

Taking Every Opportunity – Conversations about Jesus

How can we help Contacts become Inquirers?

For many years churches have seen the importance of working hard to serve and build relationships with their community.¹ Churches run all kinds of activities and events, from Toddler Groups to Fun Days, from Holiday Clubs to cafés, from Food Banks to Community Choirs. But Contacts from these “Crossing Places” are rarely immediately ready to start attending church services or for popular Inquirers’ Courses such as Alpha or Christianity Explored. What “stepping stones to faith” can we offer to bridge this gap?²

The common feature in so many different approaches to this issue is obvious. The most important thing we can be doing is simply to be talking about Jesus. To initiate and develop conversations which explore spirituality and share faith.

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16 NIV)

This paper is not primarily about churches organising events and activities. Too often evangelism is left to “the professionals”, clergy or visiting evangelists or “the church”. Michael Green thinks this is wrong. “Witness-bearing in some shape or form is the responsibility of all Christians.”³ In Acts it was not only the apostles and church leaders who shared the gospel. The substantial witness of the Early Church was through countless nameless believers who spread the Word of God with boldness, especially those who scattered after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4 and Acts 11:19-21) who went chattering the good news and gossiping the gospel, in synagogues and marketplaces with strangers and with their friends in their own homes. Michael Green notes that In the Early Church, “every man and woman saw it as his task to bear witness to Jesus Christ by every means at his or her disposal.”⁴ Similarly Bishop of Chelmsford evangelist Stephen Cottrell wrote, “According to our different personalities, gifts and circumstances each of us has a part to play in God’s work of evangelism.”⁵

John Finney’s *Finding Faith Today*⁶ demonstrated that more than two thirds of Christians come to faith in a process which typically takes years rather than in one specific moment of decision. Friends and family members are the most significant contributors to that process. Research just published by the Barna Group reports that “44% of practising Christians credit their friends for introducing them to Jesus.” More than a quarter of Christians say “conversation(s) with Christian(s) you knew well” and 9% say “conversation(s) with Christian(s) you did not know well” had a major impact on them coming to faith.⁷

Conversations about Jesus are vitally important. Most Christians agree with that – in theory at least. More than three quarters of practising Christians agree that “Talking to non-Christians about Jesus Christ is an act of evangelism”.⁸ 85% of practising Christians agree that “It is every Christian’s responsibility to talk to non-Christians about Jesus.”⁹ However when not-yet-Christians were consulted, “More than half of non-Christians (54%) who know a Christian, have not had a conversation with this person about faith in Jesus.

¹ A point highlighted by Laurence Singlehurst *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping People Sensitive Evangelism* IVP 2006

² The website www.takingeveryopportunity.org presents a number of resources for outreach and evangelism. It includes “42 Great Outreach Ideas” of which Idea39 discusses the Basic Principles of Outreach which underpin this paper. Here the Idea(number) {sometimes in curly brackets} points to those resources. For example, Idea39 can be accessed directly at www.pbthomas.com/takingeveryopportunity/idea39.

³ Michael Green *Evangelism now and then* IVP 1979 p 36.

⁴ Michael Green *Evangelism now and Then* IVP 1979 p 9.

⁵ Stephen Cottrell *From the Abundance of the Heart* DLT 2006 p20.

⁶ John Finney *Finding Faith Today* BFBS 1992

⁷ *Talking Jesus* booklet p23 at www.talkingjesus.org

⁸ *Talking Jesus* booklet p13 at www.talkingjesus.org

⁹ *Talking Jesus* booklet p14 at www.talkingjesus.org

Two thirds (64%) of 45-54 year olds who know a practising Christian say they have never had a conversation with any practising Christian about their faith in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Clearly Christians are missing very many opportunities to talk about Jesus. Michael Green rightly says, “It is not until church members have the enthusiasm to speak to their friends and acquaintances about Jesus that anybody will really believe we have got good news to share.”¹¹ “Evangelism is the overflow of our joyful faith” (Lesslie Newbigin). Baptist Christians especially are committed to the priesthood of all believers. Churches need to be encouraging and equipping all Christians to talk about Jesus confidently and wisely, boldly and effectively with anyone, wherever we may be. We need to help every believer to become confident in initiating and developing conversations which share and explore faith and spirituality. Then we will be more able to make the most of every opportunity to chat about Jesus.

The Holy Spirit and Prayer

Jesus promised His disciples that they would be witnesses to Him and as Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, it is God the Holy Spirit Who is the primary witness to Jesus. The gift of the Holy Spirit, Power from on High, gives us the power to be witnesses for Jesus (Acts 1:8). The Spirit is the dynamo and the dynamite of all evangelism. There is absolutely nothing we can do to save people. That is entirely the work of God the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can bring somebody to eternal life in Christ. It is the Spirit Who helps people to understand the Bible and Who convicts people of sin. It is the Spirit Who helps people to put their trust in Jesus, Who brings a person to new birth and gives them new life and helps them to declare that Jesus is risen from the dead and that Jesus is Lord. It is the Spirit who makes us God’s children and who makes each of us part of the God’s Forever Family, the Body of Christ, the church. In evangelism and outreach, as in so many things, it is *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty* (Zechariah 4:6).

