



3. Problems and obstacles

Why is evangelism so difficult/hard today?

Introduction

The Methodist Church has always prioritised mission and evangelism. That a consultation was required on the subject, however, suggests that although it is a named priority, it is still part of the Church's life which is difficult. The Evangelism Consultation invited inquisition into why this might be the case – and then moved the conversation on further to see how some of these difficulties might best be addressed.

In the consultation, it became apparent that there were three grouped areas of difficulty:

- external factors – such as secularism, other faith and cultural groups, and new atheism
- internal institutional factors – such as leadership, training, moral issues, sex, guilt, financial constraints, specialism
- personal factors – “if I can't convert my family, how can you expect me to lead anyone else to Christ”, lack of confidence, need to be multilingual (to speak into a local culture as well as a church culture).

The consultation also challenged the notion of quantitative results as a success marker for evangelism. What are we expecting as a result of evangelism? If we know this, then it would provide a greater vision for what to do in order to achieve it.

Why this matters

It can be easy to forget that evangelism has never been an easy calling and task: Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60); Peter was crucified (as was Jesus...); Paul preached for so long, someone fell out of the window (Acts 20:9); the Corinthians needed two letters to keep them on track.

Evangelism and ongoing discipleship development for new congregations and converts, even in the Bible, was a matter of life and death. There have always been external factors (governance, relationships with the

state, multicultural societies). And there have always been institutional factors – in fact the early Church split over who was in or out of God's reach (see Acts 10, 15).

Sharing faith and good news has inspired crusades, revolutions, reformations and schisms. The calling of Christians to share a message of hope and grace to a needy world has also fuelled an ongoing debate about the relationship between mission and evangelism.

The theologian Leonard Sweet said, “Evangelism is not learning to ‘share my faith’. Evangelism is lifting up Christ and paying attention to what he's up to in someone's life.” If this is correct, then evangelism is not so much about getting the words right, as being attentive to other people. Perhaps for this reason evangelism seems to be so difficult – as a natural inclination is to offer a quick fix to a situation, rather than to sit with the questions it raises.

There is something significant about leading an authentic life, however, which means that the gospel can be communicated through relationships with people, wherever they are.

Evangelism has often been about an individual doing something to another. What might happen if *missio Dei* is taken seriously, and we recognise that a conversation and encounter might provide the opportunity for someone to share faith with us. What happens if the Holy Spirit is already at work, and our task is to be present rather than to provide a prescription?

Further resources

- Steve Hollinghurst's *Mission Shaped Evangelism: the gospel in contemporary culture* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2010) offers a vision for what faith sharing might be about today.
- www.rachelheldevans.com/blog offers various conversations and observations about key moral issues in the world, and ways in which different

sides of the argument tackles them. It is the sort of site that is worth a weekly visit over a period of time, rather than as a one off look.

- The Venture FX blog (www.venturefx.org.uk) also tackles a number of issues faced by people trying to

living authentically Christian lives.

- Also check out the increasing pool of resources available on the Deepening Discipleship part of the Methodist website (www.methodist.org.uk/deepening-discipleship/evangelism/resources).

Questions for discussion

The following questions are suggested as ways of taking the conversation forward.

- 1. What are the three biggest problems and obstacles that you face when it comes to evangelism?**

- 2. What are the biggest objections to Christianity that you face from those outside of the Church? How would you begin to respond to them?**

- 3. The consultation suggested that one problem was the Church itself. Why do you think this might be, and what could you change in order to begin to change people's opinions?**

- 4. What resources do you need, in order to face some of the challenges? What do you already know about?**