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The Future of Evangelism: A Personal Perspective

Rob Frost¹

In the theological college where I trained, Hartley Victoria in Manchester, I was fascinated to see that Hugh Bourne's left boot was prominently displayed in a glass case. The boot was old and worn, and there were holes in the sole. The accompanying label spoke of his tireless passion for the 'lost', and his commitment to bringing the Good News of the gospel to the poor and marginalized.

The history of evangelism in the Primitive Methodist movement was outstanding. Its work among the potters and the miners took Methodism back to its eighteenth-century passion to 'reach the lost' and to 'by all means save souls'.

It's good to remember this aspect of the Methodist heritage, and to reflect again how evangelists like John Wesley and Hugh Bourne would work in such a secular and post-Christian society today. I'm convinced that they would adopt different methods, and would be clearly 'tuned in' to the felt needs of those in our contemporary society.

Over the last decade I've had to go through a momentous personal rethink about the strategies which I use in evangelism. At present I have nine key young project workers in Share Jesus International who are developing new strategies for effective communication. All I can do is to facilitate their experimentation, and support them in their ministry. I have to admit that I have to rely on their reading of the scene because mine is far too outdated to reach the rising generation.

I am finding this a steep personal learning curve, and our office dialogue has taken me through a painful process of introspection as I have sought to communicate the truths of the Primitive Methodists in an age where many find Christianity a 'turn-off'.

The rethink

I was schooled in traditional ways of 'doing evangelism'. I was taught how to preach at a mega-decibel pitch in open-air meetings, and how to use the wind to carry my voice. I was introduced to the subtle art of door-to-door witness, and how to get the 'four spiritual laws' and 'the abc of salvation' into an everyday conversation about the weather! I

Discovered, too, how to ‘get people in’ using a movie starring Billy Graham and Cliff Richard, and how to organize a church coffee morning with an evangelistic spin.

Many of these evangelistic formats seem singularly inappropriate today, however. The culture has moved on – and what worked yesterday is no longer effective in our ceaseless task of sharing the Good News about Jesus Christ. I can see the beginnings of a quiet revolution in the field of evangelism, however, and I believe that what’s happening has enormous significance for the future life of the Church.

We are living in a ‘spiritual age’, and statistics illustrate the enormous cultural shift which has occurred over the last 10 years. A survey by Hay and Hunt has revealed that whilst in 1987 48 per cent of the UK population admitted to having a spiritual or religious experience, this figure had risen to 76 per cent by 2000. In 1999 3.3 million religious books were sold, 3.2 million of which covered such subjects as New Age, the Occult, paranormal and other marginal belief systems, an indication of the growth of this ‘spiritual’ focus in our country today.

However, there is a small but growing movement of Christians nationwide who are moving beyond the walls of the church and engaging in forms of mission and evangelism which would have been unthinkable only 10 years ago.

Offering Christian healing

One of the most exciting new developments is in the field of Christian healing. There was a time when the ‘healing ministry’ of the Church was limited to alternate Wednesdays in Lent: ‘Go to the back vestry door, knock three times and ask for Gladys!’ Slowly but surely, however, Christians are rediscovering the fact that Jesus’ commission of 72 disciples to heal the sick (Luke 10.9–10) is still relevant today.

As the complementary and alternative healing industry continues to boom, with more registered practitioners in the UK than GPs, the Church is gradually waking up to the fact that Christian healing is in fact mission and evangelism! I’ve met groups who are registered to work in local hospitals, people who operate from church-based coffee shops and who even set up ‘healing points’ in shopping centres and busy high streets.

A go-ahead church in Cheam, under the leadership of David Pailthorpe, has taken a room usually used as a psychic healing centre. After worship and prayer they open the doors to the public for services of Christian healing in a secular setting. They state explicitly that they are

not healers, but that healing only happens in the name of Jesus. They simply worship and then pray for those in need. Up to 200 people have attended these meetings and discovered that Christians know a Healer who is alive today.

Many quite traditional churches are discovering that Christian healing services can have integrity and credibility, and that they can be an important aspect of the church's evangelistic witness. I recently spoke at a 'healing training day' in the diocese of Chichester and was staggered when over 200 people turned up.

Providing sacred space

In a busy and stressful world, many people are desperate to know how to discover inner peace, and how to meditate and reflect. It's little wonder that our church services are a real turn-off to people such as these! They are often agenda-driven, busy and noisy celebrations where there is often little or no space to 'practise the presence of God'. Those groups who are moving beyond the familiar format of the five hymn sandwich or the *Songs of Fellowship* medley are discovering that people are interested who are far outside the regular orbit of church life.

In Birmingham, for example, a group called 'Sanctuary' has created a safe space where those from South Asia and the West can meet to explore Christ and to worship together. Paul Singh, the director, told me that many Asians feel alienated by the culture of many white British churches. Sanctuary gives them familiar landmarks in language and culture to explore the boundless grace of Christ. Many British Christians who are alienated by the busyness and institutionalism of traditional churches are also finding Sanctuary a safe place to explore Christian spirituality.

