

## **Brief presentation to the London District Synod on Evangelism – April 2019.**

### **Evangelism and Mission – a snippet of then and now**

What is the relationship between Evangelism and Mission?

Particularly since the Reformation, and including the time of Wesley, mission was largely understood to be the Christianizing of hitherto unchristian lands, by various means. Whereas evangelism was largely understood to be the re-igniting or re-activating of Christian faith in an existing Christian culture, country or context. So, Billy Graham could say to North Americans 50 years ago, 'you know you have rejected the faith taught on your mother's knee, I want you to get out of your seats....' And incidentally, such 'crusade' evangelism only really goes back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In recent decades it's become increasingly clear that those distinctions are almost useless. If our cultures were ever 'Christian' – as some Victorians believed - they are not now, and we live in a *mission* field rather than an environment where evangelism – at least understood in Billy Graham type terms – might be particularly effective.

This is good news! But a downside is that historic denominations like ours come to describe everything they do as 'mission' but very often within that is not an intentionality about apt evangelism: the intention of making Christ known and inviting people to become His. 'Old evangelism' has been largely rejected and too often nothing else put in its place. Our Methodist renewed focus on evangelism then, is not about the retrieving of old models - now increasingly ineffective and questioned - but the identifying of apt, contemporary models of evangelism as a crucial element of God's mission today.

### **'converts' and 'disciples' - a poor false legacy**

A key reason for rejecting previous models of Evangelism is not only that it assumed what now can't be assumed but also that that resulted in a 'reduced' version of Christianity – Christian lite - being advocated. Take two examples.

First, that becoming a Christian was essentially presented as mental assent to a series of theological propositions a kind of 'tick box' belief. When in fact being a follower of Jesus is much more than this. Second, that consequently old evangelism seemed content, or even intent upon making *converts* – or sometimes simply church attenders - rather than Christian *disciples*.

The evangelism we need today can't collude with such a reduced version of Christianity. Rather it must be intentional about life-long, whole of life, world transforming following of Jesus. That is worth aspiring to and inviting people into.

### **Evangelism – a dreaded word? an indispensable activity?**

In other words, we have to move away from regarding evangelism as - in the words of Becca Pippert 'something we wouldn't do to our dog', and more towards that great statement by Ceylonese Methodist Daniel Niles, that "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where they found food."

### **Methodism – an 'Evangelistic' tradition**

Former President of Conference, Steve Wild talks of being *Evangelistic*. That's a stretchy, malleable, flexible thing, rather than a rigid, inflexible thing. I like that. I like it because at its best Methodism and its Wesleyan tradition of faith is inherently evangelistic. However it does not omit to be intentional about what Wesley repeatedly termed "offering Christ", and equally expecting people to respond to that offer, one way or another. Nor must we.

I remember many years ago at Easter People, having preached that evening, sitting talking to the preacher the previous evening, a very nice North American Southern Baptist. In the midst of our conversation he suddenly said, "you Methodists really want people to go to heaven don't you?" Somewhat taken by surprise I said cautiously, "I suppose do. Don't all Christians want that?" "I guess" he replied; "though my church seems to spend more time telling people what happens when they don't go to heaven."

Methodist evangelistic evangelism is people affirming, God affirming, life affirming, but isn't blind or naïve about any of these.

### **Newbigin's favourite Great Commission**

The great Lesslie Newbigin often pointed out that there are in fact several Great Commissions in the gospels, not just Matthew's 'Go and make disciples'. His own favourite 'great commission' was the passage we read from John 20, and particularly the sentence "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he was teaching he'd ask the group to identify the most important word in the sentence, and of course after five minutes every word in the sentence had been suggested by someone! Then he'd say, "for me, the first word is the most important. **As**. You are sent by Christ as – like – he was sent. Being like Jesus is a potent model of evangelism today, as yesterday.

### **Evangelism and church....**

The relationship between evangelism, evangelist and church is a fraught and complicated one. Too often evangelism has been regarded as an optional extra, belonging to a peculiarly gifted – or sometimes just peculiar(!) – person, called to be an evangelist. And too often denominations like ours have conveniently accepted this model of evangelism, precisely because it enables them to opt out of the whole business. We can do that no longer. The Church is an evangelistic community, and not be so is not to be fully Church.

We are not yet even at the end of the beginning of working out what Church understood in those terms looks like and feels like and is like. But at its bare minimum it is a community of Christ, dedicated to being Christ, in word and deed, among people who do not yet know him.

### **Intentionality - the most basic learning point**

A recent small collection of studies of churches that seem good at evangelism as part of being mission shaped came up with something challenging. The basic insight is that disciples of Jesus are made in congregations that are big and small, high church and low church, modern and traditional, city and country. Churches in all those contexts and of all those natures *can* make more disciples of Jesus Christ - when they are *intentional* about it. When they decide, and resolve, and

then consciously shape themselves to be *intentionally* evangelistic about making more disciples of Jesus Christ.

In short and in conclusion – healthy and appropriate evangelism as a part of *Our Calling* is not beyond any of us, and is possible for all of us.

Martyn Atkins