It follows that the most important element in all evangelism is prayer. Prayer is the key. We read in Ephesians 6:18-20 that Paul asked that church to pray for him that he might be a faithful ambassador for Jesus and that he might talk about Jesus fearlessly. In Colossians 4:2-6 Paul asked that church to pray for him that God will open doors for him to talk about Jesus and that he will be clear in what he says when he does. If the apostle to the Gentiles Paul needed prayer then we do even more! We should be praying those kind of prayers for ourselves and for each other. Especially if we are scared or worried about talking about Jesus, we should pray about that. We should pray that God will give us opportunities to talk about Jesus and that He will enable us to make the most of every opportunity. We pray to know how we should answer everyone.

Evangelism must start in prayer, and evangelism must continue surrounded in prayer. We need prayer which includes both listening for God to guide our witness {SEE Idea20} and also interceding for others. We will pray about our evangelism strategy and evangelistic events and special services. We should pray for boldness (Acts 4:29-31, 2 Timothy 1:7) and for wisdom (James 1:5). And we should always be praying for our friends and our neighbours and our colleagues.

There is a wise saying, “Always talk to God about your friend before you talk to your friend about God.” We can pray for other people: for their physical needs; that they will understand the Good News; that God will draw them to Himself, remembering that all evangelism is spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Matthew 12:25-29; Matthew 16:19). If appropriate we can tell others we are praying for them and ask them what they would like us to pray for them {see Idea3}. We pray and persevere in praying for specific individuals that they will be saved. We should pray in our personal devotions, in Home Groups and special prayer meetings, in days of prayer and prayer walking {see Idea1} and sometimes praying with fasting. If we are serious about evangelism we will take every opportunity to pray!

¹⁰ *Talking Jesus* booklet p21 at www.talkingjesus.org

¹¹ Michael Green *Evangelism now and Then* IVP 1979 p 35.

Preaching the Gospel Necessarily Includes Words¹²

Sometime in the 1990s a striking saying became popular. “Preach the gospel and if necessary use words.” Attributed to Francis of Assisi and riding on his reputation, and widely quoted by people who should have known better, it seemed to fit the mood of Christians who were disaffected with evangelism as it had been practised in the Twentieth Century. But the slogan is fatally flawed.

“If necessary use words” is used by some Christians as a “get-out clause”,¹³ as if somehow that saying allows them to stay silent about their faith. Roman Catholic blogger Emily Stimpson explains the problem very clearly. “Someone invented the quote and put it into poor St. Francis’ mouth. And ever since then, people have used it as an excuse to not evangelize with words, to not have the uncomfortable conversations or say the unpopular things.”¹⁴ Some writers even use the saying to suggest that Christians have somehow failed in their witness if their daily lives are so inadequate that they need to articulate the gospel in words. Unhelpfully this can leave some Christians feeling guilty when they do talk about Jesus! Any idea that our actions should be sufficient and that words should not be necessary in evangelism is gravely mistaken.

To start with, Saint Francis never said “if necessary use words” or anything like it. Nor would he have done so. Emily Stimpson says, “Every chance Francis got, he proclaimed the Gospel. He proclaimed it to the wolves in the forest. He proclaimed it to the Sultan in Egypt. He wouldn’t stop talking about Jesus. He couldn’t. Anymore than a woman in love can stop talking about her beloved. The thought of not speaking about his love, about Christ, to the world, would have horrified (Francis).” “He knew what the Church has always known. There is no “if” about the necessity of words in evangelization, just as there is no “if” about the necessity of actions. They are both necessary. They are both essential.” “Preach the gospel. Since it is necessary, use words”¹⁵

Biblically the gospel, the Good News, is the announcement that the Kingly Rule of God has begun in the historical events of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. All the verbs used for the ways the first Christians passed on that message are aspects of speech: preaching; proclaiming; teaching; testifying and more discussed below. Luke writing Acts is very interested in the way “the word” spread (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). Paul argues that people can only be saved if somebody preaches to them “the word of faith” (Romans 10:8-15). Christians are called to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-21) and that role certainly includes delivering their Sovereign’s messages. The church has always understood “preaching the gospel” in that way.

His Holiness Pope Paul VI was very clear. “Nevertheless [witness] always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified...and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.”¹⁶ In some corners of the church it seems as if the heralds have been struck dumb – some messengers have forgotten the message.

