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Evangelism—What should be done?

In the preceding paper we have seen how the 'urban problem' has developed, and noted some of the repercussions for the Church, which largely has failed to make an effective impact in Christ's name in urban areas. We have seen how urban areas so often characterised by despair, depression and deprivation socially, have spawned declining, demoralised congregations in decaying buildings. The danger is in thinking that how we could dare to produce out of our evangelistic hat some magical solution as a panacea for all our ills.

We hardly feel equipped to supply in a few thousand words what Christian leaders have been agonising over for well over a decade—an answer applicable in all situations as a kind of package deal. We shall attempt, however, to make suggestions for consideration and action, rather than give solutions. 'Solutions' presuppose success in some experimental realm; 'suggestions' presume nothing. We shall suggest some strategy that might be adopted, not structures that have to be formed, although these may well develop from an applied strategy.

1 Identification

In the December 1975 issue of *The Witness*, an article contained this comment, 'It is startling to be told that the almost complete deChristianization of the British working-class has been a potent element in the breakdown of industrial discipline, and our relative economic decline'. But were the British working-class ever Christianized? Not according to Bishop Winnington-Ingram who in 1896 wrote, 'It is not that the church has lost the great towns, it has never had them.' When Archbishop Longley remarked, 'The church has lost the towns', Disraeli is reported to have replied, 'Your Grace is mistaken, it never had the towns.'

Under the watchful eye of the village squire rural labourers attended church regularly, but as the migration of the population to the cities began during the Industrial Revolution church-going for these people immediately ceased. Several factors related to this cessation of church attendance, but one factor which must have played a large role in this was the low number of 'free sittings' available in the established churches. For example, in Sheffield in the nineteenth century there were fewer than 300 free sittings for a population of more than 60,000. The church at large became anxious about the situation and important local benefactors, mill and factory owners, built the terraced housing surrounding the mill or mine

that is such a feature of many industrial areas. At the same time they built large chapels and churches to which their employees were expected to go on Sunday with their families. So the serfs worked in the factory, lived in the housing the owner had provided, attended the church he had built—all as part of the contract. However, this did not have the desired effect and the Mann census indicated that only 58% of the population attended church—what of the other 5½ million, the labourers? The census claimed:

They (the labourers) dislike the social distinction in the churches, the division into respectable and free seats, and regard religion as a middle-class propriety or luxury, suspect the churches of being indifferent to their poverty, and think that the message of the clergy is vitiated because they are paid to deliver it. They live in such physical squalor they cannot rise to the things of the Spirit. . . .

It was the ruling classes who were associated with church-going, education and establishment and therefore antagonism and suspicion were naturally extended to include the church.

The working-classes have never, in a general sense, gone to church since cities began. They do not belong there in the cultural setting it provides. Although from a historical viewpoint the working classes are largely anti-church they are not anti-God.

The relationship of housing to employment is still there in places, as with the northern mining areas, although elsewhere industrial development has swallowed up older housing, dispersing the community into council estates and high-rise flats. As rehousing has taken place the church, by and large, has failed to move with the population. Sometimes it tenaciously 'maintains the witness' in a decrepit building in a depopulated area, whilst the forcibly moved population find themselves rootless in a new area which is not conducive to identity or community spirit.

The life of the city has dehumanised and demoralised its people making them mere cogs in a machine. Not only is this country pagan, but the cities are proportionately more pagan and spiritually deprived than all the other areas of the country—and 75% of the population live there. In many of our big cities the individual has about as little chance of receiving an evangelical Christian witness as he would have in some of the best known untouched mission-fields of the world.

Materialism, immorality and racial conflicts are just three of the complex social problems rampant in the city. Violence, crime, drunkenness and other allied social ills constantly rise. Despite all the money and research given to explore the problems no satisfactory plan has been devised to provide adequate social services and housing.

