

Edmonton, June 12, 2004

The High Price of Evangelism

Christian discipleship is not a picnic. There are picnics on the way, mind you, there are parties and festivals, and celebrations. But discipleship is hard work, and Jesus was at pains to make that clear. He actually discouraged people from discipleship if they weren't serious. Think of the rich young ruler: Jesus really wanted him to be a disciple ("looking on him, he loved him"), yet because the man was not prepared to pay the price, Jesus let him go.

Now evangelism can be incredible joy, almost intoxicating--when you see a person responding to the message, like a flower opening in the sunshine. But it is also not to be undertaken unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, but soberly, discreetly and in the fear of God! There's a good book on evangelism called "Evangelism made Slightly Less Difficult." That about sums it up: it will always be difficult, but it can be "made slightly less difficult."

So why do it? Why not be comfortable? One basic reason because we follow Jesus and this is something he commanded us. (I am not aware that he ever promised us we would be comfortable.) Indeed, the command to make disciples was the last command he said. Sometimes we recognise that obedience is important: we know it's important to love our neighbour, or to forgive our enemy, or to "do this in remembrance of me." So it's strange that we ignore things like the command to make disciples! Probably we do so simply because it's difficult. As G.K.Chesterton said of the faith in general: "it's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but that's it's been found difficult and not tried."

If we decide that we need to work at obeying Jesus in this, learning to make disciples, it will cost . . . So let me suggest to you ten items that need to go into the balance sheet. (I am assuming the worst-case scenario here; so if you find yourself thinking, "That wouldn't be a problem for our parish," that's a plus. Pat yourselves in the back.)

1. We will need to re-educate our congregations about the reason we exist
At its simplest, church exists to be a gathering of disciples of Jesus, to worship him, to learn from him, and to invite others to become disciples too. That might sound too obvious, too simple, but for many that sounds really weird. One elderly lady said, "Why do we always have to think about other people: why can't we think about ourselves for a change?" and that was after 60 years in that church! So for our congregations to understand what the church is all about is the starting point, the sine qua non of evangelism.
2. We will need to rediscover the Gospel
One man said to me, "After 50 years in this church, I can't say I've ever heard anything I'd call the Gospel." Nothing he had heard about God or Jesus or forgiveness or the love of God (and surely he had heard the words a thousand

times) had ever struck him as good news, good news for him personally, such that he came out of church thinking, “Isn’t that wonderful! I’m so glad I’m a Christian!”

Speaking for myself, I have heard too many sermons whose themes could be summed up as, Behave yourself! Try harder! Be nice to everyone! Give more money! Pray harder! Be a good citizen!—and of course all of these are important. But there’s no good news in any of them, nothing to get excited about. They just weigh me down with responsibilities.

So let me ask: How is Jesus good news in our lives? What is it about Jesus that makes us smile, and say, Thank you, God? What is the Gospel according to you?

One way to nurture this good news atmosphere in our congregations is to give people an opportunity to tell their faith stories. In our parish, we give sermons in Lent over to lay people talking about how Jesus is good news for them. It’s great!

But of course it doesn’t matter *how* we talk about the Good News of Jesus—as long as we really have good news, and as long as we then learn to share it. Because the Greek work for good news, or Gospel, is *evangel*--so if there is no *evangel*, how can there be any evangelism?

3. We will need programs to help new people understand discipleship.

Let me ask you, if a person comes to your church and is asking, “I’d like to understand this Christian faith business,” what can you offer? One lady new to our church said, “I didn’t know where to begin.” We too often begin in the middle, and assume a person is ready to jump into the middle of active ministry, when in fact they may not know anything about Christian faith, let alone be committed disciples. We ask, “Could you help with Sunday School?” when we should be asking, “Where are you at in exploring your spirituality?”

Remember too that the church is a school, the school of Jesus. If people behaved this way in any other school, we would think it was bizarre, like offering graduate programs to people who ought to be in kindergarten. There are programs to help beginners: Alpha works for some, Christian Basics is great, Harold Percy’s Christianity 101 is being widely used, Emmaus is catching on. So there are lots of programs: we just need to choose one and start teaching it!

4. We will need to redirect finances to make evangelism possible

At the simplest level, if you buy Alpha videos, you won’t be able to buy something else. If you start a new service, you may need to hire a musician. And so on. I don’t need to tell you, when you talk about money, specially taking money away from something, or raising money for something new, you touch a raw nerve. For evangelism to happen, you need a treasurer with strong nerves and a passion for outreach!

5. We will need to reassign personnel

In our parish, we are planning a third Sunday service, to be evangelistic in intent. Well, we will need musicians, greeters, a Sunday school, and so on. And where will the people come from to staff these? At least at first, the likelihood is that they will come from the existing services. You can imagine how popular that will be.

