

MISSIONAL INITIATIVES

Monthly Newsletter

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ARTICLE

One of the great challenges in congregational leadership is helping our people to be evangelistically faithful. And to be honest, we often reduce our equipping efforts to teaching individuals techniques in how to engage in evangelism. Not that learning how to evangelize is wrong, but I personally find it is a far cry from the equipping goal of helping them to become evangelistic people.

“What’s the difference?” you might be thinking. “Isn’t an evangelistic person someone who engages in evangelism?” I often explain the difference in terms of Jesus’ call to the disciple in Matthew 4:19. The NIV translates the Greek in this way, “‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’” This unfortunate translation skews the verse to imply that following Jesus results in a change of activity: people fishing. However, translating it closer to the original, as does the NASB, it reads, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of people.” We find that the emphasis is not on the activity of fishing but rather on the identity of the person, they will be “people-fishers.” Eugene Peterson captures this well in *The Message*, which reads, “I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you.” It is the person who is changed, not just the activity. All fishermen fish, but not all who fish are fishermen.

Following Jesus results in a new self-awareness, a new identity. An identity that is evangelistic. So the question in our equipping efforts is not, “How do we help people evangelize?” but “How do we form our people so they are evangelistic?” How can we help them to be shaped by the good news?

I think we find a bit of a clue in the next couple of verses in that same story: “Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matthew 4:21–22).

The word translated “preparing” is the Greek word *katartizo* and is often translated “equip” in the New Testament. Very often, we understand the word “equip” to mean teach but the New Testament understanding of that word is so much more. The word has the idea of “fitting

together” in mind. We find it translated by such words as fit, frame, join, mend, perfect, prepare, and restore.

So much of our equipping is often focused upon the individual, but Michael Gorman, quoting theologian John Colwell, reminds us that:

The gospel story . . . defines the life of the Christian and the life of the Church, while the life of the Church and the life of the Christian is, correspondingly, a retelling and reinterpreting of the gospel story. The world has no access to the gospel story other than as it is narrated in the life, worship, and proclamation of the church . . . Through its service and being as witness, the Church is a rendering of the gospel to the world.^[1]

Since the whole of the church is to be an evangelistic entity, then the task of equipping must engage the formation of the whole life of the church, not just teaching individuals.

The challenge of equipping people in this way is that it is a much slower process, and it becomes a process of integrating the good news into the whole life and structure of the church. And, if we do not equip the church as a whole, those efforts of equipping individuals will fail to grow deep roots because the institutional life of the church is not supporting those individual teaching efforts.

^[1] Colwell, *Living the Christian Story*, 85.

STORY

I knew it wouldn't work. It was a lame idea. However, the woman who filled out the form for starting a new ministry was free to try it if she wished. She had proposed a Friday morning coffee drop-in for people who were lonely. I just didn't see how it would appeal to anyone. Who would drop into a church they didn't know, for coffee on a Friday? I tried to let her know that she shouldn't get her hopes too high, as I didn't want her to get discouraged, but reluctantly I allowed her to go ahead.

One of my profs in seminary often reminded me that “the mission of God belongs to the people of God.” He was constantly warning us to beware of professionalizing the ministry and taking it out of the hands of the laity. It was a message I took to heart and tried to provide a means for people who had ideas for ministry to be empowered to give their ideas a try.

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- Was it a neighbourhood event (outreach) or a family event (fellowship)?
- What, when, and where it was happening?
- Provide a brief description and contact information for the leader.

The proposal would then be discussed by staff, and if they weren't asking for money or staff time, and if common sense prevailed (i.e., it wasn't heretical or unethical), we would allow them to pilot the proposal and review it over time. We would promote it; provide space in the building, if it was available; and pray for it. If the ministry succeeded, we would then consider including it in the next year's budget.

Here is what I have discovered in offering this very simple tool to our congregation:

1. People who have never been involved in other ministries get involved.
2. Ministries that I (or my staff) would have never thought of get offered and appeal to a much broader audience.
3. Leadership development happens more naturally as people who have a vested interest in the ministry succeeding are more open to learning.
4. There is far less pressure and stress when ministry is given into the hands of lay people.

