

# LEADING IN EVANGELISM

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## THE EVANGELISM CHALLENGE

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Like lots of leaders, for some years I have been wrestling with why many church leaders, who seemed to be doing all the right things and themselves have a real heart for evangelism, are seeing such modest fruit. Furthermore, what has been confusing for me is that the evidence I have experienced on the ground doesn't always seem to reflect some of the research which offers a more upbeat assessment of society's receptivity to Christians and the gospel.

There are many factors underlying the current crisis, but I wonder if it helps to recognise just how decisive and profound the impact is of a few contributory factors in the wider climate i.e. the impact of some factors *far outweigh* that of many others. If this is the case, it has implications for our response. My sense is that our thinking so far risks being too scattergun in its analysis and disparate in its response.

From an evangelism perspective, this is how I would characterise the current climate in the UK applicable to the majority of churches and congregations. Perhaps this feels a bit brutal, but I honestly believe it's broadly reflective of the situation and furthermore, in some degree or another, I recognise all of the following traits in myself.



### 1. LEADERS

A significant proportion of Christian leaders simply do not take the need for evangelism seriously for various reasons, not least they may not believe the theological imperative.

Many church leaders are somewhat overwhelmed by their increased responsibilities alongside diminished resources. For example:

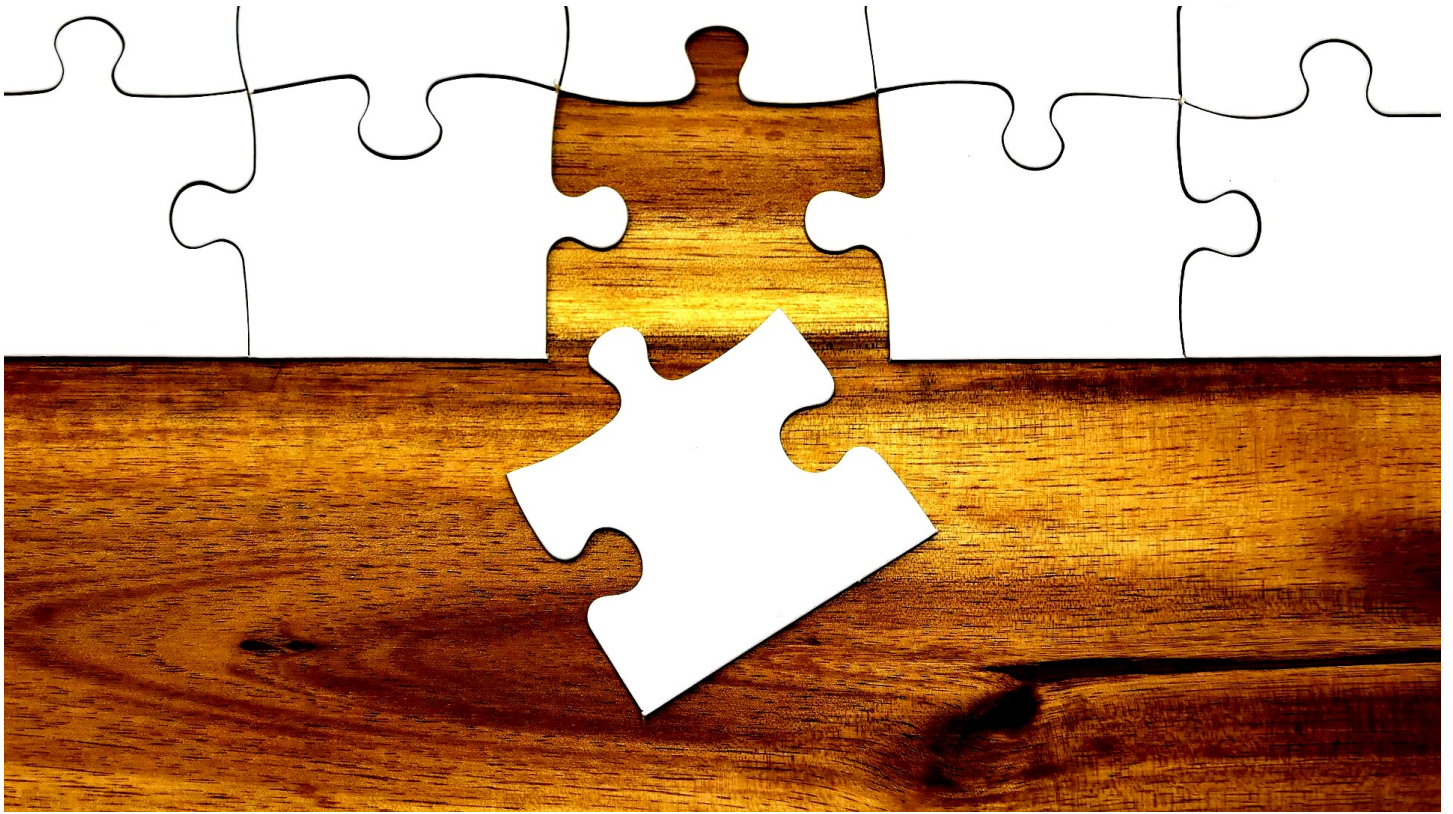
- The majority of Church of England incumbents are in multi-parish situations, which normally means more time spent on keeping what exists up and running, more time on admin, and less time for missional creativity.
- Covid has led many of those who were exercising leadership to step back from their responsibilities, and a significant number of churches have seen a reduction in income.
- There has been a steady increase in compliance over the last 10 years (Safeguarding, GDPR, DBS, and more recently Covid security), as well as increased complexity around financial matters.

