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MAKING NEW DISCIPLES

Exploring the paradoxes of evangelism



Mark Ireland and Mike Booker

SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2015

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spck.org.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-07336-8
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-07337-5

Typeset by Graphicaft Limited, Hong Kong
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicaft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

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Foreword

The vocation of the Church of Jesus Christ – to proclaim the transforming love of Jesus Christ to the whole world – is unchanging.

However, as with every call of God, it is worked out in real time, in a real place among real lives. This means that our calling is not simply to understand the gospel and to be daily transformed by it, but to engage with the *who*, *how*, *where* and *why* so that the proclamation may be as fruitful as possible.

This book is a great help in this task. It is a mapping of the landscape of evangelism over recent decades in this country.

In my experience, many in the Church would prefer to have manuals than maps. Manuals diagnose, dictate and problem-solve. They distil the action necessary by pinpointing the tried-and-tested solution that will invariably bring the change that is desired. But manuals generally deal with machines not people. They are usually most effective in the hands of experts. They are specific to precise models. Of course, we find ourselves desiring such manuals for good reasons, especially when it comes to evangelism. The weight of the calling on us to proclaim the good news effectively is heavy. But the quest to find such a manual (or write such a manual) is in itself a failure to grasp our true calling. It also fundamentally fails to grasp, or be grasped by, the living God.

While I would urge us to stop looking for the manual that will guarantee effective evangelism, I do urge that we seek maps and guides. We need those who will plot the landscape for us, who will point out the well-trodden paths, the routes others have taken and the lessons that have been learned. We need those who can give us peripheral vision to comprehend where we are, how we have got here and what the options are as we move ahead.

This book is such a map. It is a comprehensive guide to the current terrain in evangelism, setting out trends and tools, patterns and practices.

Foreword

It is my personal conviction that giving attention, energy, resources, thinking, planning and, above all, prayer to the work of evangelism is one of our most urgent tasks. This is not because numbers are falling. It is not because we are doomed if we don't grow. It is not because we are not going to be able to survive unless new people come in to pay for the church roof. It is because of the love of Jesus the Christ. It is the love of Christ that compels us – not fear for our future.

It is this Jesus who teaches us wisdom and urges us to risk. It is this Jesus who urges us to read the signs of the times and not be slow to comprehend. It is this Jesus who followed God's call, and whose Spirit empowers us to do the same.

But the other reason why I value this book and heartily commend it is that it doesn't claim to be a panacea. Whereas a manual offers a generic solution to a generic problem, as if we live in a laboratory with controlled conditions that serve across all circumstances, the Holy Spirit works in particularities. Our following of Jesus Christ, and our invitation to urge family, friends and neighbours to respond to God's call on them to follow, does not happen in ideal conditions. The Holy Spirit engages real people in real time in real circumstances. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers our attempts at witness as well as our accidents, upon whom we are completely reliant. The conditions are only controlled in the sense that God is ultimately the One in control!

The work of proclaiming the good news is indeed our vocation in the Church, but we are entirely reliant on the power of God – to open eyes, turn hearts, bend knees, transform minds and change lives. This book directs us to God as the main player in evangelism: God, who in his infinite grace invites us to partner with him. There is nothing that is more life-giving for a local church than to see people come to faith: for we see the power of the gospel transforming lives, through his power made perfect in our weakness. To be part of the work that God is doing to draw people to Jesus Christ is an awesome privilege and responsibility for which we need wise, experienced and faithful guides. I believe many will find this book to be such a guide.

+ *Justin Cantuar:*
Lambeth Palace, London

Acknowledgements

This book is the fruit of many conversations, email exchanges and visits. We would like to express our thanks to all those who have shared their wisdom, experiences and insights. We have regularly been humbled and inspired by what God is doing across the country, and by the imagination and commitment of so many people.

In some cases we have made names and locations clear. In others we have not included every detail, but those with whom we have spoken will recognize their stories. However, every person with whom we have been in contact has helped to shape this book, and our thanks are due to each one. In as much as there are mistakes and misunderstandings, they are entirely our own.

In particular we would like to record our appreciation of our colleagues and congregations, who have been tolerant when at times we may have seemed distracted, and especially of our wives, Gill and Liz, for their encouragement and their patience. To these people especially we dedicate this book.

This book is the fruit of shared work. We have pondered and discussed each chapter at length, and both share responsibility for all that is written. To reflect this, we use the first person plural wherever possible. Mark took the lead in undertaking the initial research and writing for Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 and 13, and Mike for Chapters 1, 3, 8, 9, 10 and 12. At times, we use the first person singular in recording specific conversations, visits or observations that led to the writing of that chapter.