And there was one other lesson I learned – there are a whole bunch of lonely people who are willing to drop into a church they don't know, for coffee on a Friday.

Part of the challenge of equipping the church for evangelistic engagement is nurturing an environment where people are encouraged and supported to make attempts. This is one way we endeavour to equip our congregation.

How do you allow ministry to flow from the people in your congregations?

RESOURCES

One of my professors at Regent College, the late evangelical scholar, Michael Green, has given us one last offering which was published posthumously: *Evangelism: Learning from the Past*. Perhaps I enjoyed this book so much because I could hear his voice speaking through the pages. He was a gifted, passionate, and brilliant evangelist.

He left Regent College to head up the Anglican Church of England's decade of evangelism. As well, he has written a number of must-read texts around the topic of evangelism, including his over 500-page instruction guide, *Evangelism through the Local Church*.

In this short offering, Michael works his way through the different periods of the church throughout the decades, highlighting the evangelistic efforts of the church and the changes that have shaped how we understand it today. One of the first things that struck me was with regard to public proclamation to large groups in the early church: "...we find to our surprise that public preaching of this sort seems to have played little part in the advance of the Gospel... However, Christians made up for it by bold proclamation in small gatherings."

Furthermore, he notes that "the main mission of the church was achieved because everyone saw the task of spreading the faith as their responsibility." I couldn't help but think that we often rely on the large gatherings and have lost this evangelistic consciousness of all members, which is once again needed in our day.

By the time of the third and fourth centuries with the persecution of Christians, Michael notes:

The link between holy living and effective evangelism could hardly be made more effectively. The Christians stood out for their chastity, their hatred of the cruel gladiatorial shows, their sacrificial good deeds for pagan neighbors, and their good citizenship. They did not expose infants or abort their fetuses. They refused to have anything to do with idolatry even if it meant their execution. Heathen writers of the day regularly praise their pure lives, devoted love and social concern, and their amazing courage in the face of opposition.

Somehow, it seems as if we have bifurcated evangelism from our discipleship and failed to understand that how we live bears evangelistic witness to a watching world.

Michael pulls from ancient texts and his rich knowledge of the Greek language to expose fresh insights and stirring illustrations. While we may not want to copy every way in which evangelism was engaged, we will certainly want to learn how the church through different eras adapted their evangelism methods and strove to reach their generation with the great Good News of what God has done in Christ!

An Evaluative Framework for Evangelistic Equipping

- How well equipped is your congregation for the ministry of evangelism?
- How do you evaluate your church's health in that regard?
- How would you identify equipping gaps in your congregation's evangelistic faithfulness?

Statistics indicate that fewer Christians engage in evangelism. While some suggest that people have lost confidence in the Gospel, others would argue that the problem lies in how evangelism is taught. We have lost confidence, not in the Gospel, but in the techniques for sharing the Gospel. Many pastors feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. They either teach the techniques they don't believe work and feel guilty, or they feel guilty because they don't teach evangelism at all. Many believe that the old models of evangelism are no longer effective, which makes it difficult to know how to train others.

Those who do endeavour to equip their people report that they find it just plain hard! It is slow, frustrating, and difficult to measure. It takes time and intentionality, and it is not easily controlled. The attempts that are made feel unsuccessful, and many feel that they are not doing a good job.

This training will provide an evaluative framework to help you assess your evangelistic equipping efforts. It will help you to recognize gaps you may need to fill and distortions which you will want to correct and provide a clearer path forward towards helping your church become more evangelistically faithful.

Join me in this four-session, 60-minute webinar training, which will take place at 10:00 PDT weekly beginning Thursday April 11. The sessions will include:

1. April 11 – Understanding the three quadrants of evangelism.
2. April 18 – Understanding the three quadrants of equipping.
3. April 25 – Understanding the distortions of excess and neglect.
4. May 2 – Understanding your congregations needs and developing a way forward.

There is only a limited number of spaces available. Please confirm your participation as soon as possible. Sign-up here: <https://forms.gle/VV1MeM3AKTUPQCJo6>.