All over the country Christians are developing labyrinths based on the model devised by Jonny Baker of the Church Mission Society and which he demonstrated in cathedrals all over the UK during 2000. The labyrinth is a symbolic journey towards an encounter with God. The path has three stages, the 'inward journey' where we let go of things which hinder our approach to God, the 'centre space', a place of meditation and prayer, and the 'outward journey' which moves toward a richer relationship with ourselves, with others and with the planet through a deeper relationship with the Lord.

Groups like 24-7 and the teams from my own organization, Share Jesus International, are discovering that 'sacred spaces' in nightclubs attract the most unlikely people from club culture to ask for prayer and to

chill out in a place which is overtly 'spiritual', albeit in a Christian context.

In Edinburgh Richard Higginbottom's group are taking their Christian literature stand to car-boot sales all over the city. But they don't see this initiative as a means of raising money, it's simply an opportunity to make contact with those outside the church so that prayer can be offered there and then in the midst of the car-boot sale.

Developing a Christian ecology

As more and more people join the movement to 'save the planet', many of them are discovering a kind of spirituality that seeks connection with the delicate forces which keep the world alive. They sense that some places are alive and particularly charged with this 'aura'. They believe that the whole universe is also 'conscious' and that 'all' is alive. This is not a religion confined to the wildest eco-warriors or the weirdest worshippers of the goddess Gaia. It is now mainstream thinking and has permeated much of the ecology movement.

Thank goodness that some Christian groups have at last rediscovered our Christian theology of Creation. They can say with the psalmist: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (Psalm 19.1), and they have rediscovered the powerful writings of the Celtic Christians. They are practising a form of evangelism which appreciates a rich sense of the 'immanence' of God in the created order.

For me, the leaders in this field are people like the Revd David Bookless from 'A Rocha' in Southall. This international movement has found a London focus in the transformation of one of the most desolate waste-tips in west London into the beautiful 90-acre Minet Country Park. Christians have led a multicultural group in reclaiming this land and in practising what they preach in terms of being good stewards of the planet.

Other groups like the John Ray Initiative, led by a group of eminent scientists who have a Christian vision, are encouraging projects where Christians actually engage with the world as an aspect of their Christian mission. As I've travelled the country I've also met Christians who have helped lead 'Birmingham in Bloom', who are developing prayer gardens, cleaning up rubbish-filled rivers and engaging with the community in practical care of the environment such as digging gardens and removing graffiti.

In missions such as Soul in the City and my own organization's Dawn Patrol we've discovered that when we take care of the planet in practical ways and demonstrate acts of redemption we unlock channels of communication with those around us which were previously firmly closed. I believe that you'll have far more effective conversations about the Christian gospel by involving a community in Christian ecology than by simply going 'door to door'.

Sharing a Christian spirituality

Once I visited a New Age shop. It was packed with middle-class, middle-aged Devonians doing their Saturday morning shopping between Safeways and Boots. They were buying crystals, books of mantras, self-help guides, CDs of whale music and courses in relaxation therapy. Across the road was a church which was dark and locked. A large sign proclaimed: 'Sale of Work and Coffee Morning – Next Saturday'.

It seemed to me to be like a parable. Everywhere people are seeking to buy a consumer spirituality, but the Church continues to offer a social milieu some 30 years out of date. However, there are some Christians who are seeking to discover ways of introducing these 'spiritual seekers' to the rich heritage of Christian spirituality.

In the twelfth century the great Christian theologian Richard of St Victor wrote: 'The third degree of love is when the mind of man is ravished into the abyss of divine light, so that the soul has forgotten all outward things.' There are hundreds of Christian mystics like Richard, whose writings, down the centuries, have enriched and refreshed the Church.

There are those today who are taking the work of Christian mission into this marketplace of spirituality, and demonstrating that what Christians have has a permanence and credibility that far outshines the ideas of the latest Californian guru.

Liz Babbs, who was healed from ME through Christian meditation and relaxation, now writes meditations and produces CDs which are being widely used in stress management and relaxation therapy. She regularly leads Christian relaxation workshops in her local Waterstones bookshop.

As part of her work with NGM, the visionary youth mission programme, Nancy Gaudie, organizes work-outs under skilled professional leadership which end with times of Christian meditation and relaxation. She is convinced that this is a means of communication which

reaches those which traditional forms of evangelism would simply alienate!

In Bristol Wayne Coughlin is opening the church for an hour a week, and by using Taizé music, meditations, candles and icons provides a space where people can start a journey in Christian spirituality. You don't have to sign on as a committed Christian to make a start on this journey.

People like Church Army Research specialist Steve Hollinghurst regularly take Christian groups into New Age fairs where they offer Christian spirituality as an authentic alternative to the many other forms of meditations which are on offer.

In my own work the six-week course on Christian spirituality, *Essence*, has attracted thousands of people, both within and outside the Church, to explore what Christian spirituality can offer to a busy and stressed-out society. The new course, *Kids@Essence*, which has recently been field-tested in six cities across the UK, provides a gateway for children to explore what 'being spiritual' means in a Christian context.

