

Evangelism & Evangelists in the Methodist Church

Summary Introduction

What is the role of an evangelist?

- What is evangelism?
- What have learned about evangelism in the Decade of Evangelism?
- What is an evangelist?
- Is there a difference between an evangelist and an evangelism enabler?

Equipping the whole church for its evangelistic ministry

- It is not the evangelist's role to do all the evangelistic work of the church, it is to equip the whole church to do the work of evangelism
- Our Calling highlights the importance of 'making more followers of Jesus Christ'
- Monitoring of the 'Our Calling' process suggests that in almost every area of the church's life, evangelism is the area where we have the least confidence. The continuing decline in Methodist membership and attendance is directly attributable to our inability to persuade men, women and young people to become followers of Jesus Christ within the community of the church.
- Equipping the Church for evangelism requires an approach which begins with creating a proper confidence in the 'Good News', not simply the teaching of evangelism skills.
- Planting new forms of church is an essential part of the church's evangelistic task, otherwise large sections of the population will continue to be untouched by the ministry of the church.

Recognising Evangelists

- The adoption of an appropriate commissioning service
- Accountability & training
- A recognised outcome of the discernment of vocation during foundation training is that candidates might go forward to be trained as lay-evangelists. This scheme will be piloted by Formation in Ministry & Cliff College in the next Connexional year.
- Recognising & modelling good practice

The relationship of the role of evangelist to ordained ministries.

Ecumenical Context

- This report is set within comparable developments in partner churches.

Standing Orders

Appendix

- Appendix One — 20 from 10, twenty insights from a decade of evangelism

Financial Implications

- At the connexional level no significant additional resources are called for, though reliance on the resources of the Connexional Advance and Priority Fund is advocated.

Evangelism and Evangelists in the Methodist Church

Introduction

The Methodist Conference in 2000 examined a report on the Role and Recognition of Evangelists. The report was circulated to Circuits and Districts for comment and is now put before the Conference modified in the light of those comments and subsequent developments in the life of the Church. The original report had a large section on Biblical and historical understandings of the role of an evangelist. These have proved to be uncontroversial so are not repeated in the current report. They do, however, underlie much of the thinking.

A number of factors have combined to make a re-examination of the role and recognition of evangelists in the life of the Church important as we begin a new millennium:

- The past ten years have been marked by the Christian denominations as a Decade of Evangelism and this has put the evangelistic task firmly on church agendas.
- Its importance has been further underlined by the continuing decline in church membership across most of the major denominations.
- The Methodist Church at the beginning of the 21st century faces a situation different from that during most of its history. Society has changed, and the predominant culture is now a secularised, post-modern and post-Christian one in which we can no longer assume that people have any basic Christian knowledge or understanding. If the need in earlier years was to call people back to faith, the need today is for forms of primary evangelism which assume nothing.
- We have entered a new missionary era which makes the importance of discovering, developing and deploying those within the church who have evangelistic gifts a vital and urgent need.

What is evangelism?

'Our Calling' describes evangelism as 'making more followers of Jesus Christ'. This is a process which involves the transformation of the whole person. This normally takes place in the context of a deepening personal relationship with one or more Christians. Evangelism takes place in a relationship with friends rather than in a confrontation with a stranger. As one commentator has helpfully suggested "The Church needs to change its picture of conversion from the Damascus Road to the Emmaus Road". Conversion is not normally a single life-changing moment, but a process lasting several years. However, there may be important crisis moments within the process (just as on the Emmaus road, "their eyes were opened and they recognised him" Luke 24:31).

Evangelism is rooted in the nature of God.

God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the supreme evangelist.

God is constantly working for the salvation and reconciliation of all things and all people.

God demonstrates this most powerfully and humbly in the ministry, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit of God too, is ceaselessly at work in the world, challenging and comforting, enabling and releasing, going before, working within and through the whole people of God, urging and inspiring them to share the mission and the ministry of the Holy Trinity.

The task facing the church is complicated by the fact that its theology and practice are not always the same. 'Our Calling' rightly identifies evangelism as a primary task of the church. However, many churches and individual Christians have neither the confidence nor the skills to engage in this process. In its recent history the Methodist Church has been very effective at demonstrating the love of Christ in practical ways, but much less effective at explaining the source of that love. A vital role of the evangelist is to help the whole church to rediscover confidence in its evangelistic calling.