### 2. FIVE MARKS

The Five Marks of Mission have perhaps had the serious unintended consequence of offering four alternative and convenient paths of least resistance, and have done for decades. Consequently, there is now a significant courage, skills and theology deficit around evangelism.

### 3. SPEAKING OF ONE'S FAITH

Speaking about one's faith in a substantial way (rather than light touch references, for example 'I go to church on Sunday') in today's society is for most current church-goers (the majority of whom are older) seriously scary. It is **significantly** more challenging than virtually every other aspect of Christian discipleship.



We need to understand fully the scale of this challenge. It was never easy for former generations, even in a broadly Judaeo-Christian culture, but today a swage of tsunamis have rolled in and flattened the landscape.

- A secular-liberal culture actively suspicious of faith.
- The fallout of post-modernism that relegates faith to the private sphere and removes it from the public square.
- Sex and abuse scandals and their toxic reputational impact.
- The rise of fundamentalist Islam and attendant suspicion of 'extremism' in faith.
- The relativisation and reduction of truth in a post truth society.
- Employment law and fear at what one can say.

All these have collectively significantly raised the courage and confidence bar. I know some research suggests the wider population has a more favourable view than we might imagine regarding these factors, but I think ordinary Christians do negatively feel the collective impact of them, particularly in undermining boldness in speaking about faith.

#### 4. CHRISTIANS

Most Christians if asked to articulate the substantial, radical, life-changing impact the Christian faith has made to their lives (or have seen in others' lives) which they cannot help themselves talking about would struggle to give an authentic current example. And conversely, I suspect most non-Christians would not identify this degree of radical life change in Christians they know.

There are some wonderful exceptions to this, but the evangelical tradition in particular tends to use language and story in a way that exaggerates the impact of these exceptions. We confuse a desire to encourage with hard-headed analysis.

Alongside this, modern 21 century life in the West is for most Christians relatively comfortable. While we genuinely care about and value our faith, nevertheless it's something to be integrated within other lifestyle priorities, aspirations and indeed opportunities. Most of us are not even close to the radical change of behaviours demanded by the above analysis. One of the consequences of this is that most find it convenient to subconsciously or consciously choose to sit (very) light to speaking out about their faith.

I wonder also whether for many Christians seeking a church committed to setting a higher bar of discipleship, including speaking out one's faith in all of life, the Church of England, in terms of its perceived evangelism culture, would not be their first choice; they would far more likely attend – and indeed probably have found faith within – some of the 'newer' churches. Conversely, many who actively choose a Church of England church, may do so precisely because they perceive much lower expectations in this respect; the opportunity to attend church on a Sunday and lead 'respectable' but not particularly overtly Christian lives through the week.

#### 5. LACK OF NEW DISCIPLES

Most Christians simply have not personally seen or experienced enough people coming to faith to give a sense of hope. Indeed most feel, in this specific respect, demoralised.



This can undermine confidence in the gospel to transform people's lives.

## 6. ETHICS

Amongst a growing number of younger Christians there are concerns about the ethics of evangelism, which is often a reaction to either a historical abuse of position or power to coerce others into the faith, or a personal experience of inappropriate evangelism that felt unkind, manipulative or abusive. In a society with a heightened concern to address abuse of power, and to acknowledge past wrongs, some Christians see evangelism as unethical.

### SO...

Again, there is nothing (new) in the above that is not included in much that is written about the Church today, but my key point is that taken in aggregate, we have not sufficiently understood or faced up to the magnitude of the challenge these specific factors now represent and the height of the mountain that has to be climbed.

If this argument is correct then the root issue (for both leaders and led) is not primarily organisational/skills development/tactical – it's far more foundational and is centred around core beliefs (motivation), character (courage) and prayer (spiritual temperature). It's also about recognising the scale of the spiritual battle that the wider Church faces... and it is primarily a spiritual battle before an organisational or structural battle.

Addressing it is likely to involve significant cost and probably a level of repentance and humility in senior leaders that we are perhaps only just beginning to see... again, I don't see this picture clearly described in much current analysis.

To further clarify, I would argue that perhaps beliefs, courage, confidence and spiritual temperature represent 80% of the leadership challenge, and organisation/skills/equipping only 20%.

Having said all this, and to offer the wider context, it's striking that the theme of evangelism has risen in profile as indeed has prayer – a key weapon in the spiritual armoury – over the last 20 years. Furthermore, again from a wider perspective – beyond the topic of evangelism and at ground level – there is lots to be positive about in the Church of England. God seems to be making us fitter for purpose; the leadership initiative over the last 20 years or so has been crucial to this. On the journey of change – say over a 20 to 30 year timescale – there has been a warming of the spiritual temperature in many 'ordinary' churches and amongst many 'ordinary' Christians.

There are many stories we are all hearing, across traditions and contexts, that testify to something going on, a sense that the Holy Spirit is on the case. Spiritual temperature is the key predictor of future health. Those that are left in our churches are actively choosing to be there, their faith definitely

matters, but this next big step in the journey – the confidence and courage to speak about our faith naturally in all of our lives – represents for almost all of us a very significant mountain range to be climbed.

A key rule in climbing any mountain is a clear recognition of the height and the nature of the terrain to be traversed – we may think we are climbing Ben Nevis, when in fact Everest is before us – and then a route/plan which reflects this reality.

