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### A New Paradigm

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## A NEW PARADIGM

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It is challenging for a church to preach the Gospel message to a postmodern audience using the traditional evangelism model. Churches, therefore, would be best served when they are intentional about not relying solely on denominationally provided programs and evangelistic models. By incorporating multiple evangelistic avenues year round, traditional as well as innovative, there is a greater opportunity to help people experience the Gospel. We must adapt to the times and use all the means of witnessing available to us.

Knowing that we need new ideas and coming up with those new ideas are not the same. Thankfully we have churches full of people from all walks of life who can help us generate and integrate innovative evangelism. The best creative evangelism is what the members come up with to meet the needs around them through loving relationships. Evangelistic ministries, birthed by the members, work best when there is a heart to reach people. It is not the ministry but your love and prayers that make the difference. This usually doesn't immediately impact your church's baptism or membership numbers, but it is about fostering long-term Christ-centered relationships with no strings attached.

Jesus called us to "Go" (Matthew 28:19) out into the communities, rather than waiting for them to come to us. As followers of Christ we, as individuals, are expected to do more than just speak the Truth to the world; we are to share life with others. Jesus "affirmed that the worship of God is central to what it means to be a disciple. But... He did not make the building—or corporate worship—the destination. His destination was the people God wanted to touch, those were, with few exceptions, people who wouldn't have spent much time in holy places."<sup>1</sup> Jesus intentionally socialized at weddings, feasts, people's homes, and even walking by the road or sea.

I (Joseph) discovered the potential for member-generated creative evangelistic ideas when I saw it in action at one of the churches I pastored. Diane, young adult, saw an angel tree in the mall over the Christmas holidays. The tree was filled with names of poor families in the community. She took 10 names back to the church. Within minutes the names were gone. Church members asked to be able to drop off the gifts for the families in person, rather than having the angel tree organization deliver them. The idea was to build a relationship with the families so that the church could look in on them and be there to help with any future needs. The organization agreed and Diane grabbed some more names off the tree to take back to the church. That Christmas, the church provided gifts for 100 families whose names were on the angel tree. The church was a beacon of hope for those families and a reflection of the love of Christ. Diane's impulse to have individual church members fill a community

need sparked in me a desire to tap into the creativity present in each of us for innovative ideas regarding evangelism. This led to the creation of a culture in the church in which eyes and ears were opened and encouragement given for every member to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in order to take part in filling community and personal needs.

Over the course of two chapters (this one and the next one), we want to invite you to take part in a paradigm shift in your thinking about evangelism and evangelistic strategies. This first chapter will focus on the changing paradigms of how people come to the Lord, the need for a church to exist in more than just the building, and creating an innovative evangelistic idea-generating environment. In fact, all the stories shared here feature youth and young adults.

### **New Paradigm: Show and Tell**

The old model of evangelism was a movement from facts (head knowledge) to faith to feelings (heart knowledge). In the age of modernity, being presented with facts would lead to a change in faith which would then lead to an experience within a like-minded community. For example, proof texts were presented about the validity of the Sabbath, people agreed with and had faith in those facts, and then started keeping the Sabbath.

Today, in our post-modern world, feelings hold more sway than facts.<sup>2</sup> As such, the new model of evangelism should be a movement from feelings to faith to facts.<sup>3</sup> This requires a larger commitment on the part of members. Relationships must be formed first—the unchurched need to see how Christianity works; they need to feel like a part of something—part of a community.<sup>4</sup> For example, in sharing about the Sabbath, proof texts and history lessons should not be the place to start. One should start with fellowship and relationship building, showing how living within a Sabbath rest helps to strengthen family bonds, church communities, and an awareness of God. Let the unchurched have a shared experience of the Sabbath as a delight. They will want a repeat of that experience which can lead to faith in the principles of the Sabbath. They then ask for facts about the Sabbath because they are already experiencing the joy of it. This is the “Show and Tell” paradigm.

The same is true for sharing about the Second Coming. People need to see how living in the hope of the Second Coming provides purpose and strength for everyday living. Once this is seen, the unchurched can begin to believe for themselves about the reality of the Second Coming. It is then that they will begin to ask for the facts.

Dr. Fredric Neuman observed in his psychotherapy practice that change takes more than new information. If what we learn requires a change in behavior we are less likely to embrace the needed change and more likely to reject the new information. But if we have already changed our behavior, it is much easier to adapt our beliefs to match.<sup>5</sup>

In a New York Times article by Maria Konnikova, she presents several studies that show the ineffectiveness of using facts to change people’s minds. Interestingly, it was found that when you feel good about yourself you are more open to accepting new facts.<sup>6</sup> In the realm of evangelism, this means we should not present the facts of the Gospel without sharing the love Christ has for every individual. When someone finds their value and self-worth in God, they are more open to understanding and absorbing the truth of the Gospel.

