



7. Images of evangelism (2)

How do we change the image of evangelism so that every Methodist sees it as something in which they should be involved? How do we communicate these changes?

Introduction

Evangelism often has a poor image. Say the ‘E-word’ and you’re more likely to evoke images of aggressive tele-evangelists or street preachers than someone sensitively sharing their faith with a friend. This is a shame, since ‘evangelism’ itself is a positive word, a word that means ‘sharing the good news’. If people only hear it as bad news, or as news that’s conveyed without respect and love, then they’re unlikely to listen to the message.

Among those who responded to the online survey, many pointed out the importance of ‘confidence’ for evangelism – confidence in the Christian faith and how to share it. Respondents also gave a range of views on the ‘content’ of the gospel – is it about getting back to the basics, expressing a new vision, or living out the kingdom? The respondents also explored the relationship between evangelism and discipleship.

Why this matters

When we think about ‘evangelists’ within Scripture, what’s striking is the diversity of examples that might come to mind: Philip inviting Nathanael to “come and see” Jesus (John 1:43-51); the blind man – now healed – sharing his story (John 9:13-34); Paul boldly engaging with Jews in the synagogues and Gentiles in the cities of Asia Minor (Acts 16–20). Perhaps the diversity of ways to share faith in Scripture can inspire our own efforts today.

Evangelism is one of the four key parts of the Methodist Church’s Calling, and reports have emphasised its importance to the Methodist Conference. In his 2011 General Secretary’s Report to the Conference, the Revd Dr Martyn Atkins explains that:

“Evangelism is ... transformative, containing within it all the passion of piety and social justice inextricably connected together. It relates directly to the invitation to live out whole-life, life-long and world-transforming discipleship. It is both fuelled by and enables worship, and expresses itself in service and learning and caring.”¹

At the Evangelism Consultation, participants spoke of the difficulties of embedding evangelism within the Methodist Church. Some pointed to the lack of knowledge of Scripture and the ‘basics’ of faith, while others explored the difficulties around the term ‘evangelism’.

In exploring possible ways ahead, suggestions included the rediscovery of the calling of an evangelist, seeking to equip each Methodist to know their story and identity, and celebrating the ways in which churches are currently working together in mission. Rather than focusing simply on ‘running the institution’, respondents agreed that churches need to prioritise evangelism.

Further resources

- For a helpful approach to evangelism, see Brian D McLaren *More Ready than You Realize: evangelism as dance in the postmodern matrix* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 2002).
- For an excellent four-session course on sharing your faith, see the Methodist resource *Talking of God* – available for free download at www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofgod.
- For a range of resources on evangelism, visit www.methodist.org.uk/deepening-discipleship/evangelism/resources.

1. <http://www.methodistconference.org.uk/media/41172/2-the-general-secretarys-report-0511.pdf> (paragraph 68, page 45)

Questions for discussion

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

1. What are the images that come to mind when you think of evangelism?

**2. How many members in your church are currently involved in evangelism?
What are they doing?**

3. What approaches to evangelism do you find most inspiring and helpful?

**4. How can the national Church make sure that evangelism remains a priority?
And what about your church?**