As well as confidence building, there are three principal areas of evangelism skills that the evangelist/evangelism enabler will seek to share with the whole church:

1. Personal faith-sharing — helping individual Christians to share their faith in ordinary life situations in word and deed.
2. Building Mission-minded congregations — helping churches to maximise the evangelistic potential of their existing activities.
3. Developing specific evangelistic programmes that are appropriate both for the church's resources and the needs of its local community.

What have we learned during the Decade of Evangelism

The Decade of Evangelism (1990-1999) did not lead to the numerical growth of the Church in the way that many people anticipated. It did, however, lead the Church to look closely at its understanding of evangelism.

The lessons learned are summed up well in the ecumenical leaflet "20 from 10":

1. In ten years, lots has happened
2. Evangelism is a central activity of the church
3. Evangelism is God's work
4. Evangelism is more effective when ecumenical
5. There is widespread interest in spirituality
6. Most people come to faith gradually
7. Personal relationships are basic in evangelism
8. Good evangelism is an invitation, not a confrontation
9. Evangelism is about sharing Jesus, not about promoting the church
10. A changing culture demands changing approaches
11. Evangelism among children and young people is a major challenge
12. Accessible worship is attractive
13. Good leadership is vital for effective evangelism
14. Local initiatives are best
15. Christian witness in ordinary life is at the heart of effective evangelism
16. Evangelism is part of well-rounded mission
17. Evangelism needs evangelists, but we are all witnesses
18. Personal stories are a powerful tool
19. Evangelism in Britain is a tough challenge
20. The global church continues to grow

What is an evangelist?

Someone lay or ordained, male or female, who:

- Communicates the good news of Jesus Christ by word and deed in a way that encourages people to become followers of Jesus Christ.
- Shares the Good News using a variety of forms of media.

- Acts as a focus for the ministry of evangelism within the church.
- Challenges the Church when it becomes inward looking.
- Equips the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12) in the area of evangelism.

All evangelists need to be recognised, supported and held accountable by the church.

Evangelism is a gift of the Holy Spirit — fruitfulness in terms of new disciples of Christ is God's work in which the evangelist shares.

Some evangelists will work closely with established churches, particularly in equipping the body of Christ. Their primary role will be in 'calling back' to faith people with a Christian heritage and understanding. These people will need welcoming and nurturing in the local church.

Others will work in cultures a long way removed from traditional church. People who come to faith through their ministry will not readily join a traditional church. Evangelism in these cultures will almost certainly lead to the establishing of new and different forms of church. The relationship between both the evangelist and the new community of faith which is established and the wider church will need careful thought and sensitive handling to ensure the right balance between risky mission, encouragement and accountability.

Before recognising someone as an evangelist, the church will look for an appropriate level of maturity as well as gifting:

- Active membership of the local church and involvement in its life, worship and witness.
- A genuine personal experience of Jesus Christ and a disciplined spiritual life.
- A commitment to the work of evangelism and some understanding of the breadth of approaches and methods which might be adopted.
- A mature understanding of the gospel and the way in which it relates to and interacts with individuals and contemporary society.
- The ability to relate naturally and easily to other people both within and beyond the church.
- Proven gifts as a communicator of the gospel and the ability to express its message in a variety of imaginative ways, especially to those unused to Christian insights and vocabulary.
- Evidence of some fruitfulness in terms of effectiveness and the response of others to previous evangelistic work.

Is there a difference between an evangelist and an evangelism enabler?

A number of Districts have appointed Evangelism Enablers. A much larger number of Circuits have appointed lay-workers with evangelism as a substantial part of their job descriptions (over seventy attend the Forum of Methodist Evangelists). Almost all of them have a training or enabling strand to their work, however some see themselves primarily as evangelists, others as enablers. The greater the area of work covered by the evangelist, the more important it is that they are training others to share in the work. It is equally important that those who train have the skills to model good practice. Rather than attempting to differentiate between the role of evangelist and evangelism enabler, it is preferable to understand the role of evangelist as occupying a fairly wide spectrum. Appointing someone to operate solely at either end of the spectrum — training others to do what one does not do oneself or being a 'lone ranger' with no interest in encouraging others to share in the evangelistic calling of the whole church - should be discouraged.

Equipping the whole church for its evangelistic ministry

An inherent danger in producing a report about evangelists is that the rest of the church breathes a sigh of relief and leaves the task to them. The New Testament will allow no such course of action!

If the local church is to fulfil its evangelistic ministry, it is not simply a matter of adding evangelistic programmes to an already full church calendar. It is also a matter of encouraging an evangelistic attitude that permeates every activity and programme of the church. More importantly an evangelistic attitude should permeate the lives of every Christian especially in their life outside church.

