality, the church's conservative

politics, and the church's exclusionary belief system.<sup>27</sup> These characteristics fit churches in the Evangelical and Catholic spectrum more than they fit mainline churches. Young people, Putnam concludes, have a new moral sensitivity and find the church immoral by virtue of being narrow, judgmental, dogmatic and exclusive.<sup>28</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons report similar findings.<sup>29</sup>

A third research finding relates to the delineation of the whole spectrum of spiritual orientations that presently characterize emerging adults in the U.S. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell identified the following emerging adult population segments:<sup>30</sup>

1. Committed traditionalists who embrace a strong religious faith, whose beliefs they can reasonably well articulate and which they actively practice: 15%.
2. Selective adherents who believe and perform certain aspects of the religious traditions but neglect and ignore others: 30%.
3. Spiritually open who are not personally very committed to religious faith but nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters: 15%.
4. Religiously indifferent, who neither care to practice religion nor oppose it: 25%.
5. Religiously disconnected with little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations: 5%.
6. Irreligious who hold skeptical attitudes about religion and make critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith: 10%.

So 60% of North American emerging adults are spiritually engaged or at least somewhat spiritually open and 40% are spiritually indifferent, disconnected or closed. The findings also suggest that the new atheism, which has gotten significant press, has grown to 10% but is still smaller than the segment of those who hold to traditional faith, and very small compared to the

majority of emerging adults. This segmentation leads to the implication that a one size fits all approach to evangelism will not engage emerging adult seekers across the spectrum.

### *Social Trends That Influence Emerging Adult Evangelism*

One might encapsulate these trends in the word “delay.” Social trends that have an impact on the spiritual and religious lives of young adults include delayed marriage, delayed and fewer children, delayed longitudinal careers and delayed financial security. Additionally there are new forms of relationships in a context of the explosion of access to information and the possibility of dwelling in real and virtual relational worlds simultaneously.<sup>31</sup>

We will unpack these trends briefly.

#### 1. Later marriage and fewer children.

Between 1950 and 2010, the median age of first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 26.1. For men during that same time the median age of marriage rose from 22.8 to 28.1. The sharpest increase for both took place after 1970.<sup>32</sup> And the latest research shows that the median age is trending higher faster in this decade.<sup>33</sup>

This delayed marriage trend may be the most significant factor in influencing religious participation rates for emerging adults because the level of people’s religious participation is most influenced by people’s everyday life circumstances, including their geographic and social locations.<sup>34</sup> Put simply: Are they married, do they have kids, do they live in areas where churches are more common and their presence more felt? Traditionally, married couples are most likely to have children and to live near local churches. All of this contributes to married people seeking faith to deal with their life issues when life gets complicated and when they need support. Conversely, a lower rate of marriage, having fewer kids, and living farther from religious resources can

delay longer-term organizational religious commitments. The prevalence of constant transition and change contributes to this in-between status and fluidity of choices, as we describe next.

2. Economic factors: Debt and lack of jobs and job changes and dual income families and role of parents

Contemporary changes in the American and global economy often now undermine stable, lifelong careers and replace them with careers that have lower security, more frequent job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education. This dynamic pushes youth toward extended schooling, delay of marriage, and, arguably, a general psychological orientation of maximizing options and postponing commitments.<sup>35</sup> Smith and Snell highlight the many transitions that emerging adults experience during this period:

They move out, they move back, they plan to move out again. They go to college, they drop out, they transfer, they take a break for the semester to save money, some graduate, some don't. They want to study architecture, they hate architecture, they switch to criminal justice. Their parents separate, make up, get divorced, remarry. They take a job, they quit, they find another, they get promoted, they move. They meet new friends, girlfriends change, their friends don't get along, they meet new people, they get new roommates, their roommates don't work out, they find a new apartment...There is not a lot in life that is stable and change is incessant.<sup>34</sup>

Maintaining a stable commitment to a faith community is a challenge in a life filled with so many transitions. At the same time, there are churches that have capitalized on this dynamic. Churches that can create community for emerging adults can be quite successful at reaching even people unenthusiastic toward the church. Many urban contexts provide ripe opportunities for reaching into broad swathes of young urban professional networks, a fact that has been borne out by churches like Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, Mars Hill in Seattle, Park Church in Chicago,

and many others. This emphasis on the draw of community is also important in relation to the next social trend.

3. Changing forms of relationships, including technological mediation (e.g. Facebook, texting), the continuing impact of the sexual revolution, hooking up, access to birth control, Internet dating services, etc.

Defining relationships is a very challenging task today for emerging adults. Boundaries, roles and romantic relations can be confusing:

...romantically, the lines between just met, just friends, something a bit more than friends, "talking," "going out," "dating," being boyfriend and girlfriend, sleeping over, semi-cohabiting, cohabiting, and relating like married people can seem like passing through a series of gradually darkening shades of gray.<sup>36</sup>

Though confusion and ambiguity is high, the need for friendship and community is nonetheless even more necessary given the fragility and ambiguity of contemporary relationships. These sometimes transitory friendship and romantic relationships also still form the basis for many of the networks emerging adults develop. As a result, the needs for community and for finding friendship and romantic relationships have only grown, increasing the impact of those churches and ministries that provide gathering spaces, meeting places, and connectional activities, especially in contexts (e.g. urban professional or college focused) where there is a significant concentration of emerging adults.

Besides the changing nature of sexual and intimate relationships, our culture has also seen exponential growth in the Internet, tweeting, texting, email, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, multiple player online video games and other social media. We have created a virtual social world in which many emerging adults find themselves immersed 24/7. It is not unusual for emerging adults to be at an event or in one social context (e.g. family), and be simultaneously carrying on three or four other conversations relating to several other social contexts. Whether people are in a worship service, at a

movie, attending a concert, doing homework, or riding (and sometimes driving) in a car, texting is pervasive and constant. Much of the lives of these emerging adults seem centered on creating and maintaining these personal connections and conversations. This immersion in a virtual social environment has also been accompanied by a withdrawal from civic life and the public square.<sup>37</sup>

So networks of relationships, through which the gospel travels best, are now human and technological together. Emerging adults can deepen connections, enhance communication, and tell and re-tell their story and God's story creatively and well in the digital age. We have entered an era of "cybernetic evangelism," in which the networks through which the gospel advances are both face-to-face and virtual. Of course, technological means of connection and communication (e.g., letters and later telegraph and then phone calls) have always been mediators of relationship. But never has there been the immediacy, breadth and diversity of ways to interact, inform and influence, creating new opportunities for gospel engagement.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

One way to summarize the faith trajectory of emerging adults is to say that they are moving from the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism of their teens toward the bricolage or tinkering/picking and choosing of their twenties. This trajectory presents challenges for evangelism and for recruiting a next generation of committed witnesses.

In light of all these findings and trends, one very good summary of the implications for evangelism by and for emerging adults has been given by Ed Stetzer, drawing on his research of 200 churches effectively reaching emerging adults. He identified common characteristics of these churches. Churches with thriving young adult ministries: 1) create deeper community, 2)



make a difference through service, 3) experience worship, 4) are more conversational than preachy in communication style, 5) build cross-generational relationships, 6) move toward authenticity, 7) lead by transparency and 8) lead by team.<sup>38</sup> Several of these characteristics have already been alluded to, for instance the importance of community and team, the importance of a (non-judgmental) authenticity, and the focus on making a difference through compassion and service. He also emphasizes the importance of experience that goes beyond explanation in the worship service approach, and the added dimension of community that goes beyond peer relationships, fostering significant cross-generational relationships.

The explicitly spiritual dimension of evangelism by and for emerging adults can also be emphasized. Research indicates that many emerging adults want to connect with the spiritual and the mystical<sup>39</sup> and are more interested in knowing experientially than propositionally. In addition, 42% of Americans under 30 report having had two or more religious experiences at some time in their lives.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, encounter and connection with the Holy Spirit is all the more crucial for evangelism among emerging adults. Healing prayer, prophetic evangelism, speaking to people with words of knowledge and of wisdom, and relating insights and images that God has given for people personally can be the means of them experiencing and encountering God. These practices are especially meaningful for emerging adults that show the kinds of interests Rick and Beth encountered at Burning Man.

The following additions and amplifications paint a fuller picture and serve as recommendations for what authentic and engaged evangelism by and for emerging adults looks like in light of the research:

1. Mission and evangelism by and for emerging adults embodies justice, compassion, relief, diversity, environmental care, and witness.
2. The message emphasizes the good news that God brings forgiveness but also healing and help for addictions and brokenness. Where

emerging adults have been defeated and trapped, Jesus Christ is the liberator!

3. Emerging adult Christians experience help to live out the personal and social ethic that they espouse, so that their witness will not lose credibility and their confidence in their faith will not falter.
4. Efforts by and for emerging adults in reaching out are matched to the particular spiritual interests and needs of emerging adults all along the spectrum. Selective adherents need a very different approach than those who are hostile toward Christian faith.
5. Emerging adults drop out much less often as a result of receiving significant preparation to remain authentically Christian as they face and surmount MTD and bricolage spiritualities when they are high schoolers. This preparation comes through:
  - a. Leadership opportunities and congregational involvement for teens and preteens at young ages.
  - b. Mentoring relationships across generational lines to instill wisdom and guidance and a sense of being valued.
  - c. Short-term cross-cultural mission experiences, global and urban, that allow for teens to articulate and live out a deeper and more enduring sense of Christian identity and mission.
  - d. Missional community involvement in prayer, service, and witness with other believers.
6. Evangelistic communication is more “cybernetic,” travelling along the virtual networks of communication that are so important and visible to emerging adults today, including through Facebook, tweets, gospel and story apps, You Tube videos and many more.

Overall, Jesus is seen as a master bricoleur, whether he is explicitly called that or not, who pastes together the broken and fragmented pieces of emerging adult lives and communities to create beauty out of brokenness. And that beauty out of brokenness becomes a narrative for the healing of others.

As increasing numbers of churches, parachurch groups, and mission agencies pursue these priorities and implications, emerging adults will become more engaged and chart a vibrant future for the evangelistic mission of the

Church, and more emerging adults will respond and follow Jesus. These are exciting and creative times to be in collaboration with the Holy Spirit and with emerging adults on God's mission for the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties." *American Psychologist* 55 (5) (May): 469–480. J. J. Arnett and S. Tabor, S. "Adolescents Terminable and Interminable: When does Adolescence End?" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 23, (1994), 517-537; Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers : How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: New York, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109-198.

<sup>4</sup> Wuthnow 2007, 216-231.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church : Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Dan Kimball, *Emerging worship : Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004); David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ : Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub, 2003); Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready than you Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Ockholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995); Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box : New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Smith and Denton 2005, 171.

<sup>7</sup> Dean 2010, 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Denton 2005, 166, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Brachand, 'Living God or Cosmic Therapist? Implications of the National Survey of Youth and Religion for Christian Religious Education', *Religious Education*, 105(2) (2010), 140-156. In light of faith development theory, Brachand challenges the MTD interpretation of the data, suggesting Smith and Denton merely described a natural developmental stage of faith for teens who have yet to become adult in their approach. Brachand encourages researchers to find more hope and encouragement in the developmental stage teens find themselves, rather than focusing on the inadequate or even "heretical" dimensions in what they believe.

<sup>10</sup> Smith and Snell 2009, 154-156.

<sup>11</sup> Wuthnow 2007, 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley and Jason Hayes, *Lost and found : The Younger Church and the Churches that Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 92; Richardson 2000, 45-47.

<sup>13</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1959), 193, 289. Many emerging adults from every group often clearly reflected basic liberal cultural values: Individual autonomy, unbounded tolerance, freedom from authorities, the affirmation of

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pluralism, the centrality of human self-consciousness, the practical value of moral religion, epistemological skepticism, and an instinctive aversion to anything dogmatic or committed to particulars were routinely taken for granted by respondents. In short, many emerging adults would be quite comfortable with the kind of liberal faith described by the Yale theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in 1937 as being about "a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Smith and Snell 2009, 81, indicate that most emerging adults are happy with religion so long as it is general and accepting of diversity but are uncomfortable if it feels exclusive or narrow or judgmental, making religious particularities unacceptable.