“Preach the gospel and if necessary use words” has become popular in part because it offers a valuable reminder that our deeds must match our words. Our lives must back up our message. I take that truth for granted in this paper. It is undeniable that “they won’t care what we know until they know that we care” Thankfully most strands of the church have recognised this fact and moved increasingly towards “integral mission”, proclamations and demonstrations of the gospel side by side. Loving our neighbours by serving

¹² This section is a summary of an article being published in the Autumn 2015 edition of the journal *Ministry Today*. There is a longer extract online as part of www.takingeveryopportunity.org

¹³ Pete Gilbert *Kiss and Tell* 111

¹⁴ Emily Stimpson <http://www.catholicvote.org/pope-francis-and-st-francis-preach-the-gospel-always-and-for-the-love-of-god-use-words/>

¹⁵ Emily Stimpson as above

¹⁶ Pope Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (encyclical on evangelization) 1974

our communities and by striving for compassion, justice and peace should always go hand in hand with delivering the Good News of Jesus in words. At the same time, as Tim Chester observes, “It is not enough merely to address people’s felt needs. As well as their temporal needs we must also address their eternal need of Christ.”¹⁷ We should never be “stealth-Christians”, hiding our faith. We initiate and support projects such as children’s work and youth work, Food Banks, work with homeless people and refugees with time, energy and money. As we share Christ’s love in practical ways we should not pass up the opportunity of telling folk explicitly why we do what we do.

I fervently hope never to hear or read again the saying “if necessary use words.” The Bible makes clear that out of gratitude to God and in obedience to the command of Jesus it will always be necessary for every Christian to express the life-saving Good News of Jesus in words. No trendy slogan will ever give us permission to be silent. We all need to make the best of every opportunity for conversations about Jesus.

Dialogue Reaches the Hearts Monologue Can’t Reach

Today the very word “preaching” carries negative connotations. “Don’t preach at me!” In the Book of Acts sometimes the gospel was preached (17 times) or proclaimed (10 times) to large groups. Then there was debate (twice) and teaching (10 times) both in public and in private homes (Acts 20:28). Sometimes we see small groups and even one-to-one conversations (Philip in Acts 8:26ff). Christians explained (5 times) the gospel and attempted to persuade or convince (4 times). Often they did not even need to initiate the conversations. 10 times we find them answering or replying to questions. Sometimes they pointed to Scripture and on other occasions they simply testified (6 times) or acted as witnesses regarding their personal experiences (9 times and “witness” is used 69 times across the New Testament). In passing, this gives us in Acts a list of at least 74 instances of verbal communication when the first Christians evidently found it necessary to use words to communicate the gospel. But less than one third of those occasions were preaching or proclaiming.

A long time ago I came up with a slogan for Christian education. “Dialogue teaches the parts monologue can’t teach.” In evangelism I would phrase it slightly differently. “Dialogue reaches the hearts monologue can’t reach.” Often the best way to convey the gospel message today will be through dialogue, by engaging in conversations which explore spirituality and share faith, by teaching and explaining, persuading, convincing, sharing Scripture, and frequently just by answering questions.

We begin by listening, not only to discover what is the most appropriate thing for us to say next, but more importantly listening to discern what God is already doing in the lives of these not-yet-Christians. Then we talk with people. Not talking at people, or talking to people, but engaging in genuine conversations with people. We certainly never could communicate the whole of the gospel message in a single conversation, and nor do we need to. It will be enough to share what we are given at that time. The Holy Spirit can shape a jigsaw of ideas into a gospel picture in our friend’s mind.

In this world Post-Christendom Stuart Murray says evangelism should become “Engaging in conversation rather than confrontation – evangelism alongside others, not declaiming from an authoritative height, through dialogue instead of monologue,”¹⁸ “Gentle questioning must supersede domineering assertions. Bold humility must replace arrogant insecurity. The images of fellow travellers and conversation partners must usurp memories of inquisitors and crusaders.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Tim Chester *Mission Matters* 100

¹⁸ Stuart Murray *Post-Christendom* 230.

¹⁹ Stuart Murray *Post-Christendom* 231.

Prepared to Answer

The Barna research found that “66% of practising Christians have talked about Jesus to a non-Christian in the past month”.²⁰ The report goes on, “Over half of practising Christians say they are always on the lookout for opportunities to talk about Jesus to those who don’t know him. The vast majority (72%) feel comfortable about doing so, while some (26%) for some reason feel unable to take up these opportunities to share their faith in Jesus. However, 35% feel that others are better equipped to talk to others about Jesus and 33% are afraid of causing offence to non-Christians by speaking about him.”²¹ This demonstrates that at least a minority of Christians would benefit from some help in talking about Jesus.

Christians are generally positive about the effect they believe their conversations have on their not yet Christian friends. However when researchers asked not-Christians about the effects of such conversations the results are challenging. Only one in five say that they are consequently open to finding out more or experiencing Jesus for themselves.²² So while some Christians are enthusiastically talking about Jesus, an honest appraisal will recognise that some conversations are not reaping much fruit. Indeed the research reported that after such conversations, 59% “did not want to know more about Jesus,” half were “not open to an experience or an encounter with Jesus,” 30% “felt more negative towards Jesus” and although half “felt comfortable” 32% “felt uncomfortable.”²³ Even bearing in mind the parable of the sower, we must acknowledge that when Christians do have conversations about Jesus our words are often not having the effects we pray for and desire. It would surely be beneficial to help Christians to talk about Jesus more wisely and effectively. Surely we can do better?

