

## KEEPING EVANGELISM CENTRAL IN OUR LEADERSHIP

BY DAVE MALE

I meet many church leaders who principally came into ministry because of their experience of and passion for evangelism, but who after a few years have found that their life is almost exclusively focused on the running of the church and its associated activities.

There are always church people wanting to meet with you, leaders to work with, meetings to chair, administration to complete and church services to prepare for. The demands never cease and gradually what gets eased out is your own time with people outside the church: friends, social contacts, team mates and neighbours. This not only impacts our own lives but I would argue the focus of our leadership and ultimately the health of the church.



A good way to gauge what is happening might be discovered in two ways. Firstly tell your church you are going to spend a day a week with people who are outside your church and see what their reaction is. But secondly how does this make you feel? Are you already panicking about what you cannot do? Are you unsure who you would spend the day with?

One of the big leadership phrases of the moment is that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast.' I wonder whether we need to start not simply with a new evangelistic strategy but by considering how we might need to change our church culture, at a local and national level, to really make a difference in this area of keeping evangelism central for our churches and ourselves.

Recently I have been pondering what is the bigger cultural issue that is presented by the low ebb of evangelism in many churches, and how church leaders tend to end up spending most of their time inside church.

I have been reading again *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell L. Guder, (Eerdmans, 1998). This book has been hugely influential in recent mission thinking but what the various authors highlight is how church has been restricted in its working definition to '**a place where certain things happen.**'

The inherent danger of this definition is that our self identity can easily be limited to our organisational forms, meetings and the professional leadership. At a popular level it is indicated by phrases such as 'going

to church', 'attending a church' or 'belonging to a church', not phrases that abound in the New Testament.

Listening to church leaders recently (and even this Sunday's sermon) I have been struck by how often the definition of church is limited to what happens in the church building (and usually on a Sunday morning.) We seem to lack a theology of how we are church when we are not 'at church' and this is hurting us badly!

Research for the Imagine Project (LICC) amongst church leaders highlighted this when it reported 'leaders have a growing sense that we have looked for security in church structures, programmes, plans and vision statements neglecting the transforming power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ engaged in the lives of ordinary Christians, people who carry the presence of God into their daily context'.

The authors of Missional Church suggest a more appropriate and biblical definition of church is of **a body of people sent on a mission**, a gathered people brought together by a common calling and vocation to be a sent people. I wonder if our churches grasped and were energised by this calling how it might change both our approach to evangelism and the role of leadership. If we really understood and worked out for our own particular context what it meant to be a body of people sent on a mission, I suspect church might look very different, certainly evangelism would no longer be seen as for the 'keen few'.

It might mean for us five important steps in keeping evangelism central in our churches and leadership with such a culture shift.

### 1. ENVISION

Part of changing culture is to envision people, not just with another vision for the next year or two, but envisioning our congregation that together we are a body of people sent on a mission so that we always gather to be scattered to be gathered to be scattered etc. and in both ways we are truly church. Harold Percy, a Canadian church leader wrote, 'Transformed leaders have a clear conviction that God can and will work through their congregation to change lives, and that their congregation of people can be used by God to help change the world. Such vision begins with the clear vision of the evangelising community and what that community might look like in its particular setting and circumstances.' At the root our response to this I believe must be prayer as we seek God to show us how to be his sent people.

### 2. ENCOURAGE

How as leaders do we encourage people to be a sent people if we are always demanding that they are at lots of church meetings and events? At one of the churches I worked with we had a key phrase, 'minimise meetings and maximise relationships.' What is the proper relationship between being gathered and scattered?



### 3. EQUIP

So often we fail to practically equip our church people to be witnesses to Christ. As leaders we need to understand there is a difference between 'telling' and 'training'. Often we think we are training because we have talked about the high value of evangelism or have preached about the need to share our faith from the front and we assume that this is enough. But we need practically to give people the tools to both live and articulate their faith in a missionary situation.

### 4. EXAMPLE

If this doesn't start with us as leaders we will find very few people will follow us. We need to be prioritising time for those outside the church and sharing our stories, both the good and the not so good to encourage others to get involved in God's mission.

### 5. EXPECTANCY

The book-ends of the practical activities are the envisioning and the expectancy. Again prayer is at the heart of this increased expectancy as the church becomes more aware of God's power to work and save. Prayer continually reminds all of us that evangelism is God's work; a work in which we cooperate. We are not in control of the process, but prayer is the crucial element in our role, both individually and corporately. If we want to be doing more about getting the word out, we will need to be praying more.

Dave Male has co-authored with Paul Weston a book on evangelism, *The Word's Out; Speaking the Gospel Today* (BRF). The book examines why our churches often struggle with evangelism and then asks what we can do about that, both by looking at how Jesus evangelised and looking at some practical solutions.