Dr. Roger Greenway of America has said, 'The church must learn to evangelise the city. The growth of cities is the great fact of our era and it provides the church with an opportunity to win great numbers to Christ. No other area in evangelism deserves more urgent attention.' Hippocrates once said, 'Whoever fails to reach the common people and make them listen to him, misses the mark'. It is significant to remember that of Christ it was said, 'The common people heard him gladly.' Alas, today, 'Christianity has become synonymous with a gay, unconcerned and irrelevant selfishness; and communism synonymous with a committed, disciplined and sacrificial way of living', according to Samuel Escobar. That is probably why communist influence in the cities is more and more apparent. We Christians have failed our nation and our Lord.

In order to find ways of expressing God's concern to urban man, we need to show our concern. We need first of all to acquire a concerned understanding of the composition and characteristics of our own city or suburb, and more particularly the immediate area where we live. We need to be aware of the influences that have led people to live where they live, and to think and act the way they do. Are we aware that in suburban middle class Britain the average family move every three to five years, which means they seldom put down roots or stay long enough to develop any community spirit or discover an identity? Are we aware of the motivating force in their life? Or do we realise that the percentage of urbanites living in apartments, high-rise flats and other multi-residence structures is certain to increase, and that people who live in such areas develop a life-style of their own, that increasingly isolates them from their fellow flat-dwellers and others? Do we realise that in some areas broken homes and one-parent families can be as high as 60% of the total family population? Have we then asked, how can the church which I attend, or where I live, express Christ's love in a way that will immediately begin to meet my neighbour's need socially and spiritually?

2 Mobilization

In *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, John Stott says, 'Mission embraces everything which God sends his people into the world to do. It includes evangelism and social responsibility, since both are authentic expressions of love.' Notice, he said 'God sends *his people* to do'. It has been said many times that God's means are men. God works through his church—as a community expressing his love to a loveless world—as a rescue team searching for those who have lost their way—as an organism bringing life to those who are lifeless. We cannot do anything without personnel—personnel who are willing to venture into the church's no man's land of inner city or industrial areas, recognising that it is as much a mission-field

as any foreign country, where a language and a whole new sub-culture will have to be understood. We suggest that more full-time workers are desperately needed in our cities, serving the church that exists there, spearheading evangelism into neglected areas, taking as many church members as are willing to be trained. As evangelists and modern missionaries, they will desperately need the fellowship, financial support and prayers of supporting churches. Updated versions of the work done by various city missionary organizations is required, where the worker will be more people-orientated than building-orientated. Recent work such as that of Robert Scott-Cook and Graham Loader in Bristol is an example of what is in mind. An Anglican research project has deduced that 'to reach and maintain even 10% penetration levels would require one clergyman for the first 1750 people, and one extra worker per 900 for the remainder.' On that basis a city with a quarter of a million population would need about 300 full-time workers. Even with a 5% penetration level, which as we shall see seems far more realistic, we are talking of far more full-time workers than there are in most cities.

Secondly, there may be many larger churches and fellowships in urban areas which should seriously be looking at ways of positively helping the more struggling causes, remembering that we are in a missionary situation. Although it may be pleasant to belong to a large live fellowship, its very size may be self-limiting to its growth either quantitatively or qualitatively, whereas the smaller units are often more effective in terms of growth. 'Divide and conquer' might be a watchword. Such an approach has been successfully applied in other parts of the world, for example Jamaica. A new housing area—church-less and unevangelised—or a redevelopment area would be obvious starting points. Or a declining fellowship in a socially changing environment (such as where racial and religious ghettos congregate) would also be a critical point for expressing missionary concern at home as a positive outreach from the large fellowship.

Thirdly, there may need to be the injection of people into urban and suburban areas, who go not so much because it is pleasant and congenial to live there, as because the love of Christ constrains them. Their residence as families, or as a team in an area may be the first step towards the establishing of a permanent Christian witness. The Morecambe 'Strategy for Evangelism' Conference in 1970 said in its Industrial Area and Immigrant Group report, 'We see the need for Christian homes to be built in these areas, and the call to live with sacrificial love within these areas, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus by living and speaking it. The churches should release people from the bondage of organizations so that they can be Christian husbands, wives, parents and neighbours, and use their homes for Jesus. The

Local Church should be representative of its area. The ideal is a truly indigenous church.'