<sup>14</sup> Most are optimistic for their personal future and don't regret any of the things that have happened to them, including the bad things. The stance of "no regrets" puts a good face on matters that are in fact problematic, frames the difficult past in an encouraging light, and keeps all of life's energies moving forward in an upbeat and constructive direction. It also helps to protect a sense of personal self—which seems sacred to emerging adults—against threats to the ultimate good of "being yourself" in a world in which the self is central, since actually having regrets implies that the self one has become embodies something that is wrong or undesirable. When life is centrally about being "who I am," one must negate the existence of truly regrettable decisions and experiences, since even the worst and hardest have gone into making one "who I am." (Smith and Snell 2009, 37-42).

<sup>15</sup> Emerging adults may want to distance themselves from religion because religion in their minds conflicts with certain other lifestyle options that are higher priorities, including partying, hooking up, having sex, and cohabiting. Most emerging adults reduce a certain cognitive dissonance they feel arising from the conflict of religious teachings against partying and sex before marriage wanting to engage in those behaviors by mentally discounting the religious teachings and socially distancing themselves from the source of those teachings. (Smith and Snell 2009, 83-84).

<sup>16</sup> For some emerging adults, stability, structure, support, and guidance are needed, especially for the troubled and those who need recovery. Whereas many of the specific issues like transitions, economy, no money, moral relativism, subjectivism, drugs, partying, amorphous relationships, and sexual license reduced the appeal and importance of religious faith and practice, but some emerging adults who pursue these things become broken and need recovery, and to them, religion can be very helpful. (Smith and Snell 2009, 84-85).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace : How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Wuthnow 2007, 160-161.

<sup>19</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity : Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); Phyllis Tickle, 'The Great Emergence : How Christianity is Changing and Why', *Emergence; Variation : Emergent Village Resources for Communities of Faith* (Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2008); Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity : What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> "Burning Man: What Is Burning Man?: Ten Principles," accessed December 14, 2013, [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/principles.html#.UqyhfhZb62k](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html#.UqyhfhZb62k).

<sup>21</sup> Smith and Snell 2009, 142; Jonathan P. Hill, *Religious Pathways During the Transition to Adulthood : A life Course Approach* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians are Leaving Church—and Rethinking Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011), 24.

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- <sup>23</sup> Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe : New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008). 11.
- <sup>24</sup> Putnam and Campbell 2010, 122.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe : New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008). Only about a third (in 2007) of the No Religion group are atheists who reject “anything beyond the physical world,” while two-thirds of them expressed some belief in God...these people seldom if ever attend church. But the majority prays, and a third of them pray quite often, 141-142.
- <sup>27</sup> Putnam 2010, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 130-131.
- <sup>29</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity-- and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).
- <sup>30</sup> Smith and Snell 2009, 294-295.
- <sup>31</sup> Wuthnow 2007; Smith and Snell 2009.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21-23.
- <sup>33</sup> U.S. Census Bureau reporting 28.9 for men and 26.9 for women in 2011.
- <sup>34</sup> Wuthnow 2007, 70.
- <sup>35</sup> Smith and Snell 2009, 5-6.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58-59.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert D. Putnam, ‘Bowling Alone : America's Declining Social Capital’, *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), (1995), 65-78; Richard Sennett. *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Smith and Snell 2009, 74.
- <sup>38</sup> Stetzer, Stanley and Hayes 2009, 143-144.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 92.
- <sup>40</sup> Stark 2008, 59.



# **“ASK ANYTHING”: DEVELOPING A RELATIONAL PLATFORM TO MOBILISE CHRISTIANS TO SHARE THEIR FAITH THROUGH EXPLORING QUESTIONS**

Dale Stephenson and Darren Cronshaw<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** There is a pressing need for locally produced resources to help Christians overcome a crisis of confidence or blind spot about evangelism. “Ask Anything” was designed by Dale Stephenson and trialled at Crossway Baptist Church as a relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith through exploring questions. This 5-session DVD-based course follows a question-based format with content that is intentionally pre-Alpha. It is relational and designed to be accessible and transferable in format so that it can be put in the hands of the people of God and go viral in spreading the gospel. The short DVDs and lots of time for further questions ensure sessions are interactive and dialogical. The content is simple but not simplistic, and assumes people are on a journey of exploring faith. “Ask Anything” is a resource that helps Christians authentically accompany their pre-Christian friends on that journey and encourage them towards faith. The course was successfully trialled at Crossway with 1500 people in small groups. It has also spread as a resource to a website and radio spots, but its facilitating of question-driven faith-sharing in small groups remains its most strategic use.

## **Introduction**

A Christian facilitator at Crossway Baptist Church, Ken, said that running one of the new “Ask Anything” groups had redefined evangelism for him. Said Ken: “I am having conversations that I never thought that I would be able to have with my friends.”<sup>1</sup> Ken discovered that faith conversations could become a natural way of life for him. He observed that it was as a result of the group that he was now able to have more open conversations

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with his friends about his faith in Jesus Christ. It is as if Ken has been liberated through an initial facilitated situation that was accessible to him. From a simple beginning Ken is now having more frequent faith conversations with his network of friends. This is what “Ask Anything” was designed for: to be a relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith through exploring questions.

It is well documented that Christianity in Australia has been in decline for a number of years. The *Transforming Melbourne* research report indicates that in Melbourne alone the Christian worshipping community declines by 4500 people per year. This is equivalent to closing an average sized Church in Melbourne every week. Christian Research Association projections for the city of Melbourne worship attendance across the denominations through 2026 demonstrate that with current trends the majority of denominations will witness significant decline.<sup>2</sup> The ways that the Australian Church generally is conducting itself is not connecting well with average Australians. This is a fair critique across much of the Western world. Reggie McNeil notes that, “The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists.”<sup>3</sup> The church needs to recapture its mission identity, not just to arrest the decline but to reflect the heart of God.

### **Where Goes Evangelism?**

The church is called to cooperate with God in helping people to be restored to all that God has for them. This will include acts of compassionate service, advocacy for justice and caring for creation; but it will also include verbally sharing about what really is good news. Some churches in the past were so preoccupied with wanting to announce the gospel with their words that they seemed to do little or nothing to demonstrate the gospel with deeds. Other churches focused on wanting to demonstrate the gospel and were hesitant to



create opportunities to talk about it. We see this second trend in Australian churches from National Church Life Survey statistics. Australian churches on average, including our own tribe of Baptist churches, are tending to get quantitatively and qualitatively better at demonstrating the gospel with compassionate acts and community involvement. This is a good sign. At the same time the preparedness of believers to share their faith is declining.<sup>4</sup> The gospel needs expressing in both deeds and words. Michael Frost stresses how they are intertwined: “We feed the hungry because in the world to come there will be no such thing as starvation. We share Christ because in the world to come there will be no such thing as unbelief.”<sup>5</sup>

The Lausanne Covenant definition of Evangelism is a well-regarded definition of evangelism, at least in the evangelical world:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.<sup>6</sup>

This broad description – encompassing presence, dialogue and listening; with proclamation and persuasion at the centre; and leading to discipleship, church and service – captures our imagination. Key phrases like “spread the good news”, “Christian presence in the world” and “evangelism itself is the proclamation of the [Gospel]” bring Christian participation in the relational

and verbal sharing of the good news of Jesus to the forefront. Evangelism is not social justice or interfaith dialogue, important as these issues are to the Christian and the Kingdom of God, and as much as they are partners with evangelism in expressing the mission of God.

### **Crisis of Confidence?**

We wonder does the average Christian have a crisis of confidence in being able to share the good news about Jesus with a view to bringing their friends into a relationship with God? It would seem so. According to the 2011 National Church Life Survey, 17% of Australian church attenders say they are at ease and look for opportunities to talk about their faith. Another 52% say they are mostly at ease and can discuss faith if it comes up. However, 12% say that their life and actions are sufficient for faith sharing. 18% admit it is hard to talk about their faith and express it in ordinary language. In our state denomination, the Baptist Union of Victoria, 24% say it is hard to express it in ordinary language.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, NCLS research shows that younger generations of believers are more likely to experience this barrier of finding ordinary language to discuss faith.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the challenge is that Christianity has been part of the fabric of the West for so long that some Christians do not feel they really need to evangelise. The impacts of secularism, rationalism and material prosperity appear to have muted the voice of many Christians.

One could argue that the issue is not a crisis of confidence but rather a blind spot. Have Christians simply moved their focus away from the historic practise of proclaiming the Gospel? Have the theological institutions kept it on their radar? Back in 1989 William Abraham argued:

One of the undeniable features of modern theology is the scant attention it has given to the topic of evangelism. It is virtually impossible to find a critical, in-depth study of the subject by a

major theologian. ... I consider it nothing short of a disaster that evangelism has been relegated to the fringes of modern critical theology.<sup>9</sup>

Are we now reaping the fruit of a long-term focus on other aspects of theology rather than the foundation of sharing the good news of Jesus so that the faith moves from generation to generation in a culturally relevant way? It is easy to identify influences outside the church that are speeding its decline, but we also need to consider contributing factors within the church and what the church is failing to do. Fulton Charles and Jim Lemler make this suggestion:

It is the nature of systematic decline to deny the decline itself...Blame is directed outward as long as possible, blaming culture, the national church and enemy group...When the denial can no longer be focussed outward, blame focuses within the denomination.<sup>10</sup>

The shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity internationally from the West into the developing world is not a matter of geography or economics. It relates to the way that the gospel is being handled in the developing nations. It is also reflected in the vitality and growing influence of non-Western Christianity. One can see this in the joy of African Christian worship, the fervency of Korean church prayer life, and the dynamism of evangelism in Latin American Pentecostalism and Indian rural house churches. Parallel to this is the perceived decline of Western Christianity, in the face of powerful secularist and liberal pressures within an increasingly post-Christian milieu.<sup>11</sup>

### **Stimulus for a Fresh Approach**

It is in this context that I, Dale, sought to develop a new tool and process to place into the hands of average Australian Christians to embolden them towards an engaged evangelistic experimentation. Crossway Baptist

bravely supported and trialled the initiative. The words of J. Oswald Sanders were encouraging to step out and develop the resource: “A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.”<sup>12</sup> Ralph Winter was also an encouragement with his words: “Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal.”<sup>13</sup> The risks – finances and time outlaid, and the possibility of failure – were shadowed by the goal to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ being shared more freely in relational and adaptive environments by average Australian Christians.

For an effective and relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith, a tool was needed that was both relational and assisted with proclamation. Such a tool needed to instil confidence in the Christian or they were unlikely to use it in the first place. Harvey Cox notes, “The main stimulus for the renewal of Christianity will come from the bottom and from the edge, from sectors of the Christian world that are on the margins.”<sup>14</sup> The aim was to develop a relational tool that empowers the average Christian, from the grassroots of our churches, to share their faith. The tool, at its best, would help Christians to explore faith questions, have faith conversations and share the gospel with the aim of leading people to faith in Christ.

The genesis of the initiative came a few years ago when I, Dale, felt God put on my heart the idea to invite some businessmen friends to get together for “God conversations.” My plan was to invite them to a space of conversation, where they could literally ask anything they wanted. The men were not involved in church. But as we met we had amazing conversations about faith, life and everything. In that first group, six people put their faith in

Christ as a result of God touching them through our conversation based around their questions.

### **Ask Anything**

Inspired by their response, and with the backing of Crossway, we developed an “Ask Anything” DVD resource and invited people at Crossway to give it a try. Many Crossway members invited neighbors, friends and family to get together over faith conversations and explore their questions. In that first trial, thirty-three Ask Anything groups met and more people came to faith.<sup>15</sup> The remainder of this article discusses the basis and methodology of “Ask Anything”, and points to other directions it is going.

#### **1. “Ask Anything” uses Pre-Alpha Question-based Content**

We are advocates and users of Alpha as a terrific initiative for inviting people to explore faith in a relational context, but often people need something pre-Alpha.