Mark Ireland and Mike Booker

1

The challenge of making new disciples

Today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church.

(Pope John Paul II)

Twelve years ago we wrote a book, *Evangelism: Which Way Now?*¹ (EWWN), with the aim of overviewing what was going on in evangelism across the churches in England, which strategies and materials were proving effective, and also what was attracting energy and attention but maybe having less impact. This was at a time when a major shift had been going on in understanding how people came to faith. It was a shift from seeing conversion as a crisis to viewing it as a process or as a journey. There was also a growing recognition that new believers needed to be part of healthy and effective churches, and along with that, an increasingly widespread realization on the part of far more churches that mission was at the heart of their calling.

The most marked and visible new development in the life of churches across Britain in the last years of the previous century was not the national Decade of Evangelism, but one specific venture launched by one church, the rapidly growing Alpha course. In parallel with it, a range of other nurture or 'process evangelism' courses sprang up. The impact upon church life and growth has been remarkable. Exact quantification is not possible, because those churches that were taking crowds to hear Billy Graham in the 1950s to the 1980s are very likely to be the ones most ready to adopt Alpha or a similar course in the 1990s and beyond. In other words, where evangelism was going on, more and more of it was being carried out, with a course of several weeks' duration at its heart.

Alpha was always only a partial answer responding to the need for a journey to faith that may take several years, with a course

of 15 sessions. In fairness to those who have originated some of the most used courses, they were never intended to be the be all and end all of evangelism. Emmaus Nurture was only part of a series of resources. Alpha comes from a church that makes available a huge range of resources for marriage, parenting, and other elements of Christian living. One of our intentions in writing *EWWN* was to set well-known courses in a wider context of church life and mission. But the reality remains that the main focus of awareness across many churches was on a course of a few weeks, when the journey to faith was always likely to be far longer. If anything, the journey is longer now than it was then, and needs to be undertaken in a more challenging environment.

Changing society, trends and challenges

Rather than simply rewriting and updating, our intention in this book is to look afresh at the scene before us. As authors, we have moved from our previous roles in a diocesan mission post and in theological education to the busyness of parish ministry. With less time for structured research, but more current experience as we write, the book will at times have more personal observation and less research data than our previous publication. As such, we hope that we will be inviting continued discussion and comment.

Surveying the scene as we move further into the twenty-first century, it is clear that subtle but significant changes are under way. The first is the slow but observable progress of secularization. This is expressed in several ways. On one level, it is simply a numerical reality. The Key Points document on religion in England and Wales from the 2011 Census recalls a fall in those who identify as Christian to 59.3 per cent, from 71.7 per cent only ten years earlier. Those reporting no religion have increased from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent over the same time period.²

The British Social Attitudes survey 2013 paints a similar picture. The brief section on religious affiliation in the comments:

there is little doubt that a substantial change has taken place, with a marked decline in the proportion who describe themselves as belonging to a particular religion. In 1983, around two in three people (68 per cent) considered themselves to belong to one religion or another; in 2012, only around half (52 per cent) do so . . . this decline is in practice a decline in attachment to Anglicanism; in 1983 two in five people (40 per cent) said they were Anglican, and the Church of England could still reasonably lay claim to being England's national church (and thus, arguably, to some extent its fount of moral authority). But now only 20 per cent do so.³

At the same time as stated religious allegiance is falling, attendance at Christian worship continues to decline on the part of those who claim to be believers. Not only, it would appear, do fewer people self-identify as believers, but those who do so are less likely to express this in regular worship (see Table 1.1).

Along with falling numbers at church services is the side effect of Christian faith being marginalized from public life. Sometimes this is simple oversight, as Christianity becomes less a 'normal' part of the experience of most people; at other times it takes a more deliberate form. In an interview on national radio recently, a well-known sporting personality was telling the story of his life, and in particular his recovery from alcoholism. Asked to explain what had been instrumental in his recovery, the man replied that

Table 1.1 Attendance at worship by those who claim religious allegiance (percentage)⁴

	1993	2003	2013
Once a week or more	18.9	13.9	13.1
At least once in two weeks	3.2	2.4	2.5
At least once a month	9.0	5.8	6.4
At least twice a year	16.6	10.1	8.4
At least once a year	8.5	5.8	4.2
Less often	6.1	4.3	5.5
Never	36.7	56.7	58.4
Varies	1.0	1.1	1.4

going back to church with his wife had been important. ‘Well,’ replied the interviewer, ‘we can’t really talk about that, but what else was important to you?’

