

Taking Evangelism Seriously



by David Edwards



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

J.I.PACKER
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Biblical Mandate

“Evangelism” is a much-used word whose meaning in use is not always precise. How should we define it?

Matthew’s gospel ends with marching orders for Jesus’s disciples. Said the risen Lord: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:18-20). Evangelism is the first step in fulfilling this great commission. The word means, first, bringing people to know the Gospel—to know, that is, that Jesus Christ, the Jesus of the Bible, was and is a real person, Lord of all and a great Saviour, who still calls people into life-transforming discipleship to himself; and, second, it means helping them any way we can to respond to Jesus’s call.

From this we can see three compelling reasons for taking evangelism seriously, as the church’s proper priority and every Christian’s personal business.

First, it would be wrong to keep to ourselves this message of new life and hope through Christ, when everyone needs it and without it will lead a diminished life leading to a dark, loveless eternity.

Second, Jesus himself and many passages in the Word of God tell us directly that we are to spread the good news.

Third, the most loving thing we can ever do is introduce other persons to Jesus, who will transform their lives as he has transformed ours.

The task may take us out of our comfort zone, but when we step beyond where we feel comfortable in order to be faithful in obeying our Lord, our faith and strength are increased. We should constantly be asking God to give us a passion for people’s spiritual welfare and a longing to see his kingdom extended into more and more human lives.

The desire of God's heart is to draw all of us rebellious creatures back to himself. That is why he sent his Son into this world to redeem us, and why, as Philippians 2:5-8 declares, the Son was willing to abandon his dignity, become human without ceasing to be divine, and obediently endure death on the cross as a condemned criminal—the lowest degradation that the ancient world knew. Verse 5 says we should have the same attitude as Jesus. He gave himself for the world on the cross. We are to give ourselves for the world in many forms of service, one of which is evangelism.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus's compassion towards the crowds surrounding him is highlighted. In 9:36 we read that he saw them as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The people who should be their shepherds, the Jewish leaders, were either ignoring them or leading them astray. The flock has effectively been left to the wolves and this tears at Jesus's heart. His compassion, and his commitment as a witness on mission to teaching needy souls to know and serve God and thereby find life, should mark us too.

Anglican Approach

Ever since the Reformation, Anglican priests have been charged at their ordination not only to minister the Word of God to their congregations, but also to "seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad... that they may be saved through Christ for ever" (*Book of Common Prayer*). The fulfilling of this evangelistic imperative is a task in which every rector should require his congregation to work with him.

Once, in Canada as in Britain, Anglican churchgoers numbered far more than they do today. But every congregation has its list of members, some of whom are not seen in church very often and some of whom do not come at all. In his book *Restless Churches* Reginald Bibby tells us that we have a huge evangelistic task awaiting us among those who identify themselves as Anglican, for example on the Census, yet have little or no contact with the church. Most of them are not hostile, but for some reason have drifted away from the church's worshipping life, which suggests that they have yet to find the secret of personal faith in Christ. Bibby thinks that it can be very fruitful systematically to renew contact here, showing that these are people for whom we care. This, at any rate, can be a starting-point.

But what are we to do, in practical terms? Stripped down to es-

entials, the answer is that we must find a way to do something that many of us learned to do in our youth, when we were trying to pluck up courage to ask someone out on a date. We have to initiate contact; we have to make the first move. We may be rejected, but as in those far off days of adolescence we shall survive and learn from the experience to do things better next time.

The Networking Way

Traditionally the Anglican model of ministry has been parochial, that is, geographically centred on a particular allocated area in which the church building stands and where the idea has been to provide pastoral care to all whose postal address sets them within the parish boundaries. In some rural areas this may still work well, but in most urban communities a different approach may be in order.

Today people, especially those below the age of 35, tend to be network based rather than geographically centred. They work during the day with people from all over the region, they might be members of a gym with folk from across town, they drive to their preferred clubs and pubs, at quite a distance from where they live. They are employed in one place, they play in another and they live in a third. If we are seeking, as we should, to share the gospel with them, we have to ask where and how are they regularly gathering, so that we may be able to see the most effective way to reach them.

Two stories

First: I was recently involved in mission work in a large city. One of the tasks we undertook was to ride the Subway and seek out opportunities to share the love of Jesus with our fellow travellers. It was not hard to find people who were willing to talk, and to listen as we talked. Had I been a minister of a church in that city and had the funds, I would have employed Subway Chaplains to ride the rails and fulfil this ministry on a regular basis.