The opening session of Alpha is entitled “Who is Jesus?” and is followed by a session entitled “Why did he die on the cross?” This is an excellent entry point for those who are ready to explore Jesus Christ. Within Australia there are many who are grappling with a set of issues that come prior to this conversation. They are wrestling with whether God exists and if he exists why he allows so much suffering and evil. They are not at all convinced that the Bible is a reliable document and they may well never have considered the claims of Jesus. Jon Seeley, former National Director of Alpha Australia, noted that Alpha offices were called on a weekly basis with enquiries as to whether there is a pre-Alpha course addressing more basic issues.<sup>16</sup> “Ask Anything” is deliberately placed into that pre-Alpha space.

The purpose of the Ask Anything DVD Series is to create a resource that can be used by Australian Christians as a discussion starter for faith based conversations, beginning with the primary question “Is there a God?” This comes out of a conviction that Alpha begins further down the track than many Australians are in their journey towards faith in Christ. That said, Alpha is the premier evangelistic tool internationally and it is somewhat presumptuous to seek to improve such a tool but nonetheless, there is a gap that can be filled.

There are other courses that have been developed and released since Alpha that use similar principles and methods to Alpha. Some of these (Start!, Y Course, and Essence) start earlier – with less assumptions about what people already know or are interested in exploring.<sup>17</sup> In the Western world, we need more paths and processes, courses and media that invite people – at different stages – to consider and explore Christianity. Mark Ireland, a writer who investigated Alpha and other similar programs, commented that a number of writers are putting creative effort into developing new courses, and they tend to have good results and are often more fruitful than the more widely published “pre-packaged” courses.<sup>18</sup> It pays to produce locally appropriate material. “Ask Anything” is not limited to Australia, but it is a local Australian resource.

Given that the Alpha series begins squarely with Jesus and an explanation of the Gospel, the “Ask Anything” series begins with some more foundational questions. These form the titles of each session:

1. Is there a God?<sup>19</sup>
2. Why does God allow suffering?
3. God and Evil?
4. Is the Bible reliable?
5. Is Jesus worth considering

Through personal experience of running Alpha 12 times I was aware that these are questions that people often have. I have also encountered these questions in conversations I have had with pre-Christian Australians. Further, I checked my observations with Alpha Australia. With confirmation of the centrality of these questions coming from all quarters, I prepared the “Ask Anything” series themes accordingly.

“Ask Anything” is committed to a thoroughly question-driven format. Alpha material is presented in ten sessions, often with video-based teaching, but followed by time and space for conversation, questions and debate. Nicky Gumbel, designer of Alpha, teaches that in this small group discussion space participants are encouraged to “ask anything.”<sup>20</sup>

Critics of Alpha suggest the space for questions is not broad enough. For example, Martyn Percy questions whether Alpha gives sufficient space for exploring the “paradoxes” and breadth of the gospel, and claims there is minimal space to think about and vent on concerns.<sup>21</sup> Charles Freebury suggests many churches struggle to get people to come to Alpha and similar courses, and then a number of people drop out, because they do not address questions that people are asking.<sup>22</sup> The breadth of the questions depends as much on the participants, and the freedom group leaders allow, as on the content. The small group space of Alpha is designed to address and explore whatever issues and questions people bring. However, it is staged after teaching, often from pre-recorded video presentations, and Ireland concedes there is sometimes the need for more open-ended space for questions at a pre-Alpha stage – to start with the agenda of the enquirer rather than the evangelist.<sup>23</sup>

As a resource for Alpha, or a possible follow-up course, Nicky Gumbel has written on the seven most popular or heated questions that come up for Alpha participants. In descending order of frequency the questions are:

1. Why does God allow suffering?
2. Do all religions lead to God?
3. Is there anything wrong with sex outside of marriage?
4. What about the New Age?
5. Homosexuality
6. Science and Christianity
7. The Trinity<sup>24</sup>

These have overlap with the “Ask Anything” set questions, although those five questions are more basic. Gumbel’s questions do address other religions (both in general and specifically New Age) and issues of sexuality (both sex before marriage and homosexuality), which are points of interest for many Australians. I, Dale, in retrospect believe now that I should have also done a message on “Jesus and Sexuality”. This is such a major theme in our society and was one of the points of feedback. Nevertheless, the foundational aspect of “Ask Anything” is that it is a question-based format, and starts at a pre-Alpha level with minimal assumptions about people’s awareness about Jesus.

## **2. “Ask Anything” is Relational**

The advance of the gospel in the West will primarily be through average Christians and through open and transparent relationships. Only in this way will we begin to bring together what our culture has divided, the private and public. The lay members of the church clearly belong to the public and secular world, whereas the pastors belong to the separate, “religious” world.<sup>25</sup> Trust is already low with professionals who carry a message. The credibility of personal experience and personal thought carried through relational channels, as is done in “Ask Anything”, is far more powerful.



Therefore methodology of any effective tool that is to be used by Australian Christians must provide a relationally integrated model. Steve Addison puts it this way, “The most reliable predictor of conversion is relationships, especially pre-existing, positive relationships.”<sup>26</sup> Lewis Rambo similarly suggests:

Changing to a new religious orientation takes place through what sociologists call kinship and friendship networks of one sort or another. ... People who convert or change religions usually do so through personal contact, and not through impersonal methods.<sup>27</sup>

The resource “Ask Anything” was envisioned to be facilitated in a relationally driven model, namely, Christians clustering with their pre-Christian friends, preferably over food.

People inspire people. As T S Elliot put it, “The greatest proof of Christianity for others is not how far a man can logically analyse his reasons for believing, but how far in practice he will stake his life on his belief.”<sup>28</sup> Part of the genius of Alpha is that the course is highly relational. Course participants enjoy a meal together on a weekly basis and have a weekend retreat in the middle of the course. The impact of this dynamic ought not to be underestimated.

Ireland suggest that people are not convinced about Christianity because someone with authority explains it, but when they can see it demonstrated in the life of believers and a Christian community.<sup>29</sup> In postmodern times, the integrity of the messenger is as or more important than the integrity of the message, at least from the perspective of most pre-Christians. The challenge to this is that the Good news of Jesus does actually have content not just relational demonstration. A person may well become convinced of the potential of a changed life by seeing a different life in community but they will only be convinced of the Gospel when they have heard the reason for the changed life! It was Socrates who said, “The

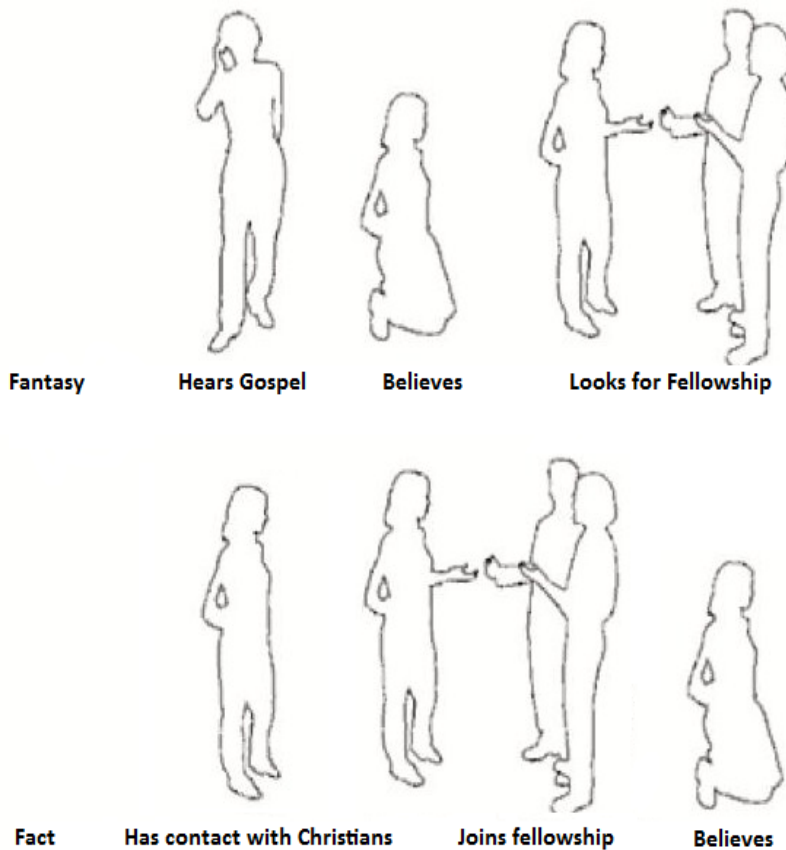
unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>30</sup> By clustering for “Ask Anything”, pre-Christian people may well “see” the way that Christians treat each other and they will also engage with them in Gospel related issues.

We are convinced that the axiom “The heart is only as open as the person is socially placed” is true.<sup>31</sup> If a person is able to cluster with people that they trust and can relate to, the heart invariably opens. If they are amongst a group of people with whom they do not trust or cannot particularly relate then the heart remains firmly closed to the message that is being communicated. While this principle is not erudite it is generally true. Hence the significance of the Alpha weekend too. The deepening of the relational network via a shared experience is part of the genius of Alpha and it is no surprise that the weekend away is a highlight for many and an important element for those who come to faith.<sup>32</sup>

Mark Ireland explains that Alpha and other similar courses are fruitful because they understand that conversion is not an event but a process and usually takes time, and that belonging will usually precede believing.<sup>33</sup>

People are hungry for community and relationship. People who are involved in spontaneous movements around the world learn the values of the Kingdom by firsthand participation. Church becomes a way of life: Discipleship and growth occur naturally, as everyone develops their gifts and learns by doing under the mentoring of spiritual fathers and mothers.<sup>34</sup> Understanding this exposes the inadequacy of some older models. Herb Miller puts forward a model that seemingly ignores relationship, suggesting that evangelism is about:

1. Being the Word – the influence of the Christian’s spiritual quality and example.
2. Doing the Word – the influence of the Christian’s loving acts toward other people.



**Figure: Belonging Before Believing<sup>39</sup>**

3. Saying the Word – the influence of the Christian’s verbal communication with those outside the Church.<sup>36</sup>

Miller suggests that Christians’ spiritual quality, loving acts and verbal communication influence people, but there is no reference to relationships. We could be spiritual people, mow our neighbour’s front lawn every week, and spin the odd verbal foray in their direction about their need for Jesus, but not actually engage in a relational way. There is a profound difference between “being, doing and saying” words, and the most powerful Gospel door-opener – having a relationship! It is relationships that are by far more powerful for the advance of the Gospel because relationships open the

heart. Jesus walks into a person's life over the bridge of relationship and the opportunity to talk about Jesus.

"Ask Anything" needs to be relational to provide a safe context for Christians to feel confident to invite their pre-Christian friends.

### **3. "Ask Anything" is Viral in the Hands of the People**

"Ask Anything" is designed to be put into the hands of God's people and go viral. Steve Addison has given a helpful summary of the traits that mark viral movements around the world both today and historically. The five traits are White Hot Faith, Rapid Mobilisation, Commitment to the Cause, Relational Connectedness and Ability to Adapt. These traits are true of all effective movements. Any evangelistic methodology that is not cognizant of these principles will at best empower individuals but struggle to move from person to person in a viral sense. If the "Ask Anything" resource is going to have the potential of going viral it must tap into the above criteria.

Malcolm Gladwell illustrates that viral ideas are not an exclusively religious. The phenomena of something going viral can apply to something as simple as footwear. He illustrates it with the suede shoes called Hushpuppies. By 1994-95 the sales of Hushpuppies had declined to the point where there were only 30,000 sales annually. But then some youths began to buy them second-hand and they were integrated into some fashion shows. Following this, a celebrity was wearing them. By late 1995 sales skyrocketed to 450,000 pairs and then 1.8 million pairs in 1996.<sup>37</sup> It all began because some kids were wearing them because no one else would, and the idea spread from one person to the next. Hushpuppies went viral.