Churches need to be encouraging and equipping all Christians to talk about Jesus confidently and wisely, boldly and effectively with anyone, wherever we may be. The vision statement of Central Baptist Church in Chelmsford expresses this well. “Equipping God’s people to make a difference wherever they are.” There are many resources available to help Christians and Churches talk about Jesus. *Mind the Gap* from Agape is an excellent six-week DVD and discussion course which helps churches to understand the challenges of evangelism today {see Idea23}. Churches speak very highly of the courses from the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity especially *Life on the Frontline* and *Fruitfulness on the Frontline*. There have been a number of helpful training courses in personal evangelism, from *Evangelism Explosion* to *Person to Person*. They have shared several features including memorizing Bible verses, simple gospel outlines and illustrations, using booklets to explain the gospel, preparing to share testimonies and discussion of “challenging questions.” Most Christians benefit from opportunities to think through their faith and practising explaining what they believe in language which their not-yet-Christian Contacts would understand.

Not only pastor-teachers but also evangelists are given “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Ephesians 4:11-12) so that all of us can share in the work of evangelism. We need to begin by addressing the many reasons why Christians might find it hard to talk about Jesus. Andrew Kirk writes, “They are afraid of giving offence, causing embarrassment or being met with apathy, misunderstanding or ridicule. They may not wish to risk valued friendships. Perhaps the biggest cause of misgivings is the fear of being made to appear foolish, and thus of betraying their faith.”²⁴ There are many pressures from society making it less acceptable to talk about faith in the public arena. Disgraced televangelists have given “evangelism” a bad reputation. Some Christians are disillusioned from having tried to share their faith previously but feeling they failed. For many, evangelism is just too low a priority. In recent years the rejection of literal understandings of hell and growing acceptance of a “love wins” universalism have diminished for many the urgency of evangelism and for some removed it altogether. Churches need to encourage and reassure Christians to talk more about Jesus. We recognise that declaring that “Jesus is Lord” and that we are His

²⁰ *Talking Jesus* booklet p5 at www.talkingjesus.org

²¹ *Talking Jesus* booklet p14 at www.talkingjesus.org

²² *Talking Jesus* booklet p20 at www.talkingjesus.org

²³ *Talking Jesus* booklet p20 at www.talkingjesus.org

²⁴ Andrew Kirk *Mission Under Scrutiny*, DLT 2006 p 91

disciples will sometimes carry all kinds of risks. But the courageous witness of countless believers through history and around the world today puts many of us to shame.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

Addressing all these issues and more I am seeking to help Christians at NSBC to become more confident in sharing our faith in a ten-week course, "Prepared to Answer." Using morning and evening services, sermons and other activities, accompanying notes and two sessions over Sunday lunches, we will lead up to making the best of the evangelistic opportunities of Christmas. Whilst most published courses are aimed at a self-selecting group who are already committed, I am deliberately presenting "Prepared to Answer" to all our members and attenders. For anyone who is interested, the outline of Prepared to Answer is online at www.takingeveryopportunity.org together with an expanded explanation of the rationale behind it and a list of other courses available. The sermons which make up the course are being posted at www.pbthomas.com/blog.

Answering the questions people are asking

Many not yet Christians feel that the church only offers answers to questions people aren't asking. Recent research has identified six Big Questions spiritually minded non-churchgoers want answers to.²⁵

1. Destiny? What happens after we die?
2. Purpose? What is the point of life? What values should I live by? Who inspires us?
3. The universe? How did it start? Is it designed or planned or controlled?
4. Does God exist? What is he/it like? Can we know or have a relationship with God?
5. Spiritual realms? What form do they take? Angels, ghosts. Supernatural?
6. Suffering? Why is there so much? What can be done? Concerns about domestic abuse, crime, intolerance and lack of respect.

There are also a number of common objections to the Christian faith.²⁶ "I'm not the religious sort." "You can't believe in God these days." "All religions lead to God" "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." "I do my best – nobody can do any more." "You can't change human nature." "Science has disproved the Bible/religion." "All truth is relative." "We can't trust the Bible." "Jesus was just an ordinary man." "Through history the church has done terrible things." "There are hypocrites in the church." "All the church cares about is money and buildings." "Religion is just a crutch for the feeble." "A loving God would not send people to hell?"

If we want to be sure to take every opportunity to talk about Jesus, these are some of the questions and challenges we need to prepare ourselves to talk about. There are also some generalised forms of questions which can open up interesting conversations. "Have you noticed that ...?" "Why do you believe what you believe about ...?" "Why do you think ...?" Some churches have found the "Table Talk" resources from The Ugly Duckling Company useful although I have never looked at them. I have listed a number of promising questions and topics for conversation at Idea19 and another obvious approach at Idea42.

We should not forget that not everybody finds discussion easy or helpful. Some meet with God more easily in silence, or through nature, or through activity. See Idea28 on Spiritual Pathways and Idea29 "The heavens are telling the glory of God."