The marginalization of Christian discourse from public life can take a more aggressive form. Since 2000, the rise of militant religious belief and associated terrorist acts has led to a growing expression of the view that all religion is not irrelevant but actually harmful. Author Richard Dawkins, until 2008 Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford, provided intellectual support for a distinctively negative attitude to all religious belief with the publication of *The God Delusion* in 2006.⁵ At a rather more down-to-earth level, reality TV personality and *Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins tweeted recently: ‘I see that all religion is evil.’⁶

Those working with young people report that similar reactions are increasingly frequent, with religion in general and Christianity in particular seen as repressive, sexist, homophobic and too often associated with child abuse. There is a deep distrust of religion, and for many people that means a distrust of Christianity and, by implication, of Christians. Addressing the Church of England’s General Synod in July 2013, the Archbishop of Canterbury observed:

The social context is changing radically. There is a revolution. It may be, it was, that 59% of the population called themselves Christian at the last census, with 25% saying they had no faith. But the YouGov poll a couple of weeks back was the reverse, almost exactly, for those under 25. If we are not shaken by that, we are not listening.⁷

In place of the religious values that have held sway in the past, the twin trends of consumerism and individualism are summed up by the now familiar saying, ‘Tesco ergo sum’ (interpreted as ‘I shop, therefore I am’). The individual, focused on what can be consumed, is in danger of being not only defined but diminished by the process. As Pope Francis writes: ‘The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.’⁸

The challenge of making new disciples

It is both reassuring and sobering to note that the disconnection between Church and society, and the challenge of taking people on the long journey to full Christian discipleship, is not only an Anglican, English, British or even a Western issue. Bishop Steven Croft, Anglican delegate at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2012, makes the following observation:

I returned from the Synod of Bishops convinced that the Church all over the world is having the same conversation about the challenge and difficulty of evangelization. I expected to hear about challenge and difficulty from Europe and North America and about growth and hope from Asia, Africa and South America. There were some contrasts but in fact the picture was much more one of challenge in the face of a uniform, powerful, global secularizing culture.⁹

The trends identified in the relationship between the Church and general culture in England are mirrored across the Western world, and are increasingly evident more widely in the Global South. The challenge of this reality to the Church of God across the globe is immense. It may also be that, faced with social trends that have moved further and faster in our own context than in other world regions, lessons learned about effective mission in our increasingly secular context may be of value in other places where the future may hold similar challenges.

*The paradox: a longer journey, but less
time to commit to it*

In the context of a society where Christian faith is less known to many, is perceived as less plausible, and viewed with hostility by a growing minority, a journey of only a few weeks from unbelief to confident faith becomes less and less a realistic expectation. The simple answer, building on recent trends, would be to suggest that the need is for longer courses. However, there seems to be little or no evidence that this is a realistic response.

The challenge is yet greater when looking at other changes going on. Along with being more secular, our culture is becoming busier,

with reduced job security encouraging people to accept more demanding work schedules, and leisure time becoming more complex. Concerns about child safety mean that children are increasingly being taken by parents and carers to organized activities. Sunday trading has made its presence felt in a big way, and along with shopping, sports and travel to see family members all take up Sunday time. The switch to smartphone ownership has created a growing proportion of the population who are used to last-minute planning, and far less likely to sign up in advance for long commitments. *Mobile Marketing* online magazine on 24 June 2014 reported a 72 per cent ownership for smartphones across the country. Ownership is now the norm for younger people, but also surprisingly high for those in older age brackets:

Generation Y – those aged around 25 to 30 – are the most likely to own a smartphone, at 89 per cent, and are considered a key target for mobile marketers. But Generation Z – those aged 16 to 24 – follow closely with 85 per cent smartphone ownership, and these people are the happiest group to use apps for shopping rather than going in store, at 48 per cent. More than half, 54 per cent, of 54 to 65 year olds now own a smartphone too.¹⁰

Thus, at the same time as the need to take people on a longer journey to faith has become increasingly evident, the readiness of most to commit in advance to a course of any length is decreasing. Life is busier, and long-term planning less of a natural instinct to people who are increasingly ready to respond at short notice to new possibilities. The youth-targeted Alpha publicity video currently in circulation aims to challenge this head on: ‘You have approximately 570,000 hours left to live, why not spend less than 24 of them with us on Alpha, exploring life’s biggest questions?’¹¹

And yet Alpha, beginning with the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’, no longer finds itself the natural starting point for people who may be searching for faith. Most simply are not at that starting line, ready to move forward. There is undergrowth to be cleared, attention to be raised, before the course can seem like the right next step. Practitioners we have spoken to in preparation for

writing this book have reported increasing difficulty in attracting people to join courses. Dedicated and enthusiastic clergy are still using nurture courses very effectively in evangelism, but too often it seems that a high level of personal gifting is needed to attract people to join. It is no longer an easy or a natural process to encourage enquirers to sign up for courses.