Frederick Buechner writes about the potential of spreading influence through one person touching another and passing it on: "The life I touch for

good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt?”<sup>38</sup>

We want to put the gospel and tools for sharing it into the hands of the people. There is nothing new in a vision for empowering the whole people of God for mission. Roland Allen stated back in the 1920s that if China was to be reached:

The first Christians who were converted by our labours understood clearly that they could by themselves, without any further assistance from us, not only convert their neighbours, but establish churches. That meant that the very first groups of converts must be so fully equipped with all spiritual authority that they could multiply themselves without any necessary reference to us.<sup>39</sup>

For the good news of Jesus to go viral it needs to reach a tipping point in the minds of Christians so that they can believe that they too can be involved in the spread of the Gospel.

These sorts of conversations are best hosted by everyday Christians rather than professional pastors. Julia Victoria posted a comment about the “Ask Anything” website pages:

The first sentence of the page ‘Why Ask Anything?’ is this: ‘Have you ever found yourself sitting next to a priest or a pastor at a social event and wanted to ask them about faith, life, the universe or anything?’ Well, now that you ask...no. But, I have sat with friends (some of whom are pastors) and wanted to hear their perspective on God, life, the universe and everything...The time of people seeing priests as people who they can trust and who they wish to discuss their big life questions with is slowly dying in the West. People want to take their questions to their friends, family or just anyone they trust. And that usually ain’t the pastor.

If we were relying on pastors to host these groups, that would place a significant limitation on their potential to spread. In the hands of everyday Christians, they have the capacity to spread virally.

Inasmuch as the good news of Jesus travels virally and through relational networks, by putting an easily accessible tool into the hands of Christians, hubs can be formed in the homes via relational networks.

There are several “ifs” associated with this type of viral transfer.

- If there is confidence that the good news about Jesus is worth sharing
- If there is a commitment to the cause of Jesus
- If there is a relational network in which to share the good news
- If there is rapid mobilisation of those who have enjoyed an “Ask Anything” group
- If the product can be used in an adaptable way.

These are the core issues that will determine whether “Ask Anything” has the capacity to go viral in Australia.

Accessibility and cultural connection are essential. If a tool is going to be put into the hands of Australian Christians for their use in spreading the gospel then it must evoke confidence in the Christian. If there is no confidence then there will be no spread. If it touches the heart and captivates the mind and is easily transferrable then the concept may well spread.

“There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world: and that is an idea whose time has come,” said Victor Hugo.<sup>40</sup> For an idea to take off it has to go viral. This is exactly what happened with the news about Jesus in the first century. It was an idea that had the capacity to be taken up by anyone, anywhere, anytime. For the good news of Jesus to go viral in Australia there will need to be a break from the traditional facility-based church evangelism model. The gospel needs to be placed into the hands of the people of God, and resources that are simple, transferable and accessible will help its spread.

#### **4. “Ask Anything” is a Simple and Transferrable Format**

Martin Robinson states that where the gospel goes viral communities form that “are small, fluid, organic, reproducible and most of all

simple; so simple that any believer would respond by saying ‘I could do that.’”<sup>41</sup> Christians who hear about the concept of the “Ask Anything” series need to feel that they could do it. It is within their reach and capacity.

In contrast to the present day Western world, where Christianity is often highly intellectualized and dispensed by professional clergy to a constituency increasingly confined to the middle class, in the early days of the church the faith was spontaneously spread by informal evangelists, and had its greatest appeal among the working class.<sup>42</sup>

Through “Ask Anything” Christians are encouraged to cluster with interested friends to have “God Conversations.” The invitation is to be up front, “Would you be interested in getting together with a few of us for some food and God conversations?” Those that choose to gather are with their own relational network. The gathering happens along with food. The tool to get the ball rolling in the conversation is a brief session from the “Ask Anything” DVD. This format is not accidental nor is it an attempt to be minimalist. It is far more pragmatic and strategic than that.

Based on the earlier stated axiom, “The heart is only as open as the individual feels socially placed,” the format for an “Ask Anything” group is designed to reduce barriers to open conversation. Alpha has very successfully employed such a model. Any venue or environment that will therefore allow for free-flow of relationship and conversation is a suitable venue for an “Ask Anything” group.

## **5. “Ask Anything” is Accessible**

Jesus issues a revolutionary call to fight for the hearts and imagination of people. Our weapons of faith, hope and love also embrace reason and relationship. For those of us who embrace the cause of Christ, the cost to participate in the mission of God is nothing short of all that we are and

everything we have.<sup>43</sup> However, it is important to make space for communicating the invitation of the gospel in accessible ways. The gospel is costly, but hearing about it should not be.

“Ask Anything” is designed to be accessible for Christians and their pre-Christian friends to cluster together for food and a God conversation. The formation of these hubs was not too difficult. The trial program showed there was a “believability” in the minds of Christians that they can do it. The simplicity of the model was intrinsic to this outcome. Part of the encouragement to Christians to use this resource is its accessibility. It is promoted by saying:

If you are willing to cluster your friends with an upfront invitation to a gathering around food for ‘God conversations’ and are willing to play the DVD, then your task is to simply ask, ‘Well what do you think?’ Then put some food in your mouth and smile.

People believed that they could do that and they embarked on some of the most powerful God conversations that they have ever had with their friends.

The length of each presentation is also deliberately short, about ten minutes. This enhances the adaptability of the tool. A lunchtime group at a school or workplace can also manage a short DVD and conversation in a 30-45 minute break. This allows for conversation to be maximised since the group does not need to sit through a 30-45 minute presentation, as is the case with the standard Alpha talks. It also allows for flexibility of timing because people do not need a significant amount of time to be available to facilitate such a conversation. Some feedback has asked for the sessions to be longer, for example: “I reckon you can easily expand the talks to 20 minutes and still keep the audience engaged.”<sup>44</sup> But others were very encouraged by the shortness of the DVD and indicated that there was enough in the short presentation to precipitate lively conversation.



## **6. “Ask Anything” is Interactive**

“Ask Anything” starts with a question, which a short DVD explores, and then makes space for interactive discussion. We are convinced that questions and dialogue are among the most powerful tools for evangelism.

Jesus was a master at using questions. When asked about how one could find eternal life, he responded with, “Why do you call me good?” (Mark 10:17-18). When asked about the payment of taxes, he responded with “Whose portrait is this?” (Matt 22:17-20). When asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, he responded with “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt 12:9-12). Answering a question with a question was normal for Jesus. In fact a clear, concise, direct answer was a rarity.<sup>45</sup> Jesus used questions extensively to draw people in and cause open engagement.

The Apostle Paul demonstrated a verbal dexterity that was clearly interactive. In Acts 17 we read of his activities in Thessalonica:

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said (Acts 17:2-3).

Here we see the Apostle reasoning, explaining and proving. While the nature of a first century Jewish dialogue would look different to a twenty-first century Western dialogue, the point remains that he was interacting with the people over gospel issues.

The intent with “Ask Anything” is to provoke conversation with a combination of rational thought, biblical revelation and emotive nuance. It is hoped that conversation will be provoked by each presentation. The feedback from the sample group of 1500 participants was overwhelmingly supportive of the capacity of this concept to provoke conversation. One participant gave the following feedback:

There was certainly no worries re discussion ‘firing’ up as we had to stop your 10 minute, excellently produced, DVD a few times due to questions and ‘interesting’ points being quite ‘noisily’ raised! ... It was amazing how this opened up people.<sup>46</sup>

“Ask Anything” not only promotes the asking of questions but creates an environment of interactive open dialogue around faith issues.

## **7. “Ask Anything” offers a Simple but not Simplistic Message**

The design of “Ask Anything” is careful to communicate the gospel in simple but not simplistic terms. Moltmann comments, “What cannot be said simply does not need to be written at all. Simplicity is the highest challenge to Christian theology.”<sup>47</sup> The good news of Jesus is not complicated but neither is it simplistic. It does, however, need to be communicated in such a way that the hearer understands. Paul declared: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Romans 10:17). Faith does not come from an unintelligible message but one that the mind grasps and the heart can embrace. “Ask Anything” seeks to provide enough to provoke the mind and stir the heart but it is not designed to be conclusive. Nor is it designed to be used without relational group interaction.

In session one of “Ask Anything,” the content is a mixture of a philosophical and apologetic interaction with science. This will appeal to a certain mindset. Sessions two and three are an entirely different approach and are likely to be more accessible to a broader group of people. It is likely that sessions four and five introduce new information to the pre-Christian person. Feedback certainly affirmed this. The topic of “Why does God allow suffering?” caused release of emotion in many groups and caused a binding effect in the group dynamic early in the formation of group dynamics. This was perceived as a very positive thing by leaders that provided verbal feedback.

Authenticity is a crucial factor for postmodern communication of the gospel. Robert Warren points out that there is a shift from “authority to authenticity” as one of the enriching trends in evangelism.<sup>48</sup> “Ask Anything” is designed to foster space for authentic exploration of faith questions.

The DVDs are not designed to be definitive on such topics as “Does God Exist?” or “Why does God allow suffering?” These topics have challenged humanity since time began. What they are designed to do is to authentically open the conversation. They are not without substance nor are they without opinion. But neither are they designed to offer simplistic ultimate answer to complex questions.

Truthfully, “Ask Anything” addresses huge questions that can be explored from multiple angles. Often the best way to respond to these big questions, when pre-Christian seekers ask them, is with another question. As mentioned above, this was Jesus’ interactive style. Socrates used it too. And it is popular with Quakers and spiritual directors. Youth Dimension (YD) trains volunteers and staff who are running outreach programs in schools and school holiday programs to always respond to someone who asks a question, “That’s an interesting question, what makes you ask that?” Julia Rhyder explains that what YD understand is that faith questions call for a pastoral response, and do not always look for a facts to download from “the expert.”<sup>49</sup> In response to questions about issues such as suffering sometimes people long for a shoulder to cry on, not just a head to give them an intellectual response.

To avoid being simplistic, and to maintain authenticity, sometimes it is appropriate for Christians to admit that they too struggle with questions and do not always know the answers. Darrell Guder quotes the Stuttgart Statement to underline the importance of listening to where people are coming from, and sharing authentically from one’s own experience:

It has to be emphasized that we can only communicate the gospel to people if we open ourselves to them and enable them

to open themselves to us. This means that listening to them is crucial in the sharing of the gospel with them; we cannot share the gospel without sharing ourselves. ... Does not the credibility of our evangelism, to some extent at least, depend on the authenticity of our own lives? Can we evangelize others without becoming vulnerable ourselves?<sup>50</sup>

On a similar theme, campus evangelist Rick Richardson comments, “In the past, being an expert and having the answers were what built credibility and a hearing. Today, having the same questions, struggles and hurts is what builds credibility and gains a hearing.”<sup>51</sup> Sincere seekers are often curious to explore answers to their questions. Nevertheless, it is also crucial for Christians to declare and empathise with pre-Christian seekers that we are all on a journey of seeking and understanding faith together, albeit perhaps at different stages.

### **8. “Ask Anything” is Part of a Journey**

The journey metaphor is much used these days to describe the process or pathway for a person to develop his or her personal convictions. It has also been effectively picked up by Christians to describe their own stories. There are many good things about the journey metaphor. It encourages allowing a person time and space to process his or her thinking and feelings about the gospel, Jesus and himself or herself. It validates the reality of people’s experience. It is less confrontational and possibly a little more socially sensitive than a “decide now” event.

The weakness, however, of a journey metaphor is that it may never precipitate a decision at all. Especially in postmodern times, we need to allow grace and space for people to explore questions, to see the reality and influence of faith in the lives of Christians and church community, and to process their thinking and response to Jesus. This takes time. But the gospel also invites and calls people to a place of faith commitment or decision to follow Christ. In acknowledging the importance of “journey,” we do want to acknowledge that

some of the journey that has “been secured;” hence the significance of a decision for Christ or witnessing to that fact by being baptised. It is at these clear points of decision that a person is able to note that they have secured a portion of their journey and they are able to move forward from that point. The “Ask Anything” series is designed to help people along their journey towards faith in Jesus Christ, but it is aiming for the destination of coming to and growing in faith.