²⁵ This research is discussed both by Nick Spencer in *Beyond the Fringe Researching a Spiritual Age* (Cliff College Publishing/LICC) and in *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age* (ed Stephen Croft Church House Publishing 2005)

²⁶ Michael Green addresses a number of these in *You Must Be Joking* (Hodder 1976)

This is my story

We live in a multi-faith, multicultural, consumer society, “Tesco ergo Sum, I shop therefore I am” (Graham Cray) where everyone demands freedom of choice and satisfaction guaranteed. In this Post-Modern supermarket of beliefs, “the preacher can become another dodgy salesperson almost certainly out to con you.”²⁷ People are suspicious of authority figures and platform speakers. But they are often willing to share “their story” and open to hearing “our story”. So every Christian needs to be prepared to share simply, directly and honestly, the difference Jesus makes to our lives. Mark Cartledge defines testimony like this. “People tell of their need and desire for God and His Kingdom, how God has met and continues to meet them in their search and changes their lives in conformity with His purposes of salvation.”²⁸

The primary task of the apostles was to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus (John 15:26-27, Acts 5:29-32). All Christians are both called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to what God has done in our lives (Acts 1:8). The apostle Peter only came to Jesus because of the testimony of his brother Andrew (John 1:40-42). We read in John 9 how the man born blind told people about how Jesus healed him and how the man delivered from a Legion of demons told everybody how Jesus had set him free in Mark 5. Matthew hosted a dinner party to introduce all his friends to Jesus in Matthew 9. In John 4:39ff we read how many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus because of the testimony of the woman Jesus met at the well. The apostle Paul retold his encounter with Jesus in Acts 22 and 26. It is important to be honest about our experiences as Paul was in 2 Corinthians 12:9ff and not to “gild the lily”. Our friends may be struggling with doubts and questions. If we give the impression that we have all the answers that will not help them. They need to see that we can still trust God while we admit the questions we wrestle with. Similarly, we can be encouraged by Paul’s admission that even he was scared as he preached the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

So it is good for Christians to consider in advance and to prepare what they might say to share what God has done in their lives. Some evangelists insist that we should not talk so much about ourselves and concentrate on talking about Jesus. Surely we need to do both, depending on what our friend needs to hear. Sometimes it will be some part of the classic “testimony” of how we came to faith: what our life was like before, how we met Jesus and how life has been difference since. Often it will be more appropriate to talk about how God impacts on our daily lives, sharing experiences of healing and answers to prayer and specific ways Jesus has helped us. Our friends will trust our words because they trust the person who says them. Christians can be encouraged to make wise use of “faith flags” such as badges or jewellery with Christian symbols or posters displayed in windows to create opportunities for conversations.

It is good if Christians are given plenty of opportunities in church services (perhaps in interviews) and Home Groups as well as in private conversations to encourage and build one another up by sharing the difference Jesus makes to them. Their stories can also be passed on more widely in church newsletters. At NSBC we published a collection of testimonies and gospel messages in a little book, “The Difference Jesus Makes” which we give to visitors and members have given to their friends (see Idea2).

Conversations and Cake

I hereby launch a campaign to ban the phrase “followed by refreshments.” This gives the wrong impression that when the church gather to worship and learn, beverages and nibbles are incidental. On the contrary, times of hospitality are too valuable and useful to squander. I am struck by Catherine Butcher’s inspiring phrase, “overwhelmingly generous hospitality”²⁹ where we demonstrate God’s love and give guests and visitors an opportunity to encounter Jesus in us. And the greater purpose of “refreshments” is surely to facilitate conversations and the building of relationships.

²⁷ Steve Hollinghurst *Mission Shaped Evangelism* 161)

²⁸ Mark Cartledge *Testimony Its importance, place and potential* Grove Renewal 9 2002 p 3

²⁹ Catherine Butcher on p 9 of *Sharing Jesus* (2014) available from www.sharejesusinternational.com

We are being church just as much while we are welcoming visitors and guests, sharing experiences and testimony and pastoral concerns, building relationships and maybe even praying for each other, as when we are singing hymns and listening to sermons. When better to get into the habit of talking about Jesus than with other believers at church? Over the last five years our most far-reaching change at NSBC was the decision to serve refreshments to everybody in the worship area and not down the corridor in the little hall. Now almost everybody stays and chats. In some churches singing fewer songs or shortening the sermon might encourage more to stay and be involved in those precious conversations. I went to one church where they showed a special welcome by serving filter coffee for visitors and instant for their regulars. And we have cake. Birthday cakes. Special occasion cakes. Lots of cake – with suitable tasty alternatives for any who shouldn't eat cake, of course. I will say more below about those churches who are building on this simple principle in various forms of Café Church.