Above all there is a desperate need for us all to recapture the missionary nature of the Church's task; to reawaken something of the enterprise of early Brethren pioneers who began fellowships in the areas where they lived and among the people with whom they worked. Kenneth Strachan, founder of Evangelism in Depth, said, 'The growth of any church is in direct proportion to its abilities to mobilise its members for evangelism.' Our success or failure can surely be judged by this maxim.

3 Proclamation

Michael Green, speaking at Lausanne, described evangelism in the early church as 'a spontaneous chattering of the Good News. It was engaged in continuously by all types of Christians as a matter of course and privilege. It came from the unquenchable conviction that Jesus was the key to life and death, happiness and purpose, and they could not keep quiet about him. The Spirit of Jesus within them drove them to mission.' Proclamation must take place, but it must ensue as a result of hearts being warmed, motivated and empowered by the Spirit of God. Forced outreach will more often than not prove counter-productive. Given that the message of God's love and purpose in Christ needs to be conveyed, how might it best be done in town and suburb? What methods of approach are appropriate to the need, and relevant to the personnel available?

Perhaps we need to start just there and ask ourselves what resources are available, in terms of manpower, finance and facilities for mission in any given situation. How then can these resources best be redeployed or motivated to be available to meet the need where it exists? Such questions as these should be the prelude to strategy, borne out of a desire genuinely to overhaul ourselves in readiness to attack the missionary situation in our towns and cities, as churches and communities of Christians.

(a) *Community* (in deed). The prime need in this rootless society is to re-capture a real community spirit within the church, instead of the 'association' outlook now apparent. This should find expression in compassionate concern for our neighbours—as a church and as individuals. It is impossible however, to form a 'community' when we live five miles from the focal point—our places of worship. The very fact of our commuting to church forces it to take on the role of an association. If every member of our churches went to his *nearest* fellowship we would have more equally numbered *local* churches from which we could begin to form the community life we seek. In every community there are family and personal needs in which

Christians can show neighbourly love and compassion through acts of kindness and deeds of love. As Michael Cassidy has said, 'We need less of pedestal and microphone and more of towel and washbasin.'

(b) *Communication* (in word). At some stage proclamation in word must take place. One of the best ways is by personal contact with the people we meet day by day—fellow-travellers, shoppers, work-mates and colleagues or people in the cafe where we lunch. The family unit must be won for Christ as well as the individual (and usually the females at that!). We need to look again at the failure of the church to reach and keep its contact with the male populace. Men tend to think that 'religion is for women and kids'. The church has let them believe this, because we don't do anything to correct this misconception and attempt to evangelize men. Therefore the family as a whole is not reached. If men cannot be reached through church-based meetings or home visiting them we have to go where they are—or more important to *be* where they are—in order to identify with them and communicate with them. It may be in the context of work-related situations that communication could take place in the first instance.

We need to be in the forefront of mass means of communication through which city man acquires his information—the press, television, cinema, radio etc. 'The cost is too great,' 'we don't have the expertise', 'we haven't the time', or, 'we mustn't get involved in the world' are our oft used excuses. If we had the enterprise of the early Brethren, and the faith to trust the promises of God we could use all the means of communication in order to reach men. The Morecambe Strategy conference report calls for all church leaders to be bold and imaginative in releasing latent creative talent in the service of Christ. We found a biblical basis for the use of modern communication techniques. i.e. visual aids, audience participation, poetry, prose, music, movement and drama. . . ' The church needs to structure itself on a co-operative basis across denominations in an attempt, *inter alia*, to influence for Christ the opinion-formers locally. It has been estimated that in any town or city, there would be no more than 300 people in this category. We find that this, strangely, was St. Paul's strategy. 'To the Jew first' involved approaches to the religious leaders with whom he may not have been in agreement or fellowship. Then there were others—devout Greeks and leading women in Thessalonica, the businessmen of Philippi, kings and civic rulers. He preached to small *and* great.

Michael Cassidy, in a paper on mass evangelism, says, 'In heterogenous situations we must discover the homogenous sub-cultural units to make effective any mass approach. Failure to do this

will nullify any mission.' Most of our thinking is normally geared to reinforcing the positive success areas, but perhaps one of the key ways forward in church growth is to identify the points at which blockage occurs, remove these blocks and strengthen the weak points, rather than mobilise extra resources and pressure at the point of strength. In any other concern, not to adopt such a policy would inevitably invite collapse. So what are the points at which we are weakest in proclamation? Which sub-cultural groups have been neglected? In what areas socially is there no witness to Christ? Which personnel need encouragement and support, morally and spiritually?

