

Transforming Evangelism : Prayer and mission

When I first entered ministry together with my husband Andrew we were fresh from college filled with the enthusiasm to conquer the world for God. Launching ourselves upon a gentle rural pastorate with all the subtlety of an armoured tank we worked very hard but had limited success. After five years of ministry, two children and four churches later we were totally exhausted. I believe this was largely because we were not so much cooperating with the Holy Spirit in our ministry more co-opting him onto our well-intentioned but largely human ventures. We were so keen to go for it that we didn't take enough time in prayer to find out what it was meant to be. I hope that we do things differently now and particularly spend more time in listening prayer.

I have learned that prayer is vital for both personal and corporate evangelism and in this chapter we shall explore both aspects. Personal evangelism, or witnessing, is about making the most of God-given opportunities to share the gospel with others around us in both word and deed. Corporate evangelism covers specific visions and plans that God has for growth and revival in the church or community context and indeed across whole nations or continents.

Prayer key to revival

The fact that prayer is essential to direct and equip evangelism has been acknowledged throughout history. Prayer preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus had instructed:

"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" Luke 24: 49 NIV

They waited to receive his empowerment and then they were to reach out and engage in evangelism. How did they wait? In Acts 1:14 we find those first disciples joining all together constantly in prayer. The early church missions were directed and empowered through cooperation with the Holy Spirit through prayer. The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Saul and Barnabas – Acts 13:2-3. The Holy Spirit spoke to the church within the context of their heartfelt worship and we are told that the Spirit then sent the two men to Cyprus – v4.

The current 24/7 interdenominational prayer and mission movement recognises the vital importance of prayer and owes much of its inspiration to the Moravian prayer movement. In 1727, Count Zinzendorf led a group of young people in prayer that began with confession and was followed by a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit resulting in the longest continuous prayer meeting in history, lasting 125 years.

*"As a result more than 3000 evangelists were sent from that small village in the 200 years following taking the gospel to most countries in Europe, as well as the Americas, Asia and Africa."*¹

John Wesley was one of the many 18th century evangelists who was directly touched and inspired by this move of the Spirit. He acknowledged: "God does nothing except through prayer". (This whole backdrop to 24/7 prayer is explored in the DVD from Share Jesus International which is recommended on page 36.)

For John Calvin prayer was also vital:

*"Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayer. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that we were pointed out by the Lord's gospel and which our faith has gazed upon"*²

David Yonggi Cho, founder and senior pastor of the Korean Yoido Full gospel church, which has the largest congregation in the world, attributes such rapid growth to the power of prayer. It began with five members and now has grown to over 830,000. In his book "Prayer key to revival" he writes: "I am convinced that renewal is possible anywhere people dedicate themselves to prayer."³

We are all called to evangelism

Evangelism is a vital and life giving gift and ministry for the individual, the church, and for the world: it is telling the good news (evangel in Greek) of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is also Christ's call to every one of his followers, given through his disciples in the Great Commission:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matt 28:19-20 NIV

Thankfully this passage begins with therefore, which puts it nicely in context. Jesus had just stated that he had the full authority of God to send them out in the work of evangelism. He then goes on to reassure them with a promise “Surely I am with you to the very end of the age”.

For us to share God’s love with others, firstly we need to have experienced something of his love and forgiveness for ourselves and come under his Lordship. Secondly, we need to be guided, equipped and empowered through prayer and be open to the Holy Spirit so he can do his work of evangelism through us. We need to be clear that it is not us who bring about the transformation of others; transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit. We just need to learn to cooperate with him through listening prayer.