I find no contradiction between the underlying hunger for spirituality being expressed all around us in our culture and the hunger which drives me to know God better. The first assumption of mysticism is that the soul is as real as any other organ of the body and in its proper sphere controls our spiritual welfare, allowing us to discern spiritual truth.

The contemporary evangelist needs to understand that Christian mysticism is the richest mysticism of all. It enables us to forge a profoundly personal relationship with the Creator, and to experience the Presence of a personal, real and loving Saviour. I see this new seedling movement of 'spirituality evangelism' as a contemporary rediscovery of Paul's famous motto that 'he would become all things to all men that he may win some' and I long that more would discover how hungry people are for what we have to share!

Free to witness

Our methods and strategies need to change, therefore, if we are to reach people where they are, to communicate in ways which they understand, and to be effective in engaging with the culture of which they are a part.

But there is another factor in contemporary evangelism which resonates with the struggles of our Primitive Methodist forebears. It is

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increasingly unpopular, and those who follow the call to become evangelists are seen as ‘oddballs’, ‘extremists’ and ‘off the wall’!

Sometimes I feel as if I’m drowning in a sea of political correctness. It’s all so well-intentioned, but it’s all so dangerous. This rising tide of political correctness threatens our right to share our faith, to nominate ‘doctrinally sound’ leaders to Christian organizations and to employ Christians in key roles in the life of the Church.

It has been my understanding that, enshrined within our British and European heritage, there is a basic principle relating to freedom of belief. I have always assumed that I have a basic right to believe, to worship, to serve and to evangelize.

Thirty years ago when I first worked in hospital chaplaincy I was welcomed as a member of the medical team, given access to confidential information, and notified of every new admission. In many hospitals this is now a thing of the past, and chaplains must trudge the wards ‘blind’ because ‘information legislation’ prevents them from knowing who might appreciate a visit.

Thirty years ago I regularly preached in the open air, and the relevant ‘permit’ was usually granted as a formality. In a recent request for police help I was threatened with arrest should I continue with a planned march because it might constitute a ‘breach of the peace’. We went ahead anyway; and the event was a great occasion and passed without incident.

Thirty years ago I would not have thought twice about sharing my faith with a Muslim, a Buddhist or a Sikh, and in fact did so on many occasions. The dialogue and friendship which emanated from such conversations was, to me, a hallmark of living in a multicultural society. I would certainly think twice about doing this today, just in case the person I was talking to might take offence and consider that what I was saying was ‘incitement to religious hatred’!

I have led evangelistic missions in hundreds of towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom. Some of these have been in places like Bradford, Southall and the Lancashire mill towns, areas that are predominantly Asian. We have often partnered Asian congregations and seen how the joint witness of Christians from British and Asian ethnic backgrounds has been a powerful witness to multiculturalism and good race relations. Out of hundreds of personal contacts from our teams I have never received a single complaint.

Recently, however, a mainstream church denomination refused to welcome our mission teams to Birmingham because this activity was considered inappropriate for such a multicultural context. One church leader informed me that the arrival of such teams would be 'derogatory to good race relations'.

When I shared this correspondence with other Christian leaders they were shocked and dismayed that a Christian denomination was so reluctant to welcome mission teams into their area. We had, incidentally, promised that all the teams would receive racism awareness training and be multicultural in their approach.

Does this mean that the UK is now 'sub-divided' into areas 'suitable for Christian mission' and others which are 'too sensitive', 'too dangerous' or 'too anti-Christian'? And if so, what does this say about the future of evangelism in the UK and the freedom of religious expression which I thought was an integral part of our culture?

Article 9 of the European Convention states that 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice or observance.'

Martyn Eden of the Evangelical Alliance in a lecture on 'Political Perspectives' noted that 'In the developed nations, traditional worldviews and the Judaeo-Christian moral consensus have given way to the influence of modern relativism, pluralism, materialism and what is called post-modernity. These cultural changes have given a new slant to the human rights movement and made it threatening to the orthodox Christian faith community in ways not anticipated 50 years ago.'

Thirty years ago I would not have thought twice about the content of my talk in a school assembly. I would have considered it basic that I could refer to Jesus as Christ, divide time into the eras AD and BC, speak of miracles and of salvation, and express my heartfelt belief that Jesus is the only way to God.

In a multicultural and multifaith context I would be considered reckless to do the same today! So are we entering an era in which I must be guarded in speaking of my faith in general everyday contact with people as well as in the school assembly? And doesn't this development take something away from my freedom of speech and my right to explain my beliefs to others?

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If we are to treasure evangelistic mission as part of our Methodist heritage we may need to become more outspoken. We must challenge those ideas and popular trends which are unbiblical and dangerous. This may lead us into direct conflict with political institutions, societal structures and legal authorities; and some of us may find this a personally costly activity. But then, so did those Primitive Methodists!

NOTE

1. Revd Dr Rob Frost is the Director of Share Jesus International, a mission agency serving seven Christian denominations. He is the leader of Easter People and presents the Sunday Breakfast show on Premier Radio from 8-10 a.m. More on his work can be found at www.sharejesusinternational.com