

Shaping the Evangelistic Ministry of Laity

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Evangelism in the local church is more an art than a science. When based on biblical and historical foundations, evangelism may resemble a multi-faceted web of related practices rather than a specific set of techniques or strategies.

Significant precedent exists within the church's tradition for the importance of lay participation in ministries of evangelism. The incredibly evangelistic period of early Christianity gave rise to the extensive spread of the faith and the establishment of numerous churches. Early Christianity was a lay movement. As George Hunter has pointed out none of those involved in the earliest evangelism of the Christian church were ordained in the sense that we speak of ordination today. Hunter also remarks that Jesus and the disciples "never met the educational and ecclesiastical requirements that would have credentialed them to be priests within Judaism."¹ The ministry of laywomen and men is essential to the faithful practice of evangelism within the local church. This article briefly explores biblical and historical foundations from which contemporary practices of evangelism for laity are shaped.

Definition and Implications for Evangelistic Practice

Because the language of evangelism tends to carry a variety of connotations in our contemporary context, for the purpose of this article evangelism will be construed as "proclaiming the message of salvation." This meaning emerges from the Greek term euangelion and related terms in the Old and New Testaments. This biblical concept of evangelism is difficult to grasp separate from initiation and participation in the kingdom of God. Therefore, evangelism is the proclamation of salvation that includes an invitation to kingdom living.

Evangelism is an essential component of the whole life of the church. Every pro-

gram and ministry within the local church should be evangelistic in character and practice. If the church is not proclaiming the message of salvation in its words and deeds, then for what does the church exist? A church that does not consider evangelism as primary may turn inward, merely sustaining itself rather than inviting others to participate in the kingdom of God. The extension of invitations by the local church to kingdom living is a communal endeavor. It is difficult to proclaim and invite others to an abstract set of beliefs not embodied in tangible practices within a local church community. Evangelism does not effectively take place separate from the whole life of a local church. Therefore, the laity are in many ways the primary practitioners.

Biblical and Historical Foundations

One tendency in defining the concept of evangelism during the last two hundred years or more has been to narrowly focus its meaning to preaching. Such a narrow definition largely limits the practice of evangelism to the ordained or the relatively small number of laity licensed to preach. Because of the additional historical obstacles encountered by women with regard to preaching, women along with many lay persons have not had broad access to evangelistic ministry. However, in recent scholarship within the field of evangelism, conceptual understanding of the language of evangelism has expanded in light of exegetical and theological reflection. For example, the emphasis of Matthew's great commission on discipleship, when read in the context of the whole gospel, is closely related to practices of compassion and justice within the

kingdom of God. Although the whole biblical canon provides foundations for understanding and practicing evangelism, an examination of the gospels reveals commission texts with various thematic emphases. Despite the relative diversity of emphases, each gospel and its commission text insists upon the necessity of both words and actions when proclaiming the message of salvation and kingdom of God.

Women in particular have lacked access to evangelistic ministry when narrowly understood as simply preaching. However, they have organized and participated in a proliferation of non-preaching evangelistic ministries. Methodist women in particular have expanded their opportunities in church and society through their various evangelistic ministries. For example, in early Methodism during the 18th century in Britain and America, the majority of the Methodist movement and its leadership were female. Women assumed leadership as class leaders and stewards and consistently participated in ministries of compassion and mercy in addition to their verbal proclamation occasionally as preachers to large crowds, but most often to small groups, and as domestic visitors. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women organized into local and national associations for the purpose of evangelizing as missionaries in foreign lands. As wives and single missionaries, women were trained as teachers, nurses and doctors offering their care to the spiritually and physically broken. Women also turned their focus to needs at home and in similar roles cared for the urban and rural poor as Deaconesses and mission workers. Eventually women began to organize around issues such as temperance and anti-lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although these movements have been studied from social and political perspectives, their impetus was strongly evangelistic. These biblical and historical foundations offer inspiration for evangelism by contemporary laywomen and men.

Contemporary Evangelistic Practice

Evangelism in the local church is more an art than a science. When based on biblical and historical foundations, evangelism may resemble a multi-faceted

web of related practices rather than a specific set of techniques or strategies. Within the Methodist tradition class meetings and small groups have and continue to play an important role in the spiritual formation and missional outreach of local churches. Small groups, whether as class meetings, or as organized networks of Christians in ministry around a particular focus provide an important structure from which to offer visitation and compassionate ministries.

Small Groups

From early Methodist practice class meetings have been understood as contexts for development of piety and mercy, the cultivation of spiritual formation and the practice of compassionate ministries. It is noteworthy that small groups within early Methodism also resolved administrative matters. Maintaining the connection between piety and mercy even with regard to administration is profound. Often ministries become compartmentalized as individuals fulfill discreet roles such that practices of piety and mercy become separated. It is important that all disciples within a local church have the opportunity to grow spiritually and practice charity to enhance their ministry and use of gifts. As small groups study the scriptures and pray together they discern practices of compassion to pursue. Such practices address the spiritual and material needs of brothers and sisters in Christ within the local community and in the larger church, but also to neighbors and strangers in need. Maintaining such a dialectic understanding within the context of small groups need not necessarily exclude administrative committees since all components of a local church are ideally evangelistic in character.

Visitation

The practice of lay visitation holds an important but often underestimated place in the historic practice of evangelism. Similar to the role of preacher, visitation in some regard has been assigned to the professional clergy in the current context. Although this is a significant practice of the ordained pastor, hospital and domestic visitation is an important evangelistic ministry within the whole life of the local church. When practiced consistently by laywoman and men within a church community, visitation often facilitates conversation and spiritual

growth as well as awareness of other needs. Visitation in the context of a Christian community may benefit from the organizational structure of small groups to minister evangelistically to a variety of constituencies. Although church members are frequent recipients of visitation, neighbors and strangers related to local church communities may also receive the message of salvation and respond to invitations to kingdom living. Combining creative reflection with regard to recipients and knowledge of cultural nuances helps to inform local practices of visitation.

Ministries of Compassion

Another component of the multi-faceted practice of evangelism is ministries of compassion. Women, especially within the Methodist tradition, were led to address issues of oppression as a result of an evangelistic impetus. As Christians, the gospel lays claim to our whole lives and gives us new eyes with which to recognize systemic injustices. As the gospel demonstrates, proclaiming the message of salvation is inclusive of words and deeds. Inspired by the memory of our Methodist forebears, participation in kingdom living and proclaiming the message of salvation may include struggles for socio-economic justice. Christian ministries of compassion should maintain the dialectic of piety and mercy and not be separated from their foundation in the message of, and invitation to, salvation.

Evangelistic ministry consists of a variety of practices. Laywomen and men have been essential to the practice of evangelism throughout Christian tradition. The cultivation of laywomen and men in small groups and their participation in ministries of visitation and compassion contributes to the effectiveness of evangelism practiced by the local church. □

¹ George Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 120.



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