Prayer in Personal Evangelism

New birth into the kingdom is one of the four basic works of the Holy Spirit outlined in the Dunamis project (along with sanctification, empowerment and koinonia/fellowship). The Holy Spirit touches people with God’s love and leads them to repentance and commitment. We as Christians are usually only called to play a small part in another person’s journey so we really need to be directed by God who has the bigger picture. He knows what has already gone on in that person’s life. He knows their heart at that moment and can speak into the concerns and satisfy their deepest need. All that we might do would be a stab in the dark in comparison. If we do not listen to God it is very likely that our work of evangelism will be inappropriate and untimely and possibly put people off. The Holy Spirit knows what people are ready to hear at a particular moment in time. He knows when the fields are ripe for harvest. We cannot work effectively without him. Even Jesus himself said: “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” John 5:19 NIV

To engage in effective transforming evangelism we need to be open to all his works in our lives including his spiritual gifts. Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well is an excellent example of this empowerment

being effective in personal evangelism. Jesus made himself available and through the Holy Spirit was given words of knowledge about the Samaritan woman and wisdom to speak them into her life and to bring her to the point of declaring: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Could this be the Messiah?” John 4:29 NIV

James Engels⁴ argues that people rarely become Christians instantaneously. It is usually a process that research shows to average 2-3 years. Understanding the steps that people take on a spiritual journey is vital if we are to know how to present the gospel to them at different points in their journey. Engels also stressed the importance of on-going discipling. Some evangelists believe their work is over once someone has prayed a prayer of commitment, but for Engels the journey continues. Jesus didn’t challenge us to make converts, but to make disciples.

Crucial in this is timely personal witness and encouragement. This may come naturally to some people but for others this can be really challenging. Prayer is vital. Start each day by asking God to provide opportunities and the wisdom to know when, how and who to share your faith with so that you are always prepared for it – see 1 Peter 3:15. Some people find it helpful to write a list of those they feel called to pray for. These might be friends, family, neighbours or colleagues at work or school. Be very practical and specific in your prayers Ask God for small steps you can take in building relationships and respect so that you can earn the right to share about your faith.

And don’t give up too easily! It is good to be like the widow in Luke 18 being persistent in prayer. God does answer our prayers but sometimes it seems to take a long time to receive answers.

Rene Day from Shanklin URC testifies to the importance of persisting in prayer for evangelism. She prayed for 28 years that her husband would become a Christian. She herself had previously had a dramatic conversion from being a staunch communist. After much patient prayer and faithful support, her husband finally made a step of commitment and they enjoyed worshipping together for five years until he died. Rene regularly encourages people not to give up in praying for others.

Prayer in Corporate Evangelism

As well as encouraging personal witness to individuals, churches need to find effective ways of

sharing the good news in the wider context. Corporate evangelism again requires that we listen to God's guidance in all we do.

Though most churches are keen to get involved in evangelism, often it is difficult to see what is the right way to reach out into the local community. If we want corporate evangelism to be transforming we again need to rely on the direction and empowerment of God.

Many congregations are discouraged by their experience of evangelism. They may struggle to fit outreach activities into an already packed programme and then find there is little or no harvest for all the effort. Often this can be because churches are tempted to copy what others have done without taking time to prayerfully consider it. They engage in a particular project because others have recommended it because it has worked for them. There is great disappointment when it doesn't work in their context.

Good idea or God's idea?

The programme may seem to be a good idea but it really needs to be a "God idea" for it to guarantee a harvest. A venture may be exhausting and time consuming particularly in an active church as it is squeezed into a busy schedule, but if it is not what God is calling them to do it may be unfruitful and leave the church disillusioned and disappointed. The problem may simply be that what may have been a good idea in one situation may not be God's idea for them. If it is not God's call it won't bring transformation. It may also be that the church should have laid other things down to give evangelism the priority and resourcing that it generally needs. In sorting out our priorities, how can we begin to see things as God sees them? We need to pray for vision.

Grasping God's vision

As Christians we are born into the Kingdom of God and this includes the calling to join in God's work of creating a new reality, beginning in our own lives. This capacity for vision through the Holy Spirit was prophesied in Joel and re-emphasized by Peter on the Day of Pentecost: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." Acts 2:17 NIV

Though the image of God was marred in us through the fall, there still remains naturally within us limited powers of creation as well as the capacity for exercising dominion. As his children we have the God

given gifts of creative imagination to conceive vision, the ability to analyse and plan and the will or determination to direct our energies to a goal. We also possess the faith that grasps the vision and connects us to the natural and supernatural powers needed for fulfilment.

Visions were significant in the events leading up to Jesus' birth. Paul was frequently led by visions and words such as in the call to Macedonia in Acts 16:9-10. Are we on the lookout? Do we expect God to lead us or are other things dominating our attention?