Second: not too long ago a new housing development was constructed without space being allocated for a church building. The local Bishop was asked how he was going to serve the area spiritually. His response was that he was going to send in a priest and see who sticks. He sent one of his more creative clergy who spent time looking around to see where people regularly gathered. The answer was Wal-Mart. He was Anglo-Catholic by tradition, and approached the

store's management with a request to celebrate Holy Communion in their entrance foyer each Sunday morning. The request was granted, and very soon he had a congregation of more than 100 people meeting there each week.

To gain wisdom from these stories we must understand the difference between a principle and a project. A principle is a guideline for application in the many and various situations on which it bears. A project is a plan with a goal, fitted to a particular set of circumstances for the meeting of a need or the gaining of a benefit. Evangelism is a project informed by principles that apply in all cases. The stories relate to two particular evangelistic projects, each shaped by its situational frame of reference.

In shaping evangelistic projects there are three principles to apply in every case. First, one must ask where people gather and how we can meet them and establish community with them in what to them is a natural gathering-place. Second, what are the interests and what is the range of experience of our congregation members who will form the evangelizing team, and how may they be equipped and enabled to be effective witnesses, being the people they are? Third, are there other churches, agencies or organisations that share our evangelistic purpose and with which we can be partners?

Wherever evangelism is projected, Christian visibility of an appropriate sort is needed by way of preparation. Some of this (hopefully, not all) will fall on the clergy. Thus, I try to walk around my parish once a week wearing my collar as I go. This has led to conversations on the street about many issues, often to being asked to pray for people amidst the traffic, and it prepares the way for future evangelistic outreach.

We need to realise that there are many opportunities to welcome people to our neighbourhoods, and form relationships with them by serving them while they are still strangers, conscious of their many needs in this new place. This is especially true of new Canadians. To prepare and present an information pack about the district, its organizations, churches and amenities, can be a good move. I have also found it helpful to take along some food on my first visit.

During my ministry I have often prepared community surveys (of which more later) to help congregations understand the needs of their area and how best to respond to them. The reply to one question saddens me. When asked "What can the church do for this area?" the reply more often than not from those addressed is "Nothing!" Perhaps

a better question would be, “What is the biggest present need, or lack, in this community?” For when something like a consensus on local need appears, the congregation can take it from there and set itself to service the need it has uncovered. A point of contact, of goodwill and trust, can thus be established, and once that is achieved more may follow. A morning creche, or an evening youth club, are examples of what the church can provide, and the spectacle of love in social action can prompt the question, what motivates these Christians? what makes them tick?—and out of such questions evangelism may grow.

Reading the Times

One of the problems that the church constantly faces is the difficulty of fully appreciating the societal changes that are taking place around us. The higher the average age of a congregation, the more conservative it tends to be, and not so much from reasoned conviction as from the human craving for a comfort zone where things can be relied on to stay pretty much the same, whatever may be happening in the world outside. There is no doubt that Western society is undergoing a profound shift of outlook, often described as a move from Modernity—too much trust in reason’s power—to Post-Modernity—too little. But however that may be, it is undoubtedly true that we are moving from a mind-set of certainty to one of uncertainty. To illustrate, from two extremes: When my Father left the Royal Air Force in 1948, he expected the job he took in the local foundry to last until he retired forty years later. That is how it once was. In 1976, however, when I could have left school, our careers teacher called us together and told us we would be the first group to leave the school to whom he could not guarantee that we would find a job at all, let alone a job for life. That is how it is now. Job security is largely a thing of the past, and our socio-economic uncertainty boomerangs on people’s minds and prompts two types of question that nowadays are constantly asked: firstly, “What is the point?”—of anything!—and secondly, “If there is a God, what does that have to do with me?”—and why should I bother about it? The questions are cynical, often defiantly so.

Granted, our era is in one sense, a very “spiritual” age, as witnesses the size of the spirituality and self-help section in the average bookstore. But people seeking spirituality in the modern secular sense—self-knowledge, self-therapy and self-absorption within some kind

of mystical unity—do not look to the churches for answers, since Christianity and Christians have been identified for them as a significant part of the problem. How can God’s people make constructive evangelistic contact with persons who look at life this way?