It is also good for the Church to organise periods of evangelistic activity. They help to focus the Church and its members on their evangelistic task. This may involve using an outside evangelist or evangelistic team (eg a 'Share Jesus' or Cliff College evangelism team). It may be as part of a local ecumenical evangelistic outreach. Or it may be a 'home grown' piece of evangelistic work. Perhaps the greatest growth area in recent years has been 'Alpha' type courses. Alpha is the best known and most widely used course but there are now 12-15 such courses. These courses last 4-12 weeks and explore what it means to be a Christian. Each has different strengths and weaknesses and a church's individual circumstances will determine which is most appropriate. They all have the great advantage of combining the exploration of faith and the beginning of Christian nurture in a relational way.

In recent years there has been a proper emphasis on evangelism as a process. However, it may be that some churches need to re-examine the place of evangelistic events and services in that process. They still have an important part to play.

Evangelism and 'Our Calling'

'Our Calling' has provided an excellent framework that every area of the church can use to assess its life. It has been well received and there are a growing number of creative ways of implementing it. However, it has become widely recognised that 'making more followers of Jesus Christ' is the area of Our Calling where the Methodist Church is least confident.

There are a number of reasons for this: different theologies of mission; lack of evangelistic skills; the increasingly secular environment in which we live; a lack of confidence that the Good News of Jesus Christ will be 'good news' for our friends and neighbours.

In the past, there has sometimes been an unhelpful competition between evangelism, social action & the struggle for justice. Evangelism must be part of a "well-rounded mission", but the Church can no longer act as though social action and the struggle for justice are the whole mission agenda. To put it bluntly, the survival of the Methodist church rests upon our ability to persuade people to become followers of Jesus Christ.

In order to respond to this, the Church must begin by building confidence. District Evangelism/Mission Enablers have a vital role to play in this process. It is also important to tell the stories of where good things are happening. The church has been in a prolonged period of decline, yet one can point to churches of almost every size and setting (inner city, urban, suburban, rural etc) which are successfully making new members by persuading men, women, children and young people to become followers of Jesus Christ. Their methods may not be capable of being transported from one church to another, but lessons can be learnt about the principles they are applying.

The recently published "Our Calling: Evangelism Resources" CD-ROM offers every church suggestions of how they might be involved in appropriate evangelism.

God's Missionary love reaches out to everyone. But how can we demonstrate that love to communities which are outside the influence of any church, particularly the 'under 40's' and people from other faith communities? It is unlikely that existing churches will ever make any real impact on these communities in Christ's name. It is therefore increasingly important that we identify, train and support the ministry of those with cross-cultural evangelism gifts to establish new congregations in these communities. These new churches will bear little resemblance to traditional Methodist Churches. Both the traditional and the new are authentic expressions of church. Circuits will need to adopt a mission policy which encourages diversity and mutual respect. It is also important to find ways of helping diverse churches to find ways of celebrating together those things which they hold in common. The evangelists participating in these ministries may be ordained or lay. Despite the pressure on stations for presbyters and deacons, it is vital that such ministries are made possible.

Recognising Evangelists

The feedback from the Conference report on the Role and Recognition of Evangelists was universal in its support of the notion that we are in a period of the church's history when the ministry of the evangelist is vital. If this ministry is vital, then it should be officially recognised by the church. This is already happening in a number of ways:

1. A number of Districts have appointed Evangelism/Mission Enablers
2. Lay workers can be appointed to Circuits or Churches as evangelists (SO 405, 570)

3. Vocational Discernment during foundation training may identify the calling of a candidate to be a lay evangelist or a presbyter or deacon whose potential ministry may include the gift of evangelism.

To these should be added the category of lay evangelist in a local church or circuit who is not formally employed as a lay-worker but is fulfilling an evangelistic ministry in a voluntary capacity.

If this ministry is already recognised in the life of the church, it is appropriate to have a service of public recognition for an evangelist (as is already the case for Local Preachers, workers with children and young people, pastoral visitors etc). A service for the commissioning of an evangelist will be brought to the Conference by the Faith and Order Committee.

Since the Methodist Conference in 1993 encouraged every District to consider appointing a District Evangelism/Mission Enabler/Team, a good deal of experience has been gained. Currently 7 Districts have paid enablers; 2 have part-time, unpaid enablers; 2 have teams and 6 Districts are actively pursuing an appointment. For those in paid employment, particularly those supported by Connexional funds, there is a generic job description, a set of competencies and an appraisal system in place. The Connexional Advance and Priority Fund has been a major provider of funds for such appointments; without their help many of these appointments would not have been financially viable.