This article outlines the methodology of “Ask Anything” but does not detail the leadership training that accompanied it at Crossway. Training in small group dynamics and evangelism were important for the success of the groups, but the church largely used Alpha training for the purposes of equipping Ask Anything group leaders.<sup>52</sup> Group leader training is part of the DVD resource.

Christians were encouraged to invite their pre-Christian friends together for food and “God conversations.” Over 300 people were trained in Alpha-like group dynamics and 65 new groups were planted where Christians invited their pre-Christian friends. A further 100 Christian groups used the materials as an effective tool for up-skilling their thinking patterns on the themes addressed. Over 1500 people participated through this initiative.

When Crossway trialled “Ask Anything” groups with the DVD resource, a number of people reported that there were first time commitments to Christ in their groups. For example, one group facilitator wrote: “It is with great excitement that I share with you the news that two ladies we know had made a personal commitment to follow Christ. For one of these ladies it was during the Ask Anything series. Each week the topics were so relevant to her and then one evening at church she accepted Christ.”<sup>53</sup> For some it assisted with their journey towards Christ, for example: “One of the husbands who is actually a pre-Christian... expressed that the series really made him think

about his journey and that it cleared up some of the issues he was thinking about.”<sup>54</sup>

The purpose of the series was to empower Christians to have faith conversations with their pre-Christian friends, but there were some that simply used it to improve their knowledge base. This was not the purpose but it is important for believers who are not ready to gather with their pre-Christian friends to have an opportunity to be exposed to the materials; for their own discipleship’s sake and in the hope that they might gather more purposefully in the future with their friends who do not yet know Jesus.

Moreover, Alpha participation at Crossway jumped after the “Ask Anything” series. Key facilitator, Fiona Hall, commented that she believed something shifted in the attitude of the Christians towards inviting their pre-Christian friends as a result of the series.<sup>55</sup>

Another thing worthy of note is that in the subsequent 3 years after running “Ask Anything” Crossway Baptist Church witnessed nearly 1000 people make a first time commitment to Christ. We also saw 477 people baptised over 3 years (compared to 62 baptisms in the full year before). These were not all converts from the “Ask Anything” series but some were. Others who had become Christians along the way somehow felt that it was time for them to witness to their faith in Christ at this time. It could be purely coincidental that Crossway experienced its largest baptism response in history within six months of the series concluding with ninety-three people being baptised on Easter Sunday, but it could also be connected to the Church demonstrating missional intent and faith too.

The majority of participants were impressed with the content of the videos, for example: “The five 10-minute [DVDs] are excellent in content – I believe your talks are very insightful, concise, yet powerful enough to cause all

viewers to think carefully about why they believe what they believe (or why they have not yet considered Jesus seriously).”<sup>56</sup>

Additional resources were placed online on the Crossway website under “watch sermons” where there is a button for “Ask Anything.” Both sermons and discussion panels on the five themes are freely available there. Pastors who have chosen to preach the series were also offered free access to the original sermon notes developed at Crossway.

### **Further Development of “Ask Anything”**

“Ask Anything” quickly spread and has been trialled in other churches. School chaplains have also trialled it as a potential tool. As well as other churches using the resource, the idea has spread to a website and radio. For radio, there is a series of one-minute radio spots with me, Dale, speaking in response to common questions. Focus on the Family Australia has run a series of interviews with Dale too. The website <[www.askanything.com.au](http://www.askanything.com.au)> has space for people to send their questions and vote for what questions they feel are most important. The site then posts answers to the questions most commonly asked. The DVDs can be ordered online there too.

Radio spots and the website are helpful resources to invite a broader “audience” to engage with their questions. But the main hope is that these extra platforms will promote more “Ask Anything” groups. The ultimate use of the resources is not reliant on the wisdom and erudition of the DVD speaker, but on the conversations in workplace and home “Hubs” where Christians can invite their pre-Christian friends to explore questions about faith authentically. “Ask Anything” has been fruitful and will hopefully continue to foster fruitful evangelism, and its development shows the importance of good quality and thoughtful *locally* produced evangelistic resources.

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- <sup>1</sup> Conversation with Dale Stephenson.
- <sup>2</sup> Philip Hughes and Stephen Reid (eds.), *All Melbourne Matters: Research of the Whole Church in Melbourne for the Future of the Church and the City* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association and Transforming Melbourne, 2009), 30. stable.
- <sup>3</sup> Reggie McNeil, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Darren Cronshaw, Ruth Powell, and Sam Sterland, "Local Churches in Mission through Word and Deed: A Case Study of Baptist Churches in Victoria Using the National Church Life Survey," *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 5: 2 (December 2011), 12-22.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Lausanne Covenant, <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> 2011 NCLS Attender Survey drawing on 216063 Australian attenders and 8830 BUV attenders. Discussed further in Darren Cronshaw, Ruth Powell, Nicole Hancock, Sam Sterland and Stacey Wilson, "Churches who share their Faith: a profile of the Baptist Union of Victoria", NCLS vitality paper (in process for 2014 publication).
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, Sandra Moore, Ruth Powell, Keith Castle, and Marilyn Correy. *Mission under the Microscope: Keys to Effective Sustainable Mission* (Sydney: Openbook, 1995), 61.
- <sup>9</sup> William J Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1, 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Fulton Charles and Jim Lemler, quoted in David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 23.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Chilcote & Lacey C Warner, *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2008).
- <sup>12</sup> Cited in Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing faith where life happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1985); cited in Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 179.
- <sup>15</sup> Dale Stephenson, "Ask Anything", Crossway Blog, Friday, March 15, 2013, <http://crosswayblog.blogspot.com.au/2013/03/ask-anything.html>, accessed 30 December, 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> Jon Seeley, conversation with Dale Stephenson, 2011.
- <sup>17</sup> Mark Ireland, "Alpha", in *Evangelism – Which way now?*, edited by Mike Booker & Mark Ireland (London, UK: Church House, 2005), 14.
- <sup>18</sup> Mark Ireland, "Other Courses – Or Write your Own?", in *Evangelism – Which way now?*, edited by Mike Booker & Mark Ireland (London, UK: Church House, 2005), 48-62.
- <sup>19</sup> Another interesting way of addressing this is to ask the open-ended questions "What makes you think on a good day that there might be a God?" and "What makes you think on a bad day that there can't be a God?" Suggested in Ireland, "Other Courses", 58.
- <sup>20</sup> Nicky Gumbel, *Telling Others* (Kingsway, 1994, 2001), 60, discussed in Ireland, "Alpha", 28.
- <sup>21</sup> Martyn Percy, "'Join-the-dots' Christianity", review in *Religion & Theology*, 3, 1997, 15-16, cited in Ireland, "Alpha", 27-28.
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Freebury, *Alpha or Emmaus?: Assessing Today's Top Evangelistic Courses* (Somerset: Higher Severalls House, 2005, 22, 32-34, available from the author by email [Charles.freebury@tesco.net](mailto:Charles.freebury@tesco.net), discussed in, Ireland, "Other Courses", 59.
- <sup>23</sup> Ireland, "Other Courses", 61.



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- <sup>24</sup> Gumbel, *Searching Issues: The Seven Most Common Questions Raised in the Alpha Course*; cf. Freebury, 35; S Hunt, *Anyone for Alpha?: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Society* (London: DLT, 2001), 76; Ireland, “Other Courses”, 59.
- <sup>25</sup> David J Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Towards a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995) 59.
- <sup>26</sup> Steve Addison, *Movements that Change the World* (Smyrna, DE: Missional Press, 2009) 75.
- <sup>27</sup> Lewis Rambo, quoted in Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*, 13.
- <sup>28</sup> Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 101.
- <sup>29</sup> Mark Ireland, “Engaging with the Search for Spirituality”, in *Evangelism – Which way now?*, edited by Mike Booker & Mark Ireland (London, U.K.: Church House, 2005) 185.
- <sup>30</sup> Socrates, in Plato, *Dialogues, Apology*, quoted by Will McRaney Jr., *The Art of Personal Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2003), 11.
- <sup>31</sup> This has been a personal mantra for many years for me (Dale).
- <sup>32</sup> Fiona Hall, Asia Pacific Director of Training for Alpha, conversation with Dale Stephenson, 2011.
- <sup>33</sup> Ireland, “Alpha”, 17-18.
- <sup>34</sup> Larry Kreider and Floyd McClung, *Starting a House Church: A New Model for Living Out Your Faith* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007), 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Ireland, “Alpha”, 18; drawing on John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does it Happen* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992).
- <sup>36</sup> Herb Miller, *Evangelism’s Open Secrets* (St. Louis, Missouri: Bethany, 1977) 12.
- <sup>37</sup> Michael Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Hackett Book Group, 2002), 4.
- <sup>38</sup> Cole, *Organic Church*, 159.
- <sup>39</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene, Origen: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 1.
- <sup>40</sup> Cited in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 165.
- <sup>41</sup> Martin Robinson, *Planting Mission Shaped Churches Today* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2006), 38.
- <sup>42</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 172.
- <sup>43</sup> Erwin McManus, *The Barbarian Way* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 5.
- <sup>44</sup> Email to Dale Stephenson, 23/6/11
- <sup>45</sup> Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI Kregel, 2004), 27.
- <sup>46</sup> This feed-back was emailed through by the leader of an “Ask Anything” Seeker Group held in his home and facilitated through Crossway Baptist Church.
- <sup>47</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Open Church* (London: SCM, 1978), 9.
- <sup>48</sup> Stephen Cottrell and Robert Warren, Springboard Travelling School of Evangelism, Lichfield Diocese, March 2001, quoted in Mark Ireland, “Engaging with the Search for Spirituality”, in *Evangelism – Which way now?*, edited by Mike Booker & Mark Ireland (London, UK: Church House, 2005), 185.
- <sup>49</sup> Julia Rhyder, Facebook message to Darren Cronshaw, 31/12/2013
- <sup>50</sup> Stuttgart Statement, 214, quoted in Darrell L Guder, “Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission”, in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, edited by Paul Chilcote & Lacey C Warner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 181-182.
- <sup>51</sup> Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 48; discussed in Kim Hammond and Darren

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Cronshaw. *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 121-123.

<sup>52</sup> Training in outreach and evangelism is important if Australian churches are going to become more evangelistically active. NCLS shows that only 13% of all Australian local churches who participated in the survey provided training in outreach/evangelism in the two years prior to 2011, and for BUV churches the figure was less at 9%. Darren and Powell et. al, "Churches who share their Faith".

<sup>53</sup> Email to Dale Stephenson, 22/11/10.

<sup>54</sup> Email to Dale Stephenson, 17/11/10.

<sup>55</sup> Fiona Hall, conversation with Dale Stephenson, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Email to Dale Stephenson, 23/6/11.

## RECLAIMING EVANGELISM FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

Heather Lear<sup>1</sup>

### Observations on the State of Evangelism and the Local Church

Within months of graduating seminary and beginning my first appointment as a United Methodist pastor, I realized that I was not equipped to lead a church in the cultural climate of the twenty-first century. I knew how to preach a decent sermon, teach a Bible study that required critical thinking, and provide nurturing pastoral care. I knew how to develop programs and create meaningful worship and fellowship experiences. Yet my appointment was to a church that rarely received visitors and had lost connection with the community. The ministry model and tools that I received in seminary felt quite inadequate for serving this congregation.

After a few years of signing up for any and every continuing education opportunity that sounded like it might help my leadership, I discovered a Doctor of Ministry track that entirely focused on my missing skill set of how to engage the twenty-first century world. It was my work in this program and my desire to share what I had learned with others struggling with the same questions that led me to apply for my current role as Director of Evangelism Ministries at the General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) of The United Methodist Church (UMC).