4 Adaptation

The church is a '*limited company*', with nominal capital, with little management, and a small mobile work force. It lacks working capital and is therefore nearly bankrupt. We have some fixed assets, but because we have a surfeit of liabilities we are perpetually running at a loss. Does it need restructuring in order to become a partnership, or a workers co-operative? In an article in the *Harvester* (November 1975) Dr. Keir Howard said, '...there must be continuing reappraisals of our work and service in the light of changing needs and circumstances. Perhaps especially. . .we must always be willing to pay less heed to the institutional form of local church. Old forms become obsolete and new forms must arise. We must cease to be 'church orientated' in the institutional sense for the form is not permanent. . .Rather it is essential to concentrate on the life of the community, a life derived from Christ himself. . . God has called us into a living community to be the agent of radical change in his world'. Morecambe again said, 'In de-humanised suburbia we have seen the need of a local church becoming a community where individuals can realise their full potential'. We believe and proclaim a gospel of grace available to all, but we operate a structure which takes the form of a club with limited membership.

We have mentioned already our belief in the need for a renewed emphasis on community. Now we wish to look constructively, we hope, at ways in which this might be achieved by a local church, with the aim of providing for growth of the Church by multiplication, rather than addition.

(a) *Small groups*

The explosion of little congregations is the most important single factor in the renewal of the church throughout the world. The key growth areas of the church are those where there exist multi house-group structures, rather than single fellowship centres. At Lausanne, Dr. Greenway of U.S.A., said, 'The house-church will probably be the organizational form in which Christianity grows

the fastest during the remainder of this century, and therefore church leaders should do everything possible to fit it properly into their church structures.' Talking of high-rise flats and other multiple residence structures, James Wong of the Singapore Church Growth Study Centre said, 'If people living in high rise areas are to be disciplined a greater number of house churches must be developed.' The existence of neighbourhood groups means that the Christian community is exposed for examination, and the locality is exposed to its influence in a way which is impossible when the Body of Christ only expresses itself within the four walls of a church building. 'It is far more important to multiply witnesses in the local community than to multiply the hearers of a well-known evangelist', comments David Wasdell in a workpaper of the Urban Church Training Project.

The loneliness, insecurity and frustration created by city life are ministered to best through the local assembly of Christians who meet regularly for worship and fellowship and belong to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The transformed lives of believers have more influence than any other factor in improving the quality of life in an urban community. What better place to give folk a better opportunity of beholding this than in small neighbourhood groups?

Such groups are more easily started in a new area where there is little of an established nature. Indeed many present day assemblies owe their existence to the origin of a housegroup. A family or two in an area could come together for mutual encouragement, then use their homes separately as community focal points in their street, apartment block or other area. This would become the first stage of showing the Church's community concern. In the same way, established churches could adopt a policy whereby area house-groups might initially revive struggling mid-week meetings. But by decentralising them, the community spirit amongst believers would be encouraged, which if not regarded as an end in itself would then become the springboard for evangelistic outreach through the regular day-to-day contacts each member has. Once the group began to grow it would be necessary for it to divide. As in many cases there are few, or even no homes, in an area where the assembly is based, members of one assembly living in the locality of another assembly should open up their homes to aid the witness in that area. A working together with other assemblies must begin. Assemblies in an area must meet together, think together and work together concerning an evangelistic strategy. If no other homes were available, perhaps some of the interested non-Christians could be asked if their homes could become a centre for fellowship.

The cell group structure in every segment of local life should also be supported, encouraged and prayed for by the local church and its members. These would operate among homogenous ethnic or occupational groups, as well as in specific geographical areas. Cell groups would be the counterpart in secular society of the community house groups. Their function would be similar—to provide fellowship for Christians, and to provide a focal point for communicating the Gospel to others in their sub-culture or social unit.