Over 70 Circuits have appointed lay-workers to evangelistic work. These are supported by the Forum of Methodist Evangelists. At the moment, appraisal is conducted by the Circuit/Church that employs the evangelist. The Forum allows for an exchange of ideas about good practice. The Connexional guide-lines for all lay-workers are also helpful.

Since there is such a wide range of evangelistic ministries it is both difficult and undesirable to be prescriptive about training. There is a large number of training opportunities provided by Methodist and other agencies (see Appendix Two). Evangelists employed by circuits or local churches are already subject to SO575 which takes training requirements into account. Further advice on suitable training can be obtained from the Connexional Evangelism and Church Planting Secretary.

A person is recognised as an evangelist in a particular context. If that person moves to a new church or circuit, they would not automatically be recognised as an evangelist in the new context. The recognition of an evangelist takes into account the character, the gifting and the ministry of an individual. In a new setting their ministry within the life of the church may be different. This is analogous to a worker with children and young people rather than a Local Preacher. However, a new church or circuit will take into account their previous experience and training and when considering whether to recognise them as an evangelist in their new setting.

This does not imply that a person will 'grow out' of an evangelistic ministry. It does, however, acknowledge that many Christians have a number of different gifts which they exercise according to the context in which they find themselves.

A recent development is the pilot scheme beginning in the next Connexional year for those identified in Foundation Training as evangelists but not having the vocation of presbyter or deacon to receive training at Cliff College for the role of lay evangelist. This is a welcome development, though there are unresolved questions about the way that such people might be employed by the church over the longer period.

These recommendations offer an uncertain employment future for evangelists. Within the life of the Church we have assumed responsibility for the life-long support and sustenance of those called to be presbyters or deacons. Evangelists who are not also presbyters or deacons have never been afforded such a luxury. Many have felt themselves called to a life-long vocation to exercise the ministry of an evangelist, but have only been able to fulfil this by accepting a succession of short term appointments. The Church owes them a considerable debt of gratitude for their faithfulness to this calling. Given the financial circumstances of the Church it is unlikely that evangelists will be offered the same security of employment as presbyters or deacons, or that District Evangelism Enablers will ever be funded in the same way as Training and Development Officers, but the way the church spends its money speaks volumes about its priorities. It is important that the whole Church recognises the sacrifices made by many evangelists and understands the pain which exercising their ministry has caused them.

The report thus far has made a number of suggestions about good practice. There is already a great deal of experience around the Connexion. This is disseminated through the Forum of Methodist evangelists, ecumenical groups and a number of publications. The Evangelism Strategy Group has the task of identifying and publicising good practice. Many evangelists have also found it helpful to have a mentor.

The relationship of the role of evangelist to ordained ministries

In considering the report 'The Role and Recognition of Evangelists in the Methodist Church', the following resolution was passed:

"The Conference acknowledges the need for identifying, training and appointing those with evangelistic gifts in presbyteral, diaconal and lay ministry, and directs the Formation in Ministry Office to explore more effective ways of meeting that need and report to the Conference of 2002."

This report has already referred to the developments proposed with regard to lay evangelists. The Formation in Ministry Office have explored the other requirements of the resolution in collaboration with the Evangelism Strategy Group:

- Understanding the missionary nature of the Church is already a required component of the syllabus in all the training bodies. A great deal of work has been done in recent years to define and develop this content. There will inevitably be some variance in different colleges and courses, but a syllabus which does not include this will not be validated.
- There is also a willingness to apply this mission theology in the specific area of building and developing missionary congregations. This is an area in which a considerable amount of practical and theoretical material has been produced in recent years. The Evangelism Strategy Group

(amongst others) has expertise in this area which can be shared with those responsible for validating syllabuses.

- In order to move from the generic training offered to all students to specific training in evangelism, all students in foundation training will be encouraged to explore whether they have the gift of evangelism. An appropriate vocational discernment tool will need to be developed to identify this. This tool will need to deal with such questions as: "What is evangelism?" "What is an evangelist?" "How can one discern the gift of evangelism?" "What evidence is there to support this vocational discernment?" The Formation in Ministry office has begun work to develop this tool.
- In the case of those who have identified evangelistic gifts, the starting point is to develop a skills based course on evangelism which, although developed by one group, can then be franchised to other training centres and individual trainers for flexible delivery.
- This course should be along the lines of Kaleidoscope, Spectrum or Faith and Worship type training. It should be accredited in a way which makes it part of the same menu as other modules used to deliver Foundation and Pre-ordination training.
- The Open Learning Centre at Cliff College have a module on Evangelism which is currently being re-written. The re-write will be shaped by the requirements outlined above.
- This training course (and others such as the Cliff College MA in Evangelism Studies or those identified in appendix C of 'The Role and Recognition of Evangelists in the Methodist Church') can then be an additional training avenue for those who discern an evangelistic element in their vocation as part of their foundation training. It will not necessarily be an integral part of the foundation training for all students.