A Joined-Up Programme of Evangelism

Churches will want to build evangelistic events and activities into their programmes. The Barna research indicated that more than a quarter of practising Christians believe that “attending (a) church service(s) (other than weddings and funerals)” had positively influenced them in becoming a Christian.³⁰ Highlights will be services of Believer's Baptism which will normally surely be outreach opportunities built around the testimony and the baptism alongside a gospel message which is aimed at guests and visitors, with an appeal offering ways to respond and find out more. Not everybody will want to make all their Sunday services Willow Creek style “Seeker Services” but surely all churches will want to plan periodic special “Guest Services” or “Seeker-Sensitive Services”, not least taking seasonal opportunities such as New Year, Valentine's Day, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Summer Holiday, Harvest, Halloween/“Light Parties”, Remembrance and Christmas. On these occasions “less is more” and “overwhelmingly generous hospitality” will give valuable opportunities for conversations. Many churches arrange “Meals with a Message” from breakfasts to lunches to dinner parties, from coffee mornings to tea parties to picnics in the park {see Idea32}. Then there are endless varieties of special occasions based around music, drama, dance, mime, comedy, illusionists and escapologists, arts and crafts. Most of these can be organised as readily “off-site” and some in the open-air {see Idea10 and Idea30}. Events and activities in themselves communicate the gospel and they also give Christians something interesting to talk about with their not yet Christian friends. More than that, “For a member of the congregation, inviting a friend to a mission event may in itself be a major step of faith.”³¹ Special events and activities give Christians opportunities to talk about Jesus.

Some Inquirer's courses are much more accessible than others. In *Evangelism which way now?* Mike Booker and Mark Ireland evaluate contemporary strategies for evangelism. Courses for Inquirers like Alpha and Christianity Explored can be very helpful but both are long and demand significant prior understanding. *Emmaus Nurture* from Church House Publishing is more accessible. Courses which are shorter and start “further back” from commitment to Christ include *Start!* (CPAS) and *The Y Course* (Agape). *Essence* (Kingsway) has been written especially for “New Age” seekers. The pre-evangelistic WellSprings Course for ladies written by Rev Leesa McKay is based around refreshment and pampering {see Idea11}. More courses are listed in Idea21.

Research shows that courses developed “in-house” are very often more effective for Inquirers than commercial materials. These can be simple Evangelistic Bible Studies, “Agnostics Anonymous”, Meal-with-a-Message” or “Grill the Vicar” {see Idea4} occasions. Courses can be built around books or videos. I have developed a 6-week course called “Meet Jesus” based on the DVD *Jesus of Nazareth*, starring Robert Powell as Jesus, with an accompanying booklet {see Idea6}.

³⁰ *Talking Jesus* booklet p23 at www.talkingjesus.org

³¹ Mike Booker and Mark Ireland *Evangelism Which Way Now?* Church House 2003 p69.

In passing, when not yet Christians visit our premises, either for special events or for regular “Contact Place” activities it is good for there to be posters (or even video screens) as “silent witnesses” to provoke thought and open doors to conversations. In particular for buildings which do not have a dedicated “sanctuary” area it can be good to provide a specific “prayer place” or “reflection point” with appropriate text and images together in one place {see Idea5}. Thinking about premises, see also Idea22.

It is important that church websites are designed for not-yet-Christians and to help visitors find Jesus rather than containing church histories or complicated statements of faith which are full of jargon. The church street address and email address should be prominent, as should a contact number such as a cheap mobile phone for incoming texts and voicemails. If the site does not explain the Christian faith clearly it can at least point to some websites designed to help Inquirers {see Idea14}.

This section has talked about church-organised events and activities and premises. Folk from outside may be surprised when Christians choose not to talk about God at church events. In some cases not yet Christians may even be looking for ways and opportunities to ask their questions and to talk about spiritual things, which Christians may fail to give. However the thrust of this paper remains to encourage Christians to talk about Jesus to their friends, neighbours and colleagues wherever we are.

Ministers as Evangelists

One major finding in John Finney’s study *Finding Faith Today* has generally been overlooked. Asking new Christians to identify the “Main Factor” helping them find faith, 19% said “Friends” and 14% said “Spouse or Partner”. But the second most frequent “Main Factor” at 17% was “A Minister”. Asked about “Supporting Factors” in the journey to faith, the most frequently mentioned was “A Minister” at 45%, with “Friends” at 40% and “Church Activities” at 32%.³² Even recognising that those findings were published more than 20 years ago, we should not ignore the parts ministers can still play in the faith journeys of very many people.

Whether ministers consider themselves to be an evangelist or not, the reality is that many people will start conversations on spiritual things with a minister which they would not do with anybody else. It is good if the minister is given as many of those opportunities as possible. This implies that it is part of the mission of the church for the minister to have time and space to build contacts in the community and friendships with neighbours and friends outside the church. Another aspect of this is for members of church and congregation to create opportunities for their family and friends to meet “our minister” outside church contexts, at street parties, barbecues or dinner parties, pamper evenings and chocolate parties, watching football, camping weekends or sailing trips, or even just sharing tea or coffee. Christians must be brave enough to trust their minister not to be too weird, or Bible-bash their friends! But such encounters will also open the door for numerous future opportunities when pastoral situations arise, as well as making it easier for the Christians to talk about their faith. It also follows that in general ministers must not be tied up in the mechanics of making outreach activities and events happen, but rather be as free as possible to engage guests and visitors in conversations – even though many ministers would rather hide in the kitchen. That also ensures that someone who needs to talk to a minister urgently is able to do so without the occasion grinding to a halt.