It's not only responsibilities within the church that will change, however. Often in the church, the way you measure someone's commitment is by how many committees they are on, right? Wrong. I recall a friend in Ottawa, Don Page, who founded the Public Service Christian Fellowship. Over several years, they established about 100 Bible study groups on Parliament Hill and in government offices, and, over those years, Don heard of about 100 people who had become Christians through them. You know what responsibilities he had at his church? None. They said, "Don, that's your ministry. We'll pray for you, support you, give you anything you need. But don't waste your gifts on church committees." When Don left, there was a suggestion that the vice-president of the PSCF should take over, but he was unable to do so. Guess why? He had too many church commitments. There's something deeply ironic about a church limiting people's ability to do evangelism, isn't there? But it happens all the time.

So we may need to release people from their regular commitments. Maybe someone will resign from vestry because they are gifted at teaching one of those newcomers groups we are going to be offering. Maybe someone will give up teaching Sunday School because they're starting a Bible study group at work. And instead of getting antsy and protective, we need to bless them and let them go. And to remind ourselves that serving on fewer committees may actually mean *more* serious discipleship, not less.

6. Some old things, familiar and beloved, will have to give way to some new things.

I don't know what these might be for you, but we need to be prepared. I think of a friend who was priest in a little country parish in Ontario. He took out the two back pews because there was nowhere for people to stand, to mingle and have coffee. Sounds like a sensible move, right? Let us just say he is no longer the priest in that parish, indeed, in that diocese. He had offended people with money, and people who had the bishop's phone number. The people he was trying to reach had neither. He changed something for the sake of outreach—and it wasn't appreciated. Beware!

7. Our worship may have to change

I did a series of sermons on Lord of the Rings a couple of years back, for a seeker service in downtown Toronto. Towards the end, one of the music group, a long time church member, came to me, and said, "At first I didn't like your sermons. I couldn't see what you were up to. But finally I've figured it out; they're not for us, are they? They're for the new people!" and she was right. But it took her time to get used to the different style.

But it may be something as simple as how we begin the service. I was in a service recently where the first announcement before the service began was about the new stewardship campaign. That's hardly appropriate as the first thing new people hear. After all, what does it tell them? "Oh wow, so this place is in financial trouble! Do I really want to stay?"

So we will need to think about the beginning of the service, how and whether we take up an offering, what we sing, how we introduce Bible readings. Everything needs to be thought through from the point-of-view of a newcomer. Not that we necessarily change everything—of course—but at least we are sensitive to how a new person will hear things, and respond accordingly, so they do not feel alienated.

8. New people will come

But that's what we hoped for, right? Why is that a cost? Well, the question is: what if they're not like us? Our youth group has been growing with unchurched kids the last few years, and, as a result, on any given Sunday morning, there may be a dozen youth in the service, and there are more belly buttons and nose rings, and more colourful hair than have ever been seen in this church before. And what's worse, they don't know the service. So far, we're coping well.

However, one priest who has seen his church grow significantly with new people said to me, "People like it . . . until it comes to questions of power. The new people have come to feel they belong, and they want to serve, so they come to the annual general meeting, and they run for office." You can imagine the rest. Power touches people where it hurts almost as much as money. But this is what happens if we do evangelism.

9. Some people will leave

Some would say in any congregation, there will be 20% who want to reach out and make disciples; 20% who say "Over my dead body" but show no sign of being about to die any time soon; and 60% who are open to be persuaded either way. Sometimes we have to choose which 20% we want--because in all likelihood not all of them will stay.

10. All this puts pressure on clergy for a different kind of leadership

I remember one priest, in his mid-40s who said to me, "I was trained for a church that no longer exists." A priest who cares about evangelism may well end up doing less pastoral visiting and more time hanging out in the local Tim Horton's; less time with the vestry and more time training lay leaders; less time caring for the present members, more for the potential members that nobody knows or has seen yet. And such clergy need the encouragement and support of their congregations, not criticism and complaint.

Well, this is the price. Is it too high? But consider the cost if we do not do it . . .

- To put it bluntly, a church that is not growing is a church which is dying—maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but somewhere down the road, when the last three members close the doors for the last time, and say, “Maybe we should have thought about evangelism after all.”

But I would say this is the least of our worries

- Far worse will be the fact that we will have failed to obey our Lord’s last command. And one day we will have to look him in the eye and explain why.

This is a higher price!

But don’t be discouraged. If we do launch out into disciple-making:

- We will find our own faith come alive. For example, the New Testament was written to a disciple making church, and it will start to come alive to us in a fresh way if we too are disciple-making church.
- We may see new people come to faith, and that will be a cause of great joy: “Wow! It really works!”
- You may remember that movie of 20 years ago, “Chariots of Fire”, and those words of the Olympic runner, “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” When we start to evangelize, we will know God’s pleasure. Why? Because God is an evangelizing God, a disciple-making God, and when we do the things that God cares about, and our heart is beginning to beat with the heart of God, we will know God’s pleasure. And there is no greater joy for a human being on this earth.