Kingdom shapers

As Christians we are called to shape the Kingdom together with God. We are not asked to do everything but we are called to cooperate with him. As we seek to engage in evangelism we need to ask God for his vision so he will show us what he wants us to do. To a busy church full of Marthas, Jesus calls us to focus on him and be obedient to his leading. Jesus said to her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:41-42 NIV

Mary focused first on Christ. We must also choose the better way! It is crucial for us to seek God's vision and his plan before embarking on evangelism and we need make time and space to be close to him in order to do this.

Listening Evangelism

This Dunamis model of Listening Evangelism is now fundamental to both Andrew's and my approach to evangelism.⁵ We learned that the first step for this is to spend time in listening prayer, as outlined in the second chapter by Marcus.

As we do this, God has the opportunity to reveal the vision he has for us or our church and to show us how he wants us to engage in evangelism. With God's vision and direction, evangelism will bear fruit because we are cooperating with him and moving according to his timing. Let me illustrate from recent personal experience:

Lymm URC

When we began our most recent ministry we tried to engage in listening evangelism. In both churches we took time to pray in an attempt to discern God's direction, particularly regarding evangelism and outreach. What happened with regard to our smaller church at Lymm was especially interesting because as

we prayed I was given a clear picture of a Christian café and bookshop to be called The Sanctuary. It was built at the back of the church in place of the church hall. It was a difficult picture to share with the congregation, many of whom had been there for years, and I was aware that at that stage I should not reveal what I had been shown. At this time the congregation discerned together through corporate listening prayer that God was calling us to develop three specific areas. First to grow the existing healing ministry, second to look at the possibility of Café/Christian bookshop with a Fair Trade outlet and thirdly some form of community outreach.

Small steps of obedience

As we continued to pray into these areas we took small steps of obedience to God. Initially we extended our healing team to include people from other churches. Also we started a monthly healing service in addition to creating other opportunities for healing prayer. We also opened 'Just shopping' a monthly stall attached to our weekly coffee mornings with Christian books, cards and Fair Trade goods for sale. A new church member also began Toddler Café an outreach event for young Mums and carers that has proved to be very successful. This has subsequently led to The Well an informal Sunday morning breakfast service.

Every two weeks we continue to meet specifically to seek God's direction for the way forward and spend time in listening prayer. We note down any guidance that we receive in a prayer book that is available for anyone who is interested to see.

Listening to God for his timing is crucial but hearing from God about when to share the café vision has also been important. When I eventually shared something of this picture I found it amazing how many other people had also received the same vision, some up to fifteen years previously. Not everybody shared my enthusiasm as many were concerned about the changes that such a project would bring particularly to their much loved church building. This was a little frustrating and in 2007 I felt God told me to wait and work for a time on Church without walls.

We were to lay aside for a while the focus on buildings to enable us to concentrate on the real purpose behind the vision God had given us, reaching out to our local community in the name of Christ. Church without walls was to remind us that success should not be measured by how many people we have managed to persuade into our individual buildings swelling church membership. This at worst can lead to

an insular numbers game when we are more worried about church membership than about lost souls. We were being called to go outside our buildings and work with Christians from different churches to build the Kingdom of God. We were to take the Gospel to where the people were.

This led us in 2008 to starting a monthly HOPE 08 stall in the village market to share the gospel and reach out to the community. This has been really worthwhile and part of the blessing has been the opportunity to regularly work together across denominational barriers for evangelism. But now as I write is the time for the vision to be fulfilled, we are ready for the walls, the first phase of the café/ Bookshop is to be opened shortly.

As you can see, prayer has been a vital part of these developments and, of course, prayer continues! My own prayer is that through this café there may be many who come to know and love God as it provides a special place to engage in transforming evangelism. Our corporate steps must now be matched by our readiness to do the all-important one to one work. The two aspects are really inseparable and all that happens needs to be thoroughly prayer led.

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This chapter is an extract from GEAR's booklet 'Let Us Pray', which is available to purchase from the website: www.praytheway.org.uk and/or www.gear.org.uk

Acknowledgements and bibliography

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