The local pastor or evangelist would be fundamental to the proper functioning of these various groups, and their adequate supervision, discipline, instruction and care. With most inner-city assemblies having only a handful of men, the running of several cell groups would be a demanding if not impossible task. Local assemblies, in working together, should consider the appointment of a full-time assembly-based worker to work alongside, say, three or four local assemblies—stimulating the vision, feeding and directing it, before handing it over to local Christians converted as a result of the ministry. Established churches would then be the place where believers attend for consolidation, instruction, training and further fellowship.

(b) *Pastoral/evangelistic visiting*

Every local church should have contacts in its local neighbourhood, through its existing activities. The visiting of these 'fringe' contacts should be a first priority in local church outreach. When relationships have been established, then it should be possible to communicate verbally something of the Christian gospel. The process of church growth known as 'Evangelism Explosion' is probably the most significant factor in the western world resulting in single church expansion. Where it has been properly applied in Britain it is resulting in a numerical annual growth rate of fifteen percent. An article in the *Christian Record* (2.7.76) reported on the application of these principles in a 'monochrome' working class estate' on the outskirts of Liverpool, where 'spectacular' results were seen. After initial training of a few church members many were converted as a consequence of the visiting. These too have been trained despite problems like culture-shock which in one case meant that it was 18 months before the convert dared to enter inside a church. Now house groups have been set up on the estate to cope with the teaching of the new converts. A church without some form of visitation programme doesn't deserve to grow, nor can it expect to. We have for too long looked for easy short-term answers in our missionary concern. There is no short-term alternative to the value of a consistent visiting programme of an evangelistic and pastoral kind.

(c) *Crossing cultural barriers*

In many areas the life-style of church members, who frequently travel in to worship, is radically different from that of the local residents. We are of a totally different culture, we think differently, our whole outlook on life, for obvious reasons, is different. In the past there have been attempts to build bridges—social bridges—into the community in order to break down the barrier of cultural differences. Today there are very few social bridges left to build across into the lives of the average English family. The church has lost her position as social centre for the community and because of this we can no longer go further down the scale offering more attractive social events than the bingo hall or the community centre. Our spheres of contact today must come through personal relationships and direct evangelistic outreach—we have no more bridges to build. Even in an immigrant situation the bridges of language teaching, sharing of English customs, sewing groups, have been sadly neglected for the church seems not to feel any responsibility or concern in these realms.

Initiative, imagination and innovation are required of the church in order to cross these long erected barriers between the man in the street and the man in the pew.

5 Implementation

In medical science, doctors, practitioners and surgeons may say: 'We are doing O.K., we're treating physical ill-health with drugs, surgery and medical care.' But they don't go on to say, 'therefore we don't need research'. They are only too aware of the need for researchers, specialists, trying to expose the cause of illness and discover effective cures, finding out what social factors as well as viruses, bacteria etc., contribute to certain types of illness. So too, we need people who will determine the causative factors of non-effective penetration with the Gospel, analyse the findings and prescribe cures.

The results of adequate research must inevitably lead to *forward planning* in our strategy for evangelism in all geographical areas, but particularly in large centres of population where we have a failure problem. Forward planning is needed because of the sophistication of modern life. Forward planning is needed because as disciples, we should be disciplined in our use of time, resources, and in the priorities we accept. Forward planning is not unspiritual, but inherent as part of life in an ordered universe and natural support system. It is also biblical.

We need to plan, with others, to enter areas of low spiritual impact, all the time being aware of the timing of God. Where housing development on a local or town-wide scale is imminent, we should