At the risk of sounding heretical, I would urge that one of our difficulties is our time-honoured, old-fashioned, conservative tendency to start our evangelism by focusing on Jesus. The more relevant, better contact-making move will be to start with God, and only focus on Jesus when people can see what we mean when we say he is God—for “God” is a Bible word with a biblically defined meaning that is very different from the ideas of deity that our post-Christian religious culture has come up with. Many of today’s spiritual searchers have little or no notion of Christianity, partly because they do not know, never having been told, that the true God, the Creator, is tri-personal, with a moral character marked by holiness and mercy, justice and grace, truth-telling and faithfulness, fatherly love to his own people, and a set purpose of renewing and re-creating his world. In these days of rival religions and theologies, we cannot be clear about Christianity and Christ till we are clear about God. Yet it remains true, as it has always been true, that God—the real God—encounters and impacts people in all sorts of ways (theologians call it general revelation), so that questions about God are constantly being asked. Might our evangelism be more effective if it began with pointing to God, so giving people a framework in which to understand their inklings of him, rather than rushing them to the cross to show them how God solved the problem of our sin, a problem of which, initially anyway, most people nowadays are unaware? Younger people focus on experience rather than argument: do we tune in to that? At the same time there are still many, usually the over 40’s, who will respond to the rational, logical arguments of apologetics. It is still very necessary for us to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us.

In this culturally diverse and confusing era, it seems impossible for any one church or agency to evangelize all the different groups that exist. So if the congregation next door is excellent at reaching the elderly, bless them. If the church across the street does well among new Canadians, wish them God-speed. If the fellowship on the other side of town is succeeding with street youth, pray for them. And then spend time with God to help you discern where your own evangelistic vocation lies.

Loving, Welcoming, Reaching Out

I heard a Bishop say that what we need is not friendly churches, but welcoming churches. Many churches consist of people friendly to each other during coffee hour while newcomers are left on the outside looking in, and that will not do.

What does a welcoming church look like? The basic principle is that it does not wait for people to come to it, but reaches out to them and makes them feel wanted. Stores, car dealers and other businesses succeed because they are out there in the market place encouraging us to become their customers. They do it through advertising, having accessible space and staff who seek to help those who come in, and letting us see what they have to offer. What we have to offer is a “pearl of great price” (Mt. 13:45-46), and if we will not use all means to encourage others to receive it there is something wrong with us. Car dealers excel in the warm welcome, and so should we.

Activity is in order here. God, confronted with human sin, came to us in Christ as our rescuer. Jesus did not remain a small time builder, working in the family shop and on the site, waiting for people to realise who and what he was, but left his earthly home and family to travel around teaching, preaching, healing, announcing the kingdom of God and making disciples. While on earth he sent his followers out to preach, and after his resurrection, as we saw, he turned them loose on an unsuspecting world. Here are models of active outreach.

Underpinning all such activism must be the principle of love, a self-giving love which sees the outsider as important and longs that he or she be transformed into an insider. Rarely does this happen in a moment. In England in the 1990's, a survey organized by Bishop John Finney, published as *Finding Faith Today*, sought to discover what the primary factors were for adults who came to faith in Jesus. The most important finding can be put thus: “I became involved with the church, or with Christians, for such-and-such a reason (fill in the blank) and I found a community that loved me, cared for me, and drew me in, and I learned the God-stuff later on, after I had become part of the group.” That is how it constantly happens in modern Canada, too.

Do our churches try to be places where people find acceptance? How many ways are there into our Christian community? How accessible are our buildings? How often are they open so that people can come in and be welcomed outside the services? What message

do our buildings give? Are they cared for or run down? The value we have for Jesus himself might be reflected here. Are our churches community places? How do we deal with difficult issues and difficult people? Do we show charity and mercy? The list of questions in this area is endless.

A personal anecdote. One of my uncles died this year at the age of 80. During the last decade of his life he began to attend church again after a break of more than 40 years. I asked him why he had stopped going all those years before. He said, "There were so many arguments going on about money and other such things. I faced that type of problem every day at work, I did not need it on a Sunday." He did not cease going to church for reasons of faith, but because of the behaviour of the community in which he found himself.

As far as evangelism is concerned the issue becomes one of asking ourselves how we are set up to show the love of God and to proclaim the Gospel. What do the various groups which meet as part of the church do to show the love of God? How is the youth group doing this? What is the loving evangelistic edge of the ACW, the Choir or the Men's Group?

As we seek to create loving communities we will no doubt make many mistakes, but that is part of being the church. Some people will think that we are not being loving enough, because their expectations of us are too high. They may feel rejected, let down and hurt. That is the downside of trying to be Jesus' agents in today's society. But we must keep at it.

To put my positive point in the jargon of missiology, we should be trying to build "missional congregations". Darrell L. Guder's book *Missional Church* is extremely helpful in this regard. Essentially the congregation has to ask the question, where can we be effective evangelistically at the present moment? Basically what is our next step? Too often churches attempt an evangelistic project which is beyond their means. The result is that it fails and they give up. Evangelism is much like riding a bicycle, there is a need to gain in confidence and keep going so as not to fall off!