Church activities such as a picnic by the lake, a hike in the local forest, or a birding expedition are wonderful opportunities to build relationships with those who don't feel comfortable in a church. Sharing food together is another way in which to build up meaningful relationships and share how Christ is working in our lives.

Several years ago, Kristy was introduced to Alexis, the sister of a church member. The two women were the same age and became fast friends even though Alexis was not a Christian. They spent time together talking and sharing meals. They would often go to the zoo on Sabbath afternoons watching the animals and enjoying nature. Alexis began to understand the importance of taking a break from work and the busyness of life in order to rest and recharge. Kristy invited Alexis to church socials and tried to do a Bible study together. But these did not increase Alexis' interest in going to church services. Over the years, the women moved away from each other, but still kept in touch. Without pressuring, Kristy would share devotional messages or Bible texts from her church newsletter that Alexis seemed to respond to and comment on. Recently, with no prompting from Kristy, Alexis signed up for the weekly church newsletter devotional and continues to reach out for general spiritual guidance.

"In the end Christians must understand that unbelievers will not accept what we say about Christ until they first see the truth manifested in our lives."<sup>7</sup> We must first show people what life with Christ looks like and why it is better in order for us to earn the trust necessary to be believed. It is then that we are able to share the facts that people may not even realize they were searching for.

### **New Paradigm: Go and Do**

Michael L. Simpson shares that in the past, people would come to the church for answers and the church became their path to God. Yet today, few people seek out a church for answers to life's questions.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, "evangelism must often take place as an encounter outside the church. The church's role is to prepare Christians for these encounters and provide safe entry points for new believers to enter into church life."<sup>9</sup>

Ethan, a young man in his twenties, saw people converging at a local park. When he discovered that they were preparing to put on a triathlon, he wondered what he could do to help. The organizers said that they could always use more water. Feeling inspired, Ethan gathered together some church members who donated water for the triathlon. For those who wanted to help pass out water, the triathlon's sponsor covered the insurance and training of volunteers. Because Ethan saw a need, church members were able to meet some great people and fill a need in the community. Church leaders could encourage members to join with other organizations as volunteers. This is just one way in which we can "Go and Do."

In meetings, Andy Stanley, “will go around the room and ask staff members to report on who they are spending time with. If staff members are not talking to people who are hell bound, then something’s out of balance in their schedule and priorities.”<sup>10</sup> He even encourages pastors to spend more time with the unchurched than with their members.<sup>11</sup> Ellen White also spoke against ministers who only focused their time on their churches as “the ministers have other work to do. They must carry the message of truth to those who know it not.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, everyone should make an effort to include spending time with unchurched people as a normal part of their day. When we intentionally spend time with people our eyes will be opened to their needs. When coupled with an evangelistic heart, members will be able to “establish ministries that allow the church to be present in the community, and have a process by which they are able to draw these unchurched people into the safety of Christ and a local church.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus’s method of one-on-one personal contact was representative of the “special place in His heart for those [who were] shunned and rejected by society regardless of their socioeconomic level.”<sup>14</sup> You do not need a ministerial license to have the Holy Spirit work through you to reach people. “Angels of God attend you to the dwellings of those you visit. This work cannot be done by proxy. Money lent or given will not accomplish it. Sermons will not do it. By visiting the people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them you will win hearts. This is the highest missionary work that you can do. If do it, you will need resolute, preserving faith, unwearying patience, and a deep love for souls.”<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after he was baptized, Peter was asked to help out with Pathfinders. He was surprised to see only about 15 kids in the club and all of them were from the church. Peter envisioned a club with half of its members from the community. He had the kids invite friends to come out and join Pathfinders. They worked to make the club known within the community. He opened the gym to the community, had monthly social events for the kids and their families, and had the Pathfinders actively involved with church services on a regular basis. Under his committed leadership and creativity, the club tripled in size in less than three years with less than half being from the church. Several families came to be church members through the influence the club had on their children.

Peter helped his church to develop a paradigm shift for not only the Pathfinders, but also for the church as a whole. The members learned the value of having non-members included in ministries and taking those ministries outside of the walls of the church.

In the research done for this article we found several examples of churches going outside their walls to meet with and be seen by the community. Many churches meet at a local park for vespers programs, Sabbath lunches, or even to do Vacation Bible School. Small Groups are held in members’ homes and youth groups meet at the local coffee shop or Panera Bread restaurant. Some churches incorporate community service projects into the calendar for months with a fifth Sabbath. Others host block parties and church at the beach or camping in the mountains. One group opened a Prayer Café in a local strip

mall.<sup>16</sup> All of these ideas involve going out and being available, consistently, outside of the church building.