Ministers who by personality, training, gifting or simply by being known to be “a minister” are naturally effective in personal evangelism need to find ways to enable everybody else in the church to share their faith even though they may have different personality types and do not have the title. Hence my companion programme of teaching and activities “Prepared to Answer.” Ministers who do not consider themselves to be evangelists must still set an example for the whole church by preparing themselves to take all the opportunities which come their way, as well as actively encouraging those church members who are gifted in evangelism. It should go without saying that all ministers must give a strong lead to the church in organising and promoting evangelistic activities and events.

³² John Finney *Finding Faith Today* BFBS 1992 pp 36-37

“Unchain the Lion”

Finding Faith Today discovered an under-reported fact. 27% of Christians surveyed said that the most important “supporting factor” in their journey to faith was “the Bible.”³³ Among Baptist Christians, 22% considered that the Bible was the “main factor” in that process.³⁴ The Barna research similarly found that 27% of Christians felt that the Bible had a significant influence on them coming to faith.³⁵ We believe that God can speak powerfully through His Word the Bible not only to believers but also to not yet Christians (John 20:30-31; Hebrews 4:12). That’s why it is a good thing for all Christians to know by heart some key Bible verses and to be able to tell some Bible stories about Jesus when appropriate. And that is why it is also good for churches to take every opportunity to place Scripture in the hands of folk who are not yet Christians. (Let’s face it, apart from the Gideons, nobody else is going to do that!) It is surely beneficial to offer gifts of Gospels or New Testaments to seasonal visitors and for members to give away to their contacts, in a modern translation and attractive presentation of course. There are also many useful evangelistic tracts and booklets {see Idea16}. These Scriptures may also in time open the door for conversations as they did for Philip in Acts 8, “Do you understand what you are reading?” It was C.H. Spurgeon who said, “Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion! Unchain it and it will defend itself.” We need to unchain the lion!

Written Testimony

Many believe that the most valuable outreach tool a church can develop is a good outward-facing church Newsletter. Church Newsletters are expensive in money, time and energy. How much better to produce monthly or seasonally a publication which is not restricted to church members but designed primarily for not yet Christians. Containing gospel messages and Bible teaching, prayers and testimonies as well as news of upcoming events, it should be aimed at fringe contacts through the church’s activities and be a publication Christians are very comfortable to give away to their friends, neighbours and colleagues. It can open the door to conversations. “Did you read ?” “What did you think about ?” Any Newsletter should aim at quality. Chris Radley wrote that people “instinctively equate scruffily produced materials with inefficiency or untrustworthiness.”³⁶ He is right. See Idea8 for helpful advice and resources.

Christian books and booklets are “written testimony” of the many and varied ways Christians have experienced God. It is good to have a CHURCH BOOKSTALL to serve Christian interests but it is especially important to have titles which will be helpful to not-yet-Christians, and maybe to select and promote those separately in contexts where non-yet-Christians will come across them. You will want Bibles and New Testaments produced for both adults and children and books explaining the Bible and the Christian faith. You will also want biographies and books addressing the questions Inquirers might have about faith. All these might be bought by seekers, or by Christians to read themselves or to give as gifts to their friends. Good Christian bookshops will offer a discount of 10% to church bookstalls and offer Sale or Return for bookstalls for special occasions. For good advice for Church Bookstalls visit <http://www.goodbookreviews.org.uk> In parallel churches may also wish to establish a LENDING LIBRARY of Christian books which could also include appropriate DVDs. {See Idea15}

I also recommend a CHRISTIAN CHRISTMAS CARD STALL. It is good to help Christians to give Christmas cards containing a Bible verse or Christmas message as a witness to their family and friends. Beginning in November, a stall can sell on at cost a range of appropriate Christian Christmas cards and perhaps other gifts obtained from your local Christian book shop. The minister may be happy to buy unsold cards to give to church members, congregation and contacts. Some churches also deliver their own Christmas Cards and Easter Cards to the neighbourhood {see Idea9}.

³³ John Finney *Finding Faith Today* p37

³⁴ John Finney *Finding Faith Today* p61

³⁵ *Talking Jesus* booklet p23 at www.talkingjesus.org

³⁶ Chris Radley *Message on a Shoestring* (MARC Europe 1986 p 6)

Adventurous Outreach

I am very grateful to North Springfield Baptist Church for a period of Sabbatical Leave in the summer of 2015. As well as space for lots of reading, reflection and writing, I was able to meet a number of ministers and visit churches and I was excited to find more than half of them running new and creative approaches to evangelism which I sum up under the umbrella title of “adventurous outreach.” It is notable that some of the most adventurous were small churches with very limited resources and personnel. I thoroughly recommend actually visiting other churches and ministers to find out what they are doing. Idea31 lists the churches I talked with, confident that they will be happy to share their experiences more widely.