Evangelistic effort has to be focused on the possible, not on the unrealistic dream. The need is to change the mentality of the congregation towards a missional mind set. This is usually a lengthy process, rather than a quick fix. It takes teaching and example by the church leaders in order for it to come to fruition. The first thing we must

learn to do is to take a long hard look at ourselves as a church community. Four diagnostic questions can help here:

What do we do well?

What can we do better?

What would we like to do?

What is hindering us from doing what we would like to do?

These simple questions can be asked of the whole church and all the organizations can ask the same of themselves and feed their answers back into the main process. The most important thing is to be honest. Answering the questions should help us to identify the resources we have been given.

A concrete example may be of use here. A church took a long hard look at the community in which it was set and tried to identify groups of people in the area whom it could serve. They did this through obtaining local statistics and going door to door with a survey. They discovered that there were three main groups of people who could benefit from the church's ministry. These were: the elderly, young people and single parents.

They felt that, given their resources which they had identified from asking the diagnostic questions above, they would only be able to serve one of these groups at this point in their history. They looked at each group in turn and considered what was being done for them by other organizations. A new youth centre funded and staffed by the city had recently been opened and they felt they could not improve on this. Several churches ran Midday meal clubs for the elderly, there was one every day, so why duplicate the work of others. There was, however, nothing aimed at single parents. The result was that the church opened a drop-in clothes-and-toy swap shop one morning per week. Within a year this had expanded to three days weekly and the number of baptisms, both infant and adult, increased by leaps and bounds, as did the number of young families in the congregation.

The principle here is: put your limited resources where you think they can be most effective, in terms of thorough enquiry into currently unmet needs.

The example just given was geographical but it could just as easily have been a network based outreach. What about the people with addiction to alcohol who live spread across a rural area? Is your church the place for an Alcoholics Anonymous group to meet?

In one rural area where I worked several of the local villages were having trouble with youngsters causing problems at Hallowe'en with Trick or Treat. People were having eggs thrown at their houses and other things were going wrong. One of the local churches decided to hold a series of "All Saints" parties on Hallowe'en night for the young people in the area. After a few years the police officer assigned to those communities commented that he did not have to visit that village anymore on October 31st because he knew that the youth were being looked after by the church and there was no need for him to be there. This enabled him to concentrate on other villages. The young people were being introduced to Jesus during these parties and it had a beneficial effect for the growth of the congregation amongst their families.

Actions like these enable us to build the relationships we need in order to share the good news of Jesus effectively. We have to create an environment which is different, which will take people beyond their everyday world into a place of hope, holiness, and love, where we trust they will feel a sense of God.

Implications for Education

Recently, in the Diocese of Fredericton Bishop Graham Cray, Bishop of Maidstone, England, spoke to the clergy about the report *Mission Shaped Church*. Bishop Graham was the Chair of the committee which wrote this document and then presented it to the General Synod of the Church of England. During the time he spent with us one of my newly ordained colleagues said, "I have been trained for a job that no longer exists".

This is a rather bleak assessment of the situation and is far from the whole story. In reality, however, we do need to look at how we educate both clergy and laity to see the opportunities created by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel in our current society.

At the selection stage of vocational development for would-be clergy should we be asking about prior experience in the practice of mission and evangelism? Within the Anglican Communion there is now one of our Provinces (not in the Global South!) which will not consider anyone for ordination who does not have such experience.

How do we train people to keep pace with our increasingly networked and multiform culture? It is not likely that this generation of under 35's will settle down as they get older into more traditional

ways. No recent generation has gone back to being like Mom and Dad, so why should this one? How then should we prepare tomorrow's clergy to keep up with the people around them, and to cope with the continuance of rapid cultural change in all its forms?

As well as thinking about clergy training, we must also ask ourselves how we should enable ordinary lay folk for mission and evangelism. Training, or equipping as some call it, is certainly needed here. Given the way society works now, fewer and fewer people come into regular contact with clergy or full-time church leaders. As we noted, there is less and less awareness of the Christian story among the general population. Many who sit in pews on Sunday will on Monday morning enter mission fields far more challenging than those faced by missionaries to the Two-Thirds World. The church today does little to help lay people feel confident enough in their faith to share it in a simple, sensitive way. What should we be doing about this?

In his important book *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin speaks of the "privatization" of Christian faith. The West, he says, has developed the idea of two types of truth, public and private. Private truth is thought of as unverifiable belief that is held by an individual or a group; of it we may use the phrase, "It is true for you." No one however may demand that others accept this belief as truth for them and for all the world, that is, as public truth. Christianity has been put into the private category, says Newbigin, and we must start by facing that fact.