As Director of Evangelism Ministries, my job description is determined by the Book of Discipline, our denominational law book.<sup>1</sup> In addition to providing oversight of the evangelism ministries of the UMC and setting a theological basis for personal, corporate, and social aspects of evangelism, I also provide resources for local churches, relate to denominational and ecumenical associations, and work with our seminaries

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and professors of evangelism.<sup>2</sup> The thirteen tasks listed under my office were originally assigned to the staff of the evangelism department.<sup>3</sup> However, with budget cuts and the compartmentalization of ministry, I remain as the sole member of the evangelism department.

As I traveled across the country over the past year, the lack of education in evangelism became quite evident. Many pastors who have been leading congregations for more than ten years were primarily trained to be chaplains for their parishioners and to run attractional, program ministries. Large numbers of our pastors and denominational leaders have never taken a course in evangelism, as it only became a required course for ordination in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in our evolving world and current cultural climate, practical, contextual evangelism training is critical.

The confusion and lack of understanding surrounding evangelism should not be surprising considering my office is just one of thirteen specialized ministry areas in the Leadership Ministries Division at GBOD. At the general church level, we model compartmentalization of ministry to the local church. Evangelism has been boiled down to a set of tasks assigned to a committee or ministry team, and in some cases, is simply seen as the task of the pastor. The compartmentalization that exists at the general church level is mirrored in local churches.

With this lack of education, especially evident for United Methodists in how little reflection is done on how evangelism is to be understood out of the Wesleyan tradition, the way evangelism is defined by local churches varies dramatically across our connectional system in America. The Southeast tends to be informed by our fundamentalist brothers and sisters, while the Northeast and Pacific Northwest tend to avoid even using the word “evangelism” when engaging in ministry. When I began my position, I actually spent some time wrestling with the word “evangelism.” Is there too

much baggage attached to move forward, or should I just use another word entirely? My conclusion was to work at reclaiming evangelism. In fact, the title of my most recent training event in Memphis was “Reclaiming Evangelism.”

At the “Reclaiming Evangelism” event I shared with the participants that my reason for choosing this title was twofold. First, the fact that evangelism is good news needs to be reclaimed. At the beginning of most workshops I lead, I ask participants to finish the following sentence: “Evangelism is \_\_\_\_\_.” The answers that I receive are quite varied, with many answering the question in the negative, telling me what evangelism is not. As we then turn to see how the scriptures define evangelism, we look at Jesus' self-proclaimed mission statements found in Mark 1:13-14, Matthew 4:23, and Luke 4:43, the Prologue to the Gospel of John, and Jesus' final commissioning words to his disciples. Through this examination they begin to recognize that biblically goodness, not negativity, is associated with evangelism, and their views of evangelism begin to expand.

This expansion is my second reason for choosing to reclaim evangelism. As we dissect the Great Commission, evangelism can no longer be a program of the church or the task of one committee. The evangelistic task and charge given by Jesus is central and should inform all that happens in the life of a church. Yet this holistic approach that encompasses all Christians is a foreign idea not only to our laity, but many of our clergy. Once they recognize this idea, I then need to help them develop a framework for engaging the entire congregation in evangelism.

### **Evangelistic Emphases in the Local Church**

In helping leaders understand and evaluate their congregation's current evangelistic ministry, I have found Hal Knight's book, *Is There a Future for*

*God's Love* quite helpful. Knight illustrates the three different emphases of evangelical theology in the last two centuries: apologetics, transformation or church renewal, and missional.<sup>5</sup> He argues that when congregations focus on one emphasis to the exclusion of another, they miss an important part of the Great Commission. The apologetic concern, or orthodoxy, helps people to understand who God is and what God has done as Creator and Redeemer. Yet, when this is the sole approach, it can become too abstract and disconnected from the current cultural climate.<sup>6</sup> For many Christians who embrace evangelism, apologetics has become the predominant understanding and purpose of the Christian faith. It is about having the right beliefs and acting a certain way. Church leaders in Jesus' day taught faith through a complicated set of tasks and rules. Jesus simplified the message by boiling it down to two tasks: love God and love neighbor.

The renewal approach, or orthopraxy, enables people to grow in their relationship with Jesus and understand the church as the body of Christ, but without apologetics or mission, it can become too individualistic and inwardly focused. Renewal theology needs to be grounded in scripture and tradition, while examining God's activity in the world beyond the church walls. Renewal is concerned with transformation: transformation of individuals as they enter and grow in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ, transformation of churches, and transformation of local communities where churches are located. Without scriptural and missional grounding, this approach can become too individualistic and inwardly focused.<sup>7</sup>

The missional approach, or orthopathy, helps people understand how to live out their Christian life in the world, and participate in God's own mission to the world. However, engaging in mission without being grounded in God's revelation and in the transformation and new life offered through Jesus Christ might lead to moralism. People might not understand why they

are engaging the world and could operate out of motivations and principles contrary to the gospel. Jesus' leadership style and methodology for evangelism focused on the entire person. When asked to name the greatest command, Jesus responded by saying "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."<sup>8</sup> Jesus spent his time teaching, preaching, and healing, and he was concerned about the well-being of the whole person: physically, intellectually, and spiritually. He accepted people in their current situation, met their needs, and invited them to experience an alternative way of living defined by the Kingdom of God.

The integration of all three approaches is necessary for a faithful witness and to embody the Wesleyan call to grow in love of God and neighbor throughout one's life by God's grace. In my work with local churches, though, I have yet to find a church that has this holistic understanding and integration of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Most churches employ one of the approaches quite effectively, and some intentionally integrate two of the approaches. Part of my task is to help congregations evaluate their current ministry, determine which approach needs more focus and move them toward a more integrated practice.

### **Denominational Support for Congregations to Reclaim Evangelism**

Because many of our congregations require a significant paradigm shift, it is important to acknowledge that change and renewal is a process that takes time. There are no one-size-fits-all answers or approaches for all congregations. I often receive requests from local congregations for the one program or study that will solve all of their congregation's problems. My response is that I do not have the answer for their congregation, but I can help them to begin to ask the right questions. Real change is an investment. It takes

time for pastors and church leaders to do the work of really getting to know and understand their congregations, and to invest the needed time into discipleship and education. There is also a necessity for leaders at the local and conference levels to be patient with this process and not be overwhelmed by the pressure to produce increases in their statistical measurements immediately.<sup>9</sup>

The need for denominational officials to make space for local churches to move into a more authentic practice of evangelism is exemplified in my own denomination. In addition to the pressure to produce numbers in The United Methodist Church, there are the realities of the itinerant system in which pastors are moved by the bishop from one church to another. This can be jarring and requires time for the pastor and congregation to get to know each other before the two can undertake significant evangelistic work. For example, in my last move I went from being the pastor of a well-educated, two thousand member church, to being the pastor of a two hundred member, rural, family church over the course of just two days. I received no training or guidance on how to make the transition, yet was expected to walk in my first day ready to lead this dramatically different congregation. Pastors may try to overcome this sudden shift by working to implement programs and ministries that were successful at their previous churches, expecting the same results. However, this strategy almost never works well. This is especially true in terms of evangelism because of how contextual its practice is.

In my position I regularly dialogue with people at all levels of the Church, as well as with those serving on foundations, boards, agencies, and at educational institutions. As The United Methodist Church, we are a connectional system, but the flow of information and resources is experiencing significant blockages. Currently, there is not enough shared work and partnerships among these various entities. As a local church pastor, I



was quite unaware of the resources, ministries, and help available beyond my local area. The greater church would benefit tremendously from the collaboration of resources, expertise, and funding that could be possible through working across organizational boundaries. One obvious example in my work is finding ways to leverage our E. Stanley Jones Professors of Evangelism to help educate the generations of pastors who have never taken a class in evangelism and are currently struggling to lead churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another needed area of increased collaboration is with our ecumenical brothers and sisters. I currently serve on the task force to find ways to live out the Full Communion between the UMC and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Sharing financial, physical, and human resources, especially in our rural communities will be essential in mapping the future. I also serve on the Advisory Board of Evangelism Connections, an ecumenical group of Directors of Evangelism representing thirteen denominations. We are currently working to develop joint training events and encourage congregations from our communions to partner in serving their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Halfway through my second year as Director of Evangelism at GBOD, I am amazed by the needed work and education in evangelism, but I am also hopeful and excited about the possibilities. My experience has shown me that people are hungry and primed for change and growth. They just do not know where to start. My effort has been to make the vast number of disparate resources on evangelism visible and accessible on the local level.

The good news is that ultimately transformation is not my responsibility. Nor is it the job of our pastors or laity. God is the only one who can bring about transformation in the lives of individuals or in a community.

We simply need to be faithful to our transformative God. To be faithful means to provide opportunities and alternatives for people to experience the Kingdom of God in significant ways. To be faithful means being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and how God can use us to partner in ushering in the Kingdom of God in the community to which one has been called to serve. “Our task in the present is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Discipline* is the instrument by which United Methodists govern themselves. Every four years, General Conference, the legislative body of the UMC, amends, perfects, and clarifies the *Discipline*.

<sup>2</sup> The Evangelism Responsibilities are found in ¶ 1112 of *The Book of Discipline*.

<sup>3</sup> At its formation, GBOD was actually called the Board of Evangelism, and employed over forty evangelists. Ten years ago, there were seven people working in the Evangelism department.

<sup>4</sup> Some annual conferences required candidates for ordained ministry to complete an evangelism course prior to 2004, but it did not become a disciplinary requirement until the 2004 General Conference.

<sup>5</sup> Henry H. Knight III, *Is There a Future for Love* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Knight, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Knight, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:27

<sup>9</sup> Many United Methodist annual conferences require pastors to regularly submit their weekly attendance, professions of faith, small group participation, mission involvement, and what percentage of their apportionments have been paid.

<sup>10</sup> N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper One, 1989) 30.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Cordeiro, Wayne, with Francis Chan & Larry Osborne. *Sifted: Pursuing Growth through Trials, Challenges, and Disappoints*. Exponential Series. Grand Rapids: Zondervan and Leadership Network, 2012. 213 pages.

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Every two years I book in for a full physical medical check-up, especially now as I get older. My need for a more regular spiritual and relationship check-up is just as important. Reading *Sifted* has been a welcome recent check-up.

Wayne Codeiro is founding pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu and a network of 114+ other church plants in Hawaii and abroad. He shares out of his experience of almost four decades of ministry and a strong commitment to developing emerging leaders. Writing with input from innovative pastors Francis Chan (author of *Crazy Love*) and Larry Osborne (author of *Sticky Teams*), the result is a highly practical and personal ministry resource. *Sifted* is part of the Exponential series, focused on resourcing the needs and diversity of church planters and leaders.

The book reads a bit like a microscope to examine three parts of a leader's life, or a scalpel to cut back the garbage and get to the heart of three issues, with four chapters for each issue. It addresses the experience of leaders being sifted and growing stronger while they are being stretched. The theme of the book is the need for holistic leadership health and diligent personal care, without which ministry is likely not to be as fruitful or lasting as its potential.

First, Codeiro invites an examination of the reader's heart. Reading these chapters on trials, purpose, expectations and criticism, and seeking God out of weakness challenged me to ask, "What are my motives? Am I prepared

to leave behind my preoccupation with success? Where does my urge to compare most appear? In what ways does God want to work in me before God works through me? What do I do with criticism targeted at me or my family? Why do I seek to meet too many people's expectations and hate disappointing people?" Codeiro says the two greatest days are the day you are born and the day you discover what you are born for. Our accountability to God is not to manically do lots of things, but to do discern the unique things God calls us to and do that (regardless of whether our own personal drive or the unrealistic expectations of others suggest otherwise).

The second focus of *Sifted* is the home, not as a sphere separate to ministry but integrally related. I am not convinced by Coreiro's simplistic reprioritizing of God, Self, Spouse, Family, Ministry in that order. I prefer to think of God as at the center of our lives, and our commitment to our other relationships needs to be worked out reflecting that. But his appeal not to sacrifice family and health on the altar of ministry is often-heard but less-practiced wisdom. Leaders need to know their limits, and they may push them sometimes but they need to be self-aware and know when they need to pull back and schedule rest. When the athlete is thirsty it is too late – he or she should have been drinking to prevent thirst. Similarly in ministry, we need to develop a sustainable pace and build in space for sleeping enough, eating healthily, exercising regularly and pursuing life-giving relationships and hobbies. Sometimes the holiest thing a leader can do is to sleep if she or he is tired, play and have fun when stretched, or be attentive to spouse and children and to learn what is life-giving.