In order to reach not-yet-Christians better, many churches are venturing into some form of “Café Church”. This can be quarterly, monthly or even more frequent, either on Sunday mornings or midweek, usually on church premises but sometimes in a secular coffee shop. In some places this includes all the usual ingredients of a morning service, except seated around tables to facilitate discussions after or even during “the service”. My experience of that approach dates back to establishing back in 1994 and running for five years a church plant in that style. Others replace the hymns and prayers with short discussion starter talks or DVDs. All the different forms of Café Church are productive because at heart evangelism is about building relationships and sharing conversations about Jesus.

Some other churches have gone down the route of “Messy Church” where the focus is on arts and crafts and often aimed at toddlers and/or primary school children and their families. It is important to realise that “café church” and “messy church” are not primarily events or activities. They are rather the communities which grow up as people gather around either hospitality or creative arts or indeed some other focus such as a school, a community project, a shared interest, or indeed some non-geographical network {see Idea40}. Again these approaches are effective substantially because they offer contexts where conversations about Jesus arise naturally. Idea40 talks more about “emerging church” and “fresh expressions of church.”

Reflecting on the experiences of these churches and also on 29 years of experience leading both local churches and ecumenical groups of churches in mission I offer the following remarks for churches considering “adventurous outreach”.

- Many churches are doing very adventurous things but wouldn’t call themselves “pioneers.” “Adventurous Outreach” is my phrase for “ordinary” churches doing “out-of-the-ordinary” “cutting edge” mission but I would love somebody to come up with a better word or phrase.
- Expect to trial a new activity for at least 12 months. Many promising ideas are cancelled or altered before they have time to become established and succeed.
- The enthusiastic involvement of the minister (although you don’t have to have one to be adventurous!) and of church leaders is essential. Outreach and evangelism should be on the agenda of every leadership and church meeting.
- There is no such thing as too much publicity. Quality publicity materials, cards, flyers, posters, digital media. If you don’t invite people they won’t come! Invitation is not just handing out publicity materials at events/activities but also verbally inviting them, and also church and congregation personally inviting their friends and contacts.
- In any event or activity, the genuine welcome which ordinary church members give to visitors and guests will make as much of an impression as the “content” of the occasion.
- Outreach costs money and few churches spend enough on it. Think about what more you could attempt if you tripled your church budget for outreach and evangelism!
- In any event and activity provide ways in which visitors and guests might respond. How will you take conversations about Jesus to the next level?
- What risks has your church taken for the gospel in the past year?

Just do it!

Michael Green wrote, "One of the greatest tragedies in the ossifying Western church is that people do not, by and large, talk about Jesus. That is extremely foolish. Jesus is the supremely attractive one. If we exclude from our conversations the only really winning card that we have, we are of all people most to be pitied."³⁷ Pete Gilbert puts it this way. "Potentially every good deed that you do, ... every good conversation that you have, every opportunity recognised and taken is a part of effective evangelism."³⁸ The Barna research comments "So we need to talk about (Jesus): to more people, more often, and more relevantly. The research shows that so many of us are already talking about Jesus. We are not ashamed of the gospel, despite some of us feeling ill-equipped to talk to our not-yet Christian friends and family members about Jesus."³⁹ The fourth of its ten recommendations reads, "Let's encourage our congregations to prioritise talking about Jesus to our friends and family"⁴⁰

We need to be brave in trying new things. If all the events and activities in a church are aimed at the last generation instead of the present generation, then the last generation will be the last generation! The apostle Paul talked about *using all possible means* to save people, doing whatever it takes, any which way we can (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). There is an old story about an occasion when a lady criticised evangelist D.L. Moody for his methods in attempting to win people to Christ. "I don't like the way you do it," she said. "I agree with you," Moody answered. "I don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?" "I don't do it," the lady replied. Moody responded, "Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it." To end with Michael Green: "Personal conversation is the best way of evangelism. It is natural, it can be done anywhere, it can be done by anyone."⁴¹ However we are led to do it, every church and every Christian needs to be making the very best of every opportunity to talk about Jesus.

FURTHER READING

Visit www.takingeveryopportunity.org

This website of reflections on outreach and evangelism contains the following resources:

Taking Every Opportunity – Conversations About Jesus – the latest version of this paper.

42 Great Outreach Ideas – resources to explain and expand on many of the ideas introduced here.

Preaching the Gospel Necessarily Includes Words – an expanded version of that section above.

Prepared to Answer – the programme delivering these ideas to North Springfield Baptist Church.

The full Bibliography for this paper and all the resources is online at Idea41.

Sermons presenting these ideas to NSBC are being posted at www.pbthomas.com/blog

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³⁷ Michael Green *Evangelism Through the Local Church* Hodder 1990 p 88.

³⁸ Pete Gilbert *Kiss and Tell Evangelism as a Lifestyle* CWR 2003 p 59.

³⁹ *Talking Jesus* booklet p24 at www.talkingjesus.org

⁴⁰ <http://www.talkingjesus.org/research/recommendations.cfm>

⁴¹ Michael Green *Evangelism now and then* IVP 1979 p 134.