Robert Henderson shares his dream of what this type of church without walls would look like: “a congregation of down-to-earth, wholesome Christian folk who are ‘radioactive’ with their love of Jesus Christ, who are alert to and praying for all of their non-Christian friends, and who are able to enter into gentle conversations with these friends which would bring them to the knowledge of the Lord in sensitive ways.”<sup>17</sup>

Considering the amount of loneliness in our world today, we would do well to focus on building relationships and connections with others. These connections will help people to realize that you are sharing with them out of genuine concern and love for them with no strings attached. This means befriending coworkers, neighbors, the parents of your child’s friends, etc.

Ellen White encourages believers:

Wherever you can gain access to the people by the fireside, improve your opportunity. Take your Bible, and open before them its great truths. Your success will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments, as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse. The presentation of Christ in the family, by the fireside, and in small gatherings in private houses, is often more successful in winning souls to Jesus than are sermons delivered in the open air, to the moving throng, or even in halls or churches.<sup>18</sup>

It is through the forming and growing of relationships that you gain credibility and the right to be heard.<sup>19</sup>

Some of those reading may be saying, “But all of my friends are Christian!” Bill Tenny-Brittian counters that “A Christian without an unchurched friend is like a dash of salt in the ocean: it doesn’t do anyone any good, and no one even knows it is there.”<sup>20</sup> Forming lasting friendships takes time, energy, and intentionally—things that are often in short supply in today’s Instagram and Twitter world.

### **New Paradigm: Live and Imagine**

Have you ever considered that all worship and evangelism is contemporary? At least it was when the services and programs we now consider traditional were first instituted. They were new and innovative. “The challenge and opportunity, however, is to shape liturgy and church life [and evangelism] in ways indigen-ous to the cultures in the community, in this generation.”<sup>21</sup>

Churches need to celebrate ministry regardless of outcome; encouraging believers to zealously make use of every evangelistic ministry and opportunity. However, we must remember that “humans do not convert nonbelievers; only the Holy Spirit does that. Consequently, our responsibility is to serve as capable conduits of God’s love through a clear expression of the gospel message. Whether or not the person accepts Christ is beyond human control.”<sup>22</sup> Having this understanding will contribute to creating an environment for creativity in a safe place to fail or succeed. However, still aim for excellency and put your best effort into all that you do. An evangelistic ministry that is poorly planned or executed can work as a disservice to the glory of God and leave people with

a bitter taste in their mouths.<sup>23</sup> Take the time to bathe your ministry in prayer and properly prepare, doing all in service to Christ.

Harry had a passion for missing members. He knew that many were still in the community, but had stopped coming to church. With permission from the pastor, he started a Saturday morning breakfast specifically for former members. No topic was off limits; they could even bash the church while drinking their coffee. What was important was listening without judgment and rebuilding relationships. He was a little worried about how the members would respond to this new ministry. But the pastor told him to go ahead; he would deal with any member complaints. After several years of spending time in this group, some of these former members started to transition to rejoining the larger congregation.

What worked for Harry was his focus on relationships and the desire to share himself with former members coupled with a grace-filled and welcoming church congregation. When we take the time to be trained in relationship building (how to be a better spouse, parent, friend, and neighbor), evangelism will be a natural outgrowth. If people don't like you, or know you, why would they want to worship with you? If you are unlikeable, what does that say about the God you serve that you want others to know?

On the other hand, if you are compassionate and empathetic to people's needs, and genuinely care about them as individuals, that is the God they will see through you. As believers in relationship with Christ we are to do our best within the church to create "environments where people are encouraged and equipped to pursue intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders."<sup>24</sup> Maintaining an intimate relationship with God will help you to be in tune to the imaginings He puts in your heart for ways in which to reach out to His Children.

When pastors and leaders encourage church members to live with evangelistic intentionality in regards to others, they are more capable of discovering new and innovative ways in which to reach those around them. In this way they can "Live and Imagine", using their God-given creativity for evangelism. Members are to live by the command of Jesus in Mark 7:8 to avoid letting traditions get in the way of obeying God or ministering to people. Creativity, relevancy and innovation become part of their thinking. Moreover, change becomes integral to their strategy. They're willing to take risks for the sake of those who are lost. In order to be effective and to have the highest impact, they learn from their mistakes and constantly readjust their course.

## Conclusion

We have discovered that friendship must be at the root of all kinds of evangelism. It is through long-term relationships that we are able to see and meet the unique personal and community needs of those in our sphere of influence. Taking the time to see and sympathize with these needs is at the heart of innovative evangelism that allows each person to contribute creative ideas. This type of commitment is necessary if we are to model Paul's actions of identifying with people in order to share the message of salvation (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). It is the task of each one of us to look for ways in which to reach the unchurched.

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## Endnotes

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