The final part zooms in on work. It is probably good not to start here, but appropriate to remind us that ministry involves focused and sometimes hard work. A key thing leaders need to learn, Cordeiro suggests, is a bias for action. A common substitute for the action of real ministry is the busywork of

office and computer activity. These chapters warn against being distracted away from ministry to people, having a sense of entitlement, leaving everything to God, and being blind to our weaknesses, or being blind to our unguarded strengths and prosperity and how they can make us independent of God. A consistent theme of *Sifted* is that Jesus is enough, and sometimes we need to lose prosperity or ministry success to learn that.

*Sifted* is an excellent resource for self-care and the personal life of evangelists, church planters and others in ministry. I appreciated the personal sharing of the writers and the insights of their hard-earned lessons. Questions and space for journaling take readers deeper and more inclined towards healthy responses in the posture of their hearts, the attentiveness to their home relationships, and their commitment to carefully focused action. Reading *Sifted* is easier and cheaper than a doctor, and less painful and threatening than a heart attack, but it can prove a sobering wake-up call about what is most important for Christian leaders.

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Grudem, Wayne, and Barry Asmus. *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 384 pages.

Reviewed by Mark R. Teasdale

With the growing importance of caring for people's physical needs as part of evangelism, the new book by Grudem and Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*, offers an interesting attempt at blending the evangelical call to save souls with the desire to improve people's quality of life. To do this, the authors tackle an enormous question: what will allow poor countries to become prosperous? Their short answer to this question is that poor nations must increase their GDP through producing more goods and services (45). They then lay out seventy-eight factors which will allow a nation to do this, ranging from adopting specific cultural values to specific economic practices and the role of government (a short-hand list of all seventy-eight factors is included in the appendix for easy reference). They make it abundantly clear throughout the work that these seventy-eight factors point to the creation of a free market economy. They capitalize on their respective strengths (Grudem is a professor of theology and biblical studies and Asmus is an economist) by offering economic history and biblical exegesis as warrants for their assertions. Both authors are also evangelical Christians, so they find commonality in that.

There is no question that the two authors are well-equipped to tackle the daunting task they lay out for themselves. Their respective experiences and expertise are clear and they have undoubtedly combed through vast amounts of data and interpretations of that data to arrive at the conclusions they present. This expertise and research makes the book a comfortable one for many conservative, evangelical Protestant American readers because it holds up American political and economic structures, particularly as they are

undergirded by the evangelical Protestant work ethic and value structure, as a gold standard for what leads to prosperity.

Having determined the ideal that will lead to prosperity, the book is full of practical recommendations for how poor nations can move toward the free market. Organizing their seventy-eight factors by theme, each chapter provides a set of related practices that a nation can adopt. As the authors point out, this text is clearly written with the leaders of poor nations in mind, hoping to give them concrete guidance in how to lift their countries to prosperity. The many real-world examples and lack of technical economic vocabulary are meant to support this endeavor by explaining as simply as possible how the factors work in tandem with each other to create a prosperous free market.

While the authors hold up the evangelical Protestant American free market system as the exemplar of creating prosperity for entire countries, they are aware that there are dangers in this argument. There are two statements that drive to the heart of what the authors want to claim along these lines. The first is buried slightly over halfway through the text: “Compared to perfection, the free market is easy to criticize. Utopia is always a better idea. But compared to any real-world example ever tried in the past, its virtues of greater economic productivity, of lifting the masses from poverty, of promoting virtuous behavior, and of frequent personal benevolences are unsurpassed.” (207) The second is on the last page: “We recognize that material prosperity is a secondary issue, though it is still very important. More important than prosperity, however, is a person’s relationship with God.” (367).

If the authors could hold to the ethic laid out in these two declarations by demonstrating that prosperity is a second-level consideration that should be subsumed to the will of God and that free market capitalism is a relatively better choice contrasted to other extant economic systems for seeking this

prosperity, then the text would be a stronger one. As it is, while the authors do include caveats throughout the text to avoid people making idols of either wealth or the free market, they struggle to avoid at least venerating the free market as God's chosen vehicle for blessing the peoples of the earth with prosperity. As a result, at times their arguments sound not unlike a panegyric in favor of American economic, political, and technological advances.

This penchant to idealize the free market and the American political and economic structures that support it leads to certain blind spots in Grudem and Asmus' thinking as well as to occasional fallacies in reasoning. Most notably, in extolling the capacity for the free market to generate greater prosperity through what they term "earned success," (74-75) they ignore the reality of unearned privilege. While they do acknowledge that disparity in wealth occurs in a free market, they do not acknowledge that some people have greater opportunity to avail themselves of the potential the free market provides for earned success than others. Much less do they recognize that this lack of access to the opportunities of the free market can come about based on no fault of the people. Historical factors that have made access to capital and the ability to increase the value of labor significantly more difficult often render the promises of free market prosperity out of reach for marginalized groups of people. By the same token, the penchant of the market's prosperity to accrue to those who already have greater access to capital and to means of increasing the value of their labor means that the free market tends to reward specific groups more than others. Given critiques of the American free market system along these lines, such as Don Peck's "Can the Middle Class Be Saved" in the *Atlantic* (July 24, 2011), or the broader strain of Christian moral theology that deals with this kind of disparity (e.g., John Chrysostom "Homily XII on 1 Timothy" and Clement of Alexandria "Can the Rich Man Be Saved") it is disappointing that Grudem and Asmus chose to ignore this issue.



This lacuna leads to some odd moves throughout the text. One is an attempt to select historical precedent that demonstrates the benefits of the free market versus the dangers of other economic systems. To do this, the authors often point to major massacres and tragedies as examples of the dangers of authoritarian or communist systems while chalking up failures of the free market system to sinful individuals who abuse the system (e.g., the list of people killed under non-free market systems on page 125 with no matching chart to recognize the cost in human lives in the development of the free market). Likewise, the history presented always assumes the perspective of those who have benefitted from the free market, and most specifically those who have controlled the capital. A small example of this is that the authors twice refer to the beneficial impact of clocks for increasing productivity in nations with strong work ethics. This ignores the way that the proliferation of clocks was used by those who controlled the capital to exact greater amounts of labor from those who worked for them by establishing a standardized way to measure the amount of time a worker owed to the employer (see Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock*). Along these same lines, the historical freedoms the authors laud that help promote the prosperity of the free market conspicuously passes over any mention of the hard fought freedom for workers to organize.

A similar problem is visible in the way Scripture is cited throughout the text. Generally, the use of biblical warrant is imaginative and appropriate. However, it is hard to get away from the notion that the Bible serves more as a means of prooftexting favored economic and political factors than as the driving force behind the authors' argument. Frequently, they will cite one of their seventy-eight factors and then show that the Bible agrees with this. By the same token, they avoid biblical passages that might challenge some of their assumptions. For example, when the authors describe how the African

practice of borrowing impoverishes the nation by failing to allow individuals sufficient property rights (146-148), the authors do not wrestle with Jesus's command to "give to those who ask of you" (Matthew 5:42).

Where the authors' marshaling of biblical texts on behalf of their free market argument becomes particularly awkward is in the rather abrupt conclusion of the book. Having allied themselves throughout the book with pro-free market authors who do not believe that religion or even value structures are important to achieving prosperity, albeit in provisional ways, (310-315) Grudem and Asmus make a jarring turn in the final few paragraphs to remind readers that what is most important is accepting Jesus Christ as savior, not prosperity. It is as if they recognized they were in danger of promoting the free market as a religion and quickly moved at the end to shore up their evangelical credentials.

Grudem and Asmus are clear that God has reached out through Jesus Christ to save humanity. That salvation has an eternal quality. Implicitly, they argue that it also has a temporal quality, calling people to a better quality of life through the establishment of free markets that will make possible higher national GDPs. The authors are to be commended for addressing such a complex issue, working through the mountains of material written on it, and unapologetically witnessing to their Christian faith in the process. There are certainly some excellent, practical insights to help poor nations recognize and overcome some of the systemic issues that are denying their nations prosperity. These are written in easily understood ways. By the same token, the significant blind spots the authors leave, leading to a stilted interpretation of history and scripture, means this text misses too many of the nuances of the free market. Especially, it misses systemic forms of corruption and injustice that can occur in the free market. A book that lays out a roadmap that other nations have followed to prosperity, especially a roadmap that is visible

through the light of faith, is a fine idea. Such a book needs not only to show the successes of rich nations, but the mistakes and failures of the rich nations so that the poor nations can avoid those. This is especially important when the Christian faith itself speaks to those failures and offers redemption from them.

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Acevedo, Jorge. *Vital Church Changing Communities and the World*.  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012. 141 pages.

Review by Andrew D. Kinsey

A new kind of genre in renewal has emerged over the last twenty years among those who lead churches in churches in both “mainline” and evangelical Protestant denominations. It is a genre of literature with a familiar kind of narrative that flows as follows: Pastor is appointed or moves to a church in decline or near death. Pastor realizes that things must change if the boat is to sail, let alone stay afloat. Changes are made usually with great resistance to church members. Change comes albeit slowly if not dangerously. Church experiences renewal and growth, but always with struggle. A new course of ministry is set, though it takes a great deal of energy and sacrifice along the way. Church grows. Pastor writes book to share insights about what it took to turn things around at said church and speaks at conferences throughout the country. Denominational leaders highlight the key ingredients of both leader and church turnaround to show how it is done.

Sound familiar? Overblown? To be sure, there are the Walt Kalstead’s and T. D. Jakes who could certainly echo the above scenario. In The United Methodist Church there are also folks like Mike Slaughter

(Ginghamsburg), Adam Hamilton (Church of the Resurrection), Dick Wills (Fort Lauderdale), and James Furnish (Tampa) who have written similar stories of renewal and turnaround. Such entrepreneurial leaders are to be commended for the amazing gifts they bring to the church. The church catholic is stronger and has learned a great deal as result. Indeed, the church is making inroads into new people groups as result of what these leaders have accomplished. But what else can the church learn?

Step into the picture Jorge Acevedo, the Lead Pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Southwest Florida, a multi-site congregation that has gone from 400 to over 2,600 people under Acevedo's leadership and done so in ways that are instructive to those who are seeking to practice evangelism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially among those who may not find themselves in affluent suburbs or wealthy downtown churches. Instead, what makes Acevedo's story unique is how it took place in an unlikely place among so-called unlikely people: among the poor and working class persons and families of Southwest, Florida. Acevedo's book on *Vital Churches* tells the story of this incredible journey.

Acevedo divides his book into five key chapters, with each chapter exploring a particular behavior of highly vital congregations: Spiritual Pastoral Leadership, Unleashing the Book of Christ, A People Made for Worship, the Power of Small Groups, and Reaching across the Street and Around the World. All of these chapters follow a basic structure of biblical exegesis and story-telling, insights from the Wesleyan tradition, the journey to vitality at Grace Church with examples, and research from the Towers Watson Research Study conducted by the United Methodist Church (a research group that discovered that less than fifteen percent of United Methodist Congregations are vital according to the above five areas of behavior).

Acevedo uses the Towers Watson Report as an Appendix at the end of the book to highlight the areas of behavior.

Acevedo's book provides a wonderful resource to those who are looking at ways to utilize examples of evangelistic ministries in the life of the church, especially within the Methodist and Wesleyan traditions. Acevedo's work also supplies pastors with helpful tools to understand the dynamics of growth in a multi-site, multi-ethnic community. The section on reaching persons with addictions is particularly helpful. And Acevedo's gifts of leadership are definitely woven throughout the chapters as he and his team work to create a vital congregation.

