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Editorial

The Decade of Evangelism is now upon us, and the Church of England, in common with the other churches of the Anglican Communion, has committed itself to look seriously at the whole question of mission. This is not a new concern of Anglicans in this country; in some ways it can be said to go back at least as far as the late Archbishop Frederick Temple's famous report *Towards the Conversion of England*. Since then we have had Billy Graham several times, Mission England, Call to the North, the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism and so on. We have had constant campaigns of all kinds, including even a visit from the Pope, if that can be called 'evangelistic'. And yet where are we now?

Statistical analyses show that the churches are still in decline, as older members die off and are not being replaced. Minority groups like the Eastern Orthodox are growing, largely because of immigration, but they do not count in the overall equation. House churches are booming, but it is hard to tell how much of the growth is permanent, and how much is merely temporary. In such an informal atmosphere, people tend to come and go with much greater speed than would normally happen elsewhere.

Evangelicals, for whom growth is often next to godliness, and is certainly a sign of faithfulness to the Gospel, will be quick to point out that their churches are generally increasing in numbers. That may be true, but it may also be a fact that often these numbers are produced by gathering people from far and wide to come to a single centre—a habit which gives a false impression of the health of the Church as a whole. London churches in the inner suburbs know only too well how their parishes can be siphoned off to big city-centre churches (with few parishioners of their own), and they understand how discouraging this can be for local evangelism: If the Christians in a given area are not working together, how can they hope to make an impact on the neighbourhood?

That in turn raises another question, which concerns inter-denominational co-operation. Few Evangelicals are happy about co-operating with Roman Catholics, though an officially-sponsored evangelistic campaign will not want to leave them out. Even Billy Graham does his best to include them as far as possible, and the Church of England is hardly likely to be less generous. Of course, the Romans are no problem at all when compared to the Liberals, many of whom dominate affairs in the older Free Churches. How can we work with a Methodist whose views may be scarcely distinguishable from those of a Hindu—and who may be proud of his or her openness to other cultures and religions? What are we to

say to those whose vision of the Gospel is more social than personal, or Biblical?

These problems mean that it is generally more likely that the Decade of Evangelism will result in local initiatives among the like-minded, rather than a national campaign. Since these initiatives would probably be taking place in any event, it is hard to see what impact the Decade will have. At bottom, evangelism is one person telling another about Jesus, and this is unlikely to happen as long as the Church is too preoccupied with itself to allow for the possibility of its members going out into the 'world' in significant numbers.

Think for a minute of the position of the average outsider, who does not know what goes on inside a church building. Why would he or she want to give up a Sunday morning to enter a strange fellowship, where the insiders are clearly at home but where the worship (nowadays probably some sort of family communion) is liable to be meaningless—and exclusive to boot. With sermons being little more than a few anecdotes tied together by good advice, there is little chance that his mind will be nourished to any significant degree. On the other hand, in those parishes where intellectual sermons are the norm (a tiny minority!) he is liable to find himself left hopelessly behind.

None of this means that the prospective inquirer will be turned off for good; the genuinely converted do stay, after all, and join the club eventually. But the Church as a whole needs to think long and hard about the sort of barriers it sets up, and the kind of expectations it makes of people who might want to know more about Jesus, but fail to understand why this should mean singing endless choruses at a strange and inconvenient time during the week.

For better or for worse the Church has for too long done its best to cut the bridges linking it to the population in general, and is suffering as a result. Having debunked infant baptism as 'folk-religion', it is now finding that many people think the Church has rejected them, and have hardened their attitude towards it as a result. By stressing full commitment, the Church has attracted the highly religious at the expense of the fringe—those who might go to church occasionally, and who like to hear a good sermon, but who have not the time or the inclination to sign on for a six-month study course. How these people can be reached and catered for, without losing or alienating the more committed, ought surely to be one of the great challenges of the Decade of Evangelism. So far there has been little sign of this, and it seems likely that the Decade will go the way of earlier efforts, to be followed no doubt, by more of the same after 2000. Is it not a pity that such an opportunity should be lost in this way?

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