plan with the planners at an early stage. If population movements are involved, we ought to prepare as a church to provide for the Christians that will inevitably be a part of that population movement as well as for the non-identity new populace. For example we should constructively plan for 1.5% of any population movement to consist *now* of committed Christians. If the Mission to the Nation proposals are accepted and implemented, we should be looking more realistically and in faith for a figure of 5% in any given area by 1980. This must necessarily involve church planting on a scale not known in this country in decades. We need to set more goals in our evangelism. 'If Christians dare set their goals and sights high, they can expect, with God's help, the possibility of doing something great for him.' The disciples learnt the practical lessons of launching out into the deep at his command. We have the commands—we must launch out. The proposal to multiply churches in all segments of the towns and cities, where there is none already, must be regarded as feasible, and as the will of God. Perhaps a working group of interested people, with specialist knowledge in goal setting in evangelism, church planting, housing planning and development, sociology and training might be formed to examine these and related factors more closely. The way forward into areas of missionary need in our towns and suburbs will obviously require the mobilization of as many Christians as possible. But as so many, it seems, are weighted down by present activities, or overawed by the task, one asks how can they realistically be able to do anything to meet the vast missionary need? We firmly believe that serious training and retraining is an essential pre-requisite.

Training is required at local church level. This again is a sphere in which more full-time workers could be used. What is needed is a scheme relevant to each person in a local church situation. This can only be achieved and administered by a person who lives, works and is personally involved in that area. *Every* believer is capable of bringing someone else to the Lord, but because 'he doesn't know how' his capabilities are never realised. So many things in life change so quickly, that it is difficult to keep up to date. Training needs to be at two levels—theory and practice. So it may be necessary for residential training conferences to be arranged for specialist needs, coupled with some period of practical training. We have thought about the possibility of Spring or Summer schools, lasting for up to six weeks, with a different course each week at each of the centres chosen, covering the needs of leadership, evangelism, (in its different settings), youth and children's work, pastoral counselling, church planting, to name a few of the subjects that relate to today's theme. James Wong of Singapore points to a strategy for achieving the goal—to disciple the whole of the urban population for Christ.

The key factor lies in the church's ability to train sufficient leaders to become "church planters" so that new centres of witness may be expanded to all areas of opportunities.'

Training is an inbuilt feature of the Evangelism Explosion programme and can be adopted and adapted by any church. Training-schemes are offered by various organizations such as the Urban Evangelical Training Project, The Fishers Fellowship, In Contact, etc. It is time to admit that we can no longer muddle through maintaining the status quo and doing things the way we always have done. We must prepare, restructure, re-appraise ourselves and our churches for mission in these last days. We must encourage and train our personnel. We must see the divine priorities, and proclaim unequivocally the Gospel of redeeming grace.

6 Confrontation

The church, in town and suburb, established or to be established, needs to turn from defensive tactics to attack. The protagonists of secularism, humanism, communism and many other isms have been having a field day, whilst we have left the field, it seems, to them. They are becoming better organised, whilst we are becoming less organised, often divided, un-co-ordinated. We dishonour our Lord, whose impelling final commission was Go. . .Go. . .Go. Two telling quotations present the challenge—one from an Anglican and one from a Baptist.

'Throw off what hampers your service, even though it be venerable with the history of ages, or consecrated by dear familiarity. Use these things as aids to service if you can, but if they are only clogs cut them off and cast them from you. The day is come that burns like fire, for Christ has cast His fire on earth. Come out from your safety and comfort; come out from your habits and convention; listen for the voice of the wind as it sweeps over the world and stand where you may be caught in its onward rush' (William Temple).

'Go is the obligation of the saved. Jesus hastened to impose the obligation on those whom he saved during his earthly ministry. On the borders of Samaria he healed ten lepers and said, "Go". As he entered Jericho he gave a blind man his sight and said, "Go". He healed the woman of an illness that was of twelve years duration and said, "Go". In a graveyard at Gadara Jesus drove devils out of a demented man and said, "Go". "Go" is a choice word which the Lord Jesus used to give instruction to his church. It means just what he meant. Whatever else the church may do will result in barrenness if she fails to be a going church. The world will not be saved by proxy. It is a lazy cold disinterested (*sic*) kind of Christianity that would invite men to come into the Kingdom with stereo-typed letters,

bright flashing signs, and the many allurements commonly used to try to save the church from the obligation imposed by the text, "Go". *Go* is the command of the unerring wisdom' (Billy Graham).

In Christ's name we go. With his wisdom may we know how and where to go. With his love may we share his message of love. With his Spirit we shall have power to go. With his church we have the people to go.

*'Let us go forth
Unto Him
Outside the camp,
Bearing His reproach.
For here we have no continuing city, but
we seek one to come.'*