The Ecumenical Context

In 1999 the House of Bishops Working Party of the Church of England published the report 'Good News People' which made a number of recommendations to help the Church of England properly to recognise, train and support evangelists. The Church of England has also established its College of Evangelists — a fellowship or network of evangelists.

The Baptist Union has formally recognised evangelists as accredited ministers. A candidate for the ordained ministry in the Baptist Union can now be received as either a pastor or an evangelist. The Baptist Board of Mission is encouraging clusters of Churches to appoint an evangelist to serve them. An ordained evangelist will model good evangelistic practice as well as training, equipping and encouraging the evangelistic ministry of the local church and its members.

The United Reformed Church Assembly in 2001 considered a report, 'Growing up to the ministry of evangelists' which has been sent to local churches for consideration prior to a final report being brought to the Assembly in 2003. It recommends the identification of those in lay and ordained ministry who

have the gift of evangelism and begins a process of discussion about how men and women can be released to exercise their ministry of evangelism.

The Roman Catholic bishops have recently decided to set up a national Agency for Evangelisation, whose basic aim will be to foster a culture of evangelisation among priests and people: sharing the faith rather than just keeping it. The main work of the new body will be to assist parishes, both directly and through diocesan structures, to empower and train lay people to share their faith in daily life; and to help parishes bring the values of the gospel to bear on local realities.

There is therefore, a good deal of convergence in the way that the different denominations are approaching the subject.

Standing Orders

- In the light of a number of changes to the Standing orders related to ministry, it is proposed to bring suggested changes to Conference 2003 so that it is possible to ensure that new standing orders are consistent with one another.

Recommendations

1. 'Our Calling' rightly identifies evangelism as a major theme in the life of the church. This is a moment in the history of the Methodist Church when evangelism is vital. The Conference affirms evangelism as a task for the whole church, but recognises that there are particular individuals who are called and equipped by God to be a focus for that ministry.
2. Districts and Circuits are encouraged to recognise and commission individuals as evangelists within the life of the Church, using the prescribed commissioning service.
3. This recognition may be given to presbyters, deacons, lay-workers and lay evangelists.
4. Circuits are encouraged to consider appointing evangelists to work with those outside the activities of their existing churches and to consider the planting of new forms of church to meet these peoples' spiritual needs.
5. The recognition of an evangelist is for a particular ministry in a particular context. Such a recognition should be subject to review within a particular circuit or district at least every three years, and will not automatically transfer to a new appointment if the evangelist moves church or circuit. In the case of a presbyter or deacon, the review is to be considered as part of the normal system of appraisal and invitation.
6. Many Districts have been greatly assisted in their evangelistic task by the appointment of District Evangelism Enablers. Districts which do not have an Evangelism Enabler are encouraged urgently to consider making such an appointment.
7. All District Evangelism Enabler appointments will be made in consultation with the Connexional Evangelism and Church Planting Secretary.

8. Any Circuit or District recognising someone as an evangelist shall inform the Connexional Evangelism and Church Planting Secretary who will establish and maintain a register of recognised evangelists and issue an appropriate certificate.
9. Conference welcomes the support given by the Connexional Advance and Priority Fund to many of the posts described in this report and encourages an ongoing partnership between this fund, Districts and Circuits in facilitating further appointments, providing the appropriate criteria are met.
10. The discernment of evangelism as a vocation during the Foundation Training process is warmly welcomed. This process will be monitored by the Formation in Ministry office who will bring proposals, after consultation with the Evangelism Strategy Group, on how such individuals will be supported in their ministry to the Methodist Conference of 2005.
11. Conference directs the Evangelism Strategy Group to monitor the implementation of this scheme and to review the training and support for evangelists in the Methodist Church and to report to Conference in 2006.

Resolutions

1. Conference adopts the Report
2. Conference Directs the Evangelism Strategy Group after consultation with the Formation in Ministry Office to bring appropriate changes to the Standing Orders to conference 2003.