The Christian claim is that our faith is truth for everyone, whether this is recognized or not, and church people must be educated to see this and feel confident in saying it. The unique claims of Jesus rest on stubborn historical fact (how did Christianity ever begin, if Jesus did not live, die, and rise from the dead as the New Testament says he did?), and we must be able to state them. But we must understand the views of others and treat them with respect, so as to win the right to be heard.

Yet the eternal questions about life and meaning are still being asked. Almost every soap raises issues about redemption, as the characters try to work out how broken relationships can be restored. In door-to-door surveys (I have done many), the question, "If you could ask God one question, what would it be?" evokes two majority answers—"Why is there so much suffering in the world?" and, "Why am I here?" Throughout my ministry, many of the conversations I

have had about the faith have begun with an ethical conundrum: “I decided to turn the machines off when Dad was sick, was I right?” “If I get really ill I just want them to finish it for me. Is that okay?” “My beautiful daughter is on drugs, what do I do?” The list of questions goes on. This is where theology hits practice and practice hits evangelism. What do we say? Where is God in these situations? How does Scripture apply? Christians, both paid ministers and local church members, need education in God’s revealed truth, so that they can bring wisdom and hope to people with questions like these.

Practicalities

The rector of a very rural parish asked me to meet his ACW and talk to them about evangelism. This was the only group in the congregation that met outside the Sunday services. I gathered with seven ladies all over the age of 70 who told me quite quickly that there was nothing they could do about this and the rector must be out of his mind to think otherwise.

After about an hour we came to the conclusion that there was something they could do. Once every three months they would make a special effort to invite others from the community to their meeting. They did this and within two years their number had grown to fifteen — a very successful first step, which gave them confidence to do other things. Starting small is often the way to go, in evangelism as elsewhere.

Children’s ministry is vital. To the question, which I have often asked in Canada and which Bishop Gavin Reid asked all over England, “Would you say that something that happened to you in connection with the church before you were eleven played a major role in your being a Christian today?” over 70% of people replied “Yes.” But we tend to put too little of our resources into children’s ministry. How does it appear in the budget of your church? And does the church run a Holiday Bible Club, a weeknight children’s club, family socials, family fun days, or anything of that kind? One church I know has a very successful wiener and beans night, where families meet to eat and then go out to bowl. Links with the families from which the children come are very important. At Stone Church we always have a family barbeque at the end of our Vacation Bible School, and I reckon to be there, to forge those links.

What about a Men’s Group that meets for breakfast and does

more? I know of one where the men have a specific aim of involving the husbands of women who come to church alone. They do this by going bowling and on other adventures together. Their creativity allures, and husbands are hooked into the group. From this, friendship evangelism can grow.

How about music? At Stone Church we have devised two choral events telling the story of the Bible and Jesus through song and narration. Recently, too, we inserted in the local Shakespeare Festival a Choral Evensong according to Cranmer's Prayer Book, including Cranmer's own sermon on Justification by Faith from the 1547 *Book of Homilies*. Another church periodically mounts a Bach cantata in morning worship with an evangelistic hook in the sermon. Non-churchgoers can easily be invited to musical events.

Effective evangelism begins with thinking new thoughts about ways of making contact with people around us. Programmes like Alpha, with its meals and weekend away, do some of this thinking for us, but outreach to people not currently connected with the church requires our own thinking in our own situation, and we should be asking God to help us in this.

The most helpful hint I can give is to start reading about mission and evangelism. I recommend Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989), David Watson, *I believe in Evangelism* (Hodder, 1976), Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (IVP, 1999), Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Hodder, 1990), and *Missional Church*, ed. Darrell Guder (Eerdmans, 1998), as starters. When we see what others have thought and done it becomes easier to form creative plans for doing evangelism ourselves. It is, of course, the Holy Spirit's work actually to bring people to faith, but devising ways and means of confronting people with the word of truth through which the Spirit brings life is a constant task for us to tackle. May we all, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, do all we can to make Christ known, and so play our part in advancing the kingdom of God.

Questions For Study and Discussion

1. How would you define the church's evangelistic task in this twenty-first century?
2. What ways and means of outreach to non-churchgoers would you favour in your own neighbourhood and in the networks to which you belong?
3. How do you evaluate the church-less evangelism of TV evangelists?
4. Do you regard the involving of people in church community groups as a fruitful first step in evangelising them? Why or why not?
5. In what ways does the diversity of present-day Western culture help or hinder clear witness to the truth of the Gospel and the saving power of Jesus Christ?
6. Do you think that most Christians fulfil their responsibility in evangelism, or not? Do you think that you yourself do?