New starting points

After the early years of economic confidence, the twenty-first century has seen the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s. Austerity, as a government response to the budget deficit, has hit many hard. Recognizing this, much good work in mission is being done in responding to social needs and working for the common good. In particular, the exponential growth in foodbanks and the work of Christian organizations in debt counselling have done much to live out the authenticity of Christian message. There is, flowing against the stream of suspicion about organized religion and the Church, a clear current of authentic mission in service to those around. In living out the third and fourth of the Anglican Communion's Marks of Mission¹² (to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation), Christians are also preparing the ground for the first and second marks: to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and to teach, baptize and nurture new believers. Just how well the linkages and mutual resourcing between the different elements of God's mission are working we will explore further in Chapter 11.

Also placed in the early stages of the faith journey are a range of new resources and approaches aimed at allowing open exploration, or at creating fresh spaces for belonging, before the full content of believing has been explored. In particular, resources such as Table Talk (explored in Chapter 7) aim to be accessible to people who are not ready to commit to a longer and more content-laden course. Addressing not only content but the whole context, a wide range of fresh expressions of church, including Messy Church, are playing a significant role in this area. The Church of

England, along with the Methodist Church and other denominations and networks, has recognized the need to train and equip ministers and ministries with the specific task of pioneering new work in places, networks and communities untouched by existing Christian mission. The fundamental question of the nature of Christian ministry and how best to resource it is rightly under close scrutiny. Things are changing, and in some areas changing fast, as the Church recognizes increasingly the scale of the missionary challenge.

Discipleship, Church and the future

It is not only the start of the journey to full, committed church membership that is growing in complexity. The loss of knowledge of the Christian story and the slipping out of our shared life of Christian practices mean that those who begin the journey of faith have further to go before they become fully integrated church members. Or, perhaps to put things in a more positive and hopeful way, those who begin the journey of discipleship following Jesus Christ will find it harder and take longer to end up as enthusiastic members of *traditional* churches. The shift from the early years of the internet to the current multiplicity of social media has been accompanied by a need to interact and to question, not simply to receive information and to accept it. Evangelism that sees the faith journey as simply one of inculturation into existing church life is struggling to make an impact, and is likely to continue to do so.

Headline figures of church attendance, showing gentle but persistent decline, are only the surface of the story. Beneath that surface, fresh expressions of church have grown with remarkable and increasing speed. Spurred on by the *Mission-Shaped Church* report,¹³ a remarkable range of new groups and projects, intended not to feed people into existing churches but to be new, culturally relevant churches in their own right, have grown and flourished. From being the preserve of innovators and enthusiasts, fresh expressions are now a significant part of the life and membership of the Church of England, and of the Methodist Church, as the

two denominations have worked in partnership to encourage and enable the growth of fresh expressions.

Detailed research carried out by the Church Army¹⁴ is being extended to cover the dioceses of the Church of England. A distinct pattern is emerging of approximately 10 per cent of worshipping Anglicans now being in fresh expressions of church. From very small beginnings at the start of the century, a very significant strand of the life of the Church of God has emerged.

In *EWWN* our overview of approaches to church life and growth left us, as our study progressed, increasingly uneasy at the lack of any programme or resource that was having a significant impact on work with children and young people. It has been heartening to see how in the years that have followed, fresh expressions of church have a far younger age profile than 'inherited' churches. Many aim specifically at families or at young people. Perhaps most significant has been the near-explosive expansion of Messy Church, which works very largely with families and children.

The growth of fresh expressions of church, with the definite intention of growing new churches in their own right and not simply of developing mission projects that will feed people into existing churches, is creating a new dynamic in the life of the whole Church. Since the stated aim is no longer incorporation within current congregations, it raises the question of what these new churches will look like as they mature. In the case of Messy Church, the interactive, participative, exploratory nature of the monthly gathering, including a full shared meal, begs merely one of the most frequently asked questions, which is how involvement in this kind of church can lead to something approaching full participation in 'normal' Sunday worship. Very many fresh expressions are seeing people grow in their church involvement in a way that will not easily sit alongside standard church, or church in 'inherited mode' as it is commonly referred to in literature associated with fresh expressions.

A significant trend that appears to have received insufficient comment to date is the worrying news hidden deep below the surface of those headline church attendance figures. If fresh expressions of church have grown and are continuing to grow, their