And yet, as the above genre scenario may suggest, and as pastors who work in the other 85% of congregations deemed "not vital" may ask, what other ways might evangelistic renewal may come? The Towers Watson Report provides five areas that are believed to be necessary to vitality, but are there others? Indeed, it is also clear that Acevedo is unashamedly Wesleyan and evangelical, if not Pentecostal, to the core. What bearing does this have on the way churches may grow and become more vital?

Such questions suggest future conversations, as well as other scenarios: The future of renewal and vitality, while having begun, is definitely not finished. Indeed, some would say that it is not only finished but that it has only begun. Acevedo's work is but another good venture in the church's witness to that unfinished journey.

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Heath, Elaine A. and Larry Duggins. *Missional. Monastic. Mainline. A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014. 136 pages.

Reviewed by Mark R. Teasdale

Elaine Heath has built her career on reclaiming the mystical and monastic traditions of the Christian faith and using those traditions to inform how North American Christians practice evangelism. She has become best known for being a scholar practitioner, not only writing about these new ways of evangelism, but experimenting with them. During her tenure at Southern Methodist University, these experiments have included the creation of New Day Communities (small, indigenous congregations that engage in missional relationship-building and worship within their neighborhoods), the Epworth Project (several intentional communities planted throughout the Dallas/Ft. Worth area), and most notably the Academy for Missional Wisdom (an organization offering alternative forms of theological education grounded in a neomonastic practice of the church).

Her most recent book, co-authored with former student Larry Duggins who has served as a leader in Heath's various endeavors, is meant to share the practical steps for those who are seeking to start small missional communities that are anchored in traditional mainline congregations. This book was prompted by the vast number of inquiries that Heath has received over the past half-decade about her undertakings.

In spite of being subtitled a "guide," perhaps only 30 pages of the book's 120 are given over to practical guidance on how to create a missional community. This is because of the competing audiences that the book expects. On one hand it is aimed at those who may be open to participating in a neomonastic community. On the other hand, it is aimed at leaders in traditional congregations who are considering supporting such a community,

though not participating in it. As a result of this, the book gives over its first 60 pages to define and defend the importance of neomonastic communities. Only in the second half does the book offer a guide for how to construct such a community, and even in this half the book continues to provide substantial amounts of personal commentary as apologetics for neomonastic communities.

In splitting its energies this way, the book never quite lives up to its promise of being a guide for the creation of missional communities. Instead, readers will find a general outline of major issues that require attention interspersed with prompts to read other books that have more detail on how to start such communities (including a lengthy bibliography on missional and neomonastic literature).

Beyond this lack of practical guidance, the book does not value its two major audiences equally. It is clear that, in the authors' opinions, the neomonastic community is the true expression of the church that God desires. The traditional congregations are an aberration wont to fall into grave sins.

While the authors go out of their way to acknowledge the gifts of institutional congregations that anchor neomonastic communities, it seems that it is only insofar as the wealthier and more administratively solid institutional congregations are willing to share these gifts with the neomonastic communities that they have value. Otherwise, institutional churches are suspicious and parsimonious, needing the true Christians of the neomonastic movement to win them to the actual faith and practices of Christ. The tendency of the book to advocate so heavily for neomonasticism over and against institutional congregations could make it hard to swallow for readers still committed to the institutional church and its congregational forms. The book banks on people in the church feeling disaffected enough by the church's

current evangelistic impotence and internal turmoil to be open to its critique and proffered neomonastic solution.

The one thing that the book does make clear is that these communities are meant to be transformative for both the individuals in them and for the churches anchoring them. They are not for those who want to maintain the same lifestyle or assumptions while adding on a new spiritual practice. They are for those that want to listen deeply to the work of the Holy Spirit and move accordingly. This call to encourage Christians to a deeper place of reliance on the Holy Spirit is welcome and appropriate, whether those Christians lean toward neomonasticism or not.

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Hammond, Kim, and Darren Cronshaw. *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. 207 pages.

Reviewed by Richard William Shaw

To navigate consumer Christians to become missional disciples is the stated objective of Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw's project in *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians*. The Australian missionaries and missiologists probe the leading motif of risk in mission, identifying and articulating six stances of engaging with *missio Dei* in local contexts at various junctures across the globe. "Sent people," the first position, explores the import of the journey of mission, rather than merely the destination. Discovering closeness to God through closeness to people defines the second posture of "submerged ministry." The establishment and cultivation of a "shalom spirituality" is the central task of the third stance. The authors



attempt to define “safe places” in the fourth posture, venues to “nurture faith while avoiding inappropriate and unauthentic evangelism” (119). Building upon a robust Trinitarian missiology, Hammond and Cronshaw research *diatriba*—shared life—in the fifth position. Finally, the missionaries identify the stance of “standing in the gap,” utilizing positions of power and empowerment to advocate for those persons who are normatively victims of discrimination and disregard.

Hammond and Cronshaw are content to make the reader discontent, challenging our customary habit of following Jesus, nudging us to unlearn and abandon ways of discipleship which embrace consumerist ecclesiology. Insisting that missional sentness is within our reach, the missionaries, in the first position, demand that 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians discover proximity places, where “the new barbarians” can be engaged with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Sentness, as both a missional posture and objective, causes us to “recalibrate to be more empowering and participatory” (52).

Values of vulnerability and mutuality highlight the second section entitled “Submerged Ministry.” The modality of incarnational mission is redefined as mission at its best, “a mutual and sensitive exchange and partnership—just like dancing” (77). Appropriating the cliché-esque WWJD, the writers articulate the starting point of mission as WIJD—What Is Jesus Doing? Perhaps one of the most cogent statements of the entire project, encased in a singular, balanced statement is telling, “Jesus knew how to bring everyday spirituality to a party without condoning and without condemning” (73).

Foregrounding a much-used motif within current missiological discussion, shalom, the writers turn to the apostolicity of the seventy-two disciples commissioned by Jesus in Luke 10. The stout biblical instructions serve missional churches even today, regaining a position of hermeneutical

prominence. The emphasis distilled by the writers is of stability, to find a “place to stay and bless it with ‘Peace be on this house’” (94). Though itinerant, Jesus’ model and modality was of stability, exemplified in his followers, including Saint Benedict and today’s neomonastics.

The oft-explored missiological motif of bounded sets and centered sets is envisaged through the lens of evangelism in the fourth position, “Safe Places.” Opting for the latter, the authors only vaguely engage the theological debate experienced by many, of the perimeter of the Body of Christ. The conclusion drawn, “We like to invite anyone and everyone to participate in worship *to whatever extent they like*,” (124) will be disconcerting to many. The emphasis on ministry to those with addictions, however, truly engages many in Western cultures, challenging all to become supportive communities without shame.

Building upon Acts 2.44 and Michael Frost’s assertion that “the best we have to offer this post-Christendom world is the quality of our relationships,” (132) Hammond and Cronshaw focus upon the nature of Christian discipleship within the missional church, in “Shared Life,” the fifth posture. Values of love and forgiveness within relationships are what should characterize missional—sent—churches. Being careful not to exclude other ecclesial forms, the missionaries wax idealistic about the nature of missionality, painting a sometimes rosy picture of what this modality often presents.

The six and final posture, “Standing in the Gap,” presents sentness as forms of the scattered church, truly engaging unevangelized, lost, and disengaged cultural groups in the West in innovative and creative ways. Discovering, identifying, and advocating for these populations, demonstrates a “lowering of the bar,” originally proposed by Neil Cole. The distinction between “doing church” and “discipleship” is not always clear, however, and

the organic church proposed by Cole is somewhat obfuscated in the discussion.

*Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians* will offer readers lively reading and will cause them to retrace much missiological ground. The nature of the six postures, while clear, seems at times forced and incongruent with the reality of ministry and mission, however creative the presentation may be. The greatest value of Hammond and Cronshaw's presentation may be the innovation inspired within the reader to add on to the six positions described.

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Teasdale, Mark R. *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation: The Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1860-1920*. Eugene Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014, 277 Pages.

Reviewed by Mark A. Fowler

The publication of Mark Teasdale's *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation* comes at a time when the global membership of The United Methodist Church has surpassed twelve million souls, the largest in the denomination's history. This reality and the articulated hope of the leadership of the church is to become "global" in its nature and character. Yet, there is enormous energy and primary concern focused on stemming the downward spiral of members and money among churches in the United States that overshadows and diminishes the "global" news. The methods of the market economy and its weekly "dashboards" have occupied focused attention in recent years. Seminary students serving in city and rural appointments are often befuddled by the inordinate importance placed on the church building as a formative sign of their faith in distinct juxtaposition to the Wesleyan forms

of koinonia and connection that are at the heart of the evangelism and denominational curriculum taught in the seminary.

Mark Teasdale's contribution is a compelling and careful development of the formative evangelistic vision and enormous influence of the Methodist movement in the United States from the Civil War through the First World War. In what he terms the "clutch" between the familiar, often romanticized Wesleyan Methodist beginnings with their translation to a rapid, outstanding growth in the new United States and the contemporary period, Teasdale develops the establishment of the Methodists as a "quintessentially American" movement with a sense of a "providential mission in the life of the nation." The success of Methodist evangelism among the "middling classes," along with the expressed agency of the laity in evangelistic efforts led to a fusing of soteriology and the ideals of white middle class native born Americans (Teasdale focuses on the development of the "North" following the Civil War and coins the acronym WMCNB) to be understood as the pre-eminent civilization in the world. The values of republican government, increased technological capacity, material blessings and patterns of life founded on the Christian (read that Methodist) faith were tightly intertwined with the Methodist mission to form an American Gospel with its fervent pure American Evangelism. At the core of this book's engaging survey is the belief and its defense that the advanced civilization of America is the sign of the fullness of God's Kingdom come to earth. "Their (the Methodists') goal was nothing less than a holy nation inhabited by individuals who enjoyed the salvation of God both through the highest possible quality of life in the present and the hope of glory in the future."

The heart of this book dedicates itself to tracing the efforts of the Methodists in three major areas in order to accomplish their evangelistic goals. Teasdale demonstrates the adaptability of the Methodist capacity in

different arenas, but rallying around the same goal. It is made clear in these chapters that the key was to inculcate a variety of persons into the White Middle Class Native Born vision and to defend its fragile status at all costs. In the post-Civil War South the efforts of the Freedman's Aid Society and others was to educate freed slaves so that they might "appropriately" participate in the Republic and not bring ruin to it. In a stunning reversal, this seemingly altruistic work was superseded by a rapprochement with Southern whites and work with folks in Appalachia as a defense against the culture of immigrants who might also "wreck" the Methodist vision of the Republic and its fusion with American evangelism.

Similar work among Native Americans, frontier pioneers, Latinos and Asians are surveyed in a sweeping review of work in the West. Building churches as a sign of the presence of the church and its promise through faithful education and the Methodist form of Americanization are important landmarks in denominational formation. The final focus is on the critical work of the Methodists in the cities, especially New York and Chicago. Work with the poor, especially the immigrants, as well as the wealthy was a major challenge for the formulation of the American gospel in an age when the diversity of the nation was overwhelming the capacity of an evangelistic effort to defend the ideals, values and vision of a white middle class native born America rooted in a Methodist notion of liberty and the human agency of progress toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

Teasdale's study ends in the cataclysm and beginning of another "clutch" in the First World War. Methodism was on the forefront of the passage of the Prohibition Amendment and an immersion in the work of the Social Gospel and adoption of a Social Creed regarding worker's rights. The nation and the world were to enter a century of revolution and turmoil that would shake the foundations of the structures of society and contemplate a

new heaven and a new earth. Of necessity, it deconstructs the social foundations along with the narrow vision and values of the nineteenth century Methodists that are the subject of Teasdale's very good study. However, to overlook the rich descriptions *Methodist Evangelism, American Salvation* offers us is to miss what this reviewer has observed as remnant, if inarticulate, in many Methodist churches. The promise of the Republic, the notion of American exceptionalism, the moral focus of the church and its rightful place as a numerically strong voice on the American landscape still absorb the energies of The United Methodist Church in a number of guises. Mark Teasdale's work will go a long way to help us understand the roots and branches so that we might confront the challenges of the future in "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World."

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