

interact



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Motivation for Evangelism

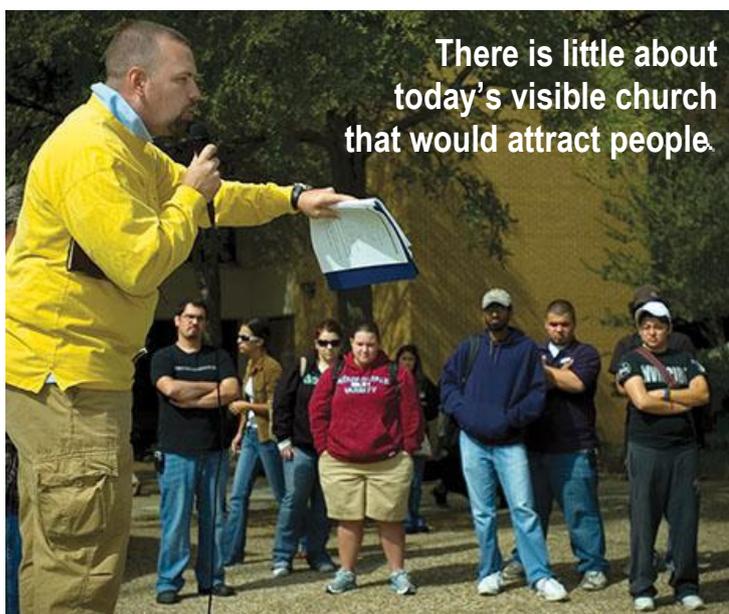
by Kel Willis

Most evangelical churches have an emphasis on reaching their local communities; it is an essential part of who we are as the people of God. When we understand and respond to God's gracious provision for us, something happens within, generating a desire that others will also come to know him. This is what prompted Paul to declare, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.' The gospel declares all that God has done to make it possible to be reconciled to him and to become all that he created us to be. We believe as evangelicals that God has commissioned us to take this good news message to the world outside the church.

I am sure that up until this point I would have no disagreement from anyone. What I have written is taught in any evangelical church. We all affirm the wonder of the gospel and the privilege we have in proclaiming it. Yet if we are being honest, we would also agree that most of us are not doing what we know and say we should do. In fact only a small percentage of people in our churches are really involved in sharing the gospel with non-Christians. No doubt all of us at times have questioned why it is so difficult to engage those outside the church with such good news.

It may disappoint you to read that my intention in this article isn't to try and definitively answer this question. Indeed, I am not sure that there is a definitive answer. What I want to do is to share some of my own journey and perhaps provoke us to find better ways of doing evangelism.

Evangelism ought not to be something we just do or some technique we have learned, but a natural part of who we are.



The challenge of competing voices

There are lots of reasons one could offer as to why we do not readily take the gospel to others. Whilst it has never been easy for Christians to overtly be who they are in a world that has always demonstrated some antagonism to the Christian message, it is probably more difficult for this current generation than for most that have gone before. There is little about today's visible church that would attract people. It appears to be fragmented and outdated, it brings an uncertain message, and in many cases it is not sure what it believes on critical issues like the authority of the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus. The church that many see seems to offer nothing that is relevant to their world. This makes it difficult for them both to want to understand Christianity and to be identified with its message.

Furthermore, all of us have potential contacts that have shown their skepticism or antagonism towards religion, or who feel there are so many more attractive alternatives. For example, the new atheism propagated by people like

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Sam Harris (*End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*) and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), with their caustic verbosity and naturalistic and bankrupt philosophy are believed by many to have totally discredited the existence of God. In addition, so many people today disregard everything apart from their own desires and wants. The world of materialism and pleasure is far more alluring than a call to 'go to church', yet there is an emptiness that pervades this generation like a heavy blanket of smog, smothering its vitality, drawing it into an abyss of drugs and meaninglessness.

Added to the dilemma of those seeking an answer to the spiritual emptiness they occasionally feel is the fact that there are so many other religions competing for people's attention. There is Hinduism with its multiplicity of gods, some evil and corrupt and others good (so much so that even Hindus find it difficult to comprehend it), Buddhism with its rejection of the notion of a personal God or even an individual self, and Islam with its call for total allegiance, yet its total unwillingness to be scrutinised. These are the voices that compete with the good news about Jesus, and their very presence is daunting to many urban Christians, who tend to mix in a much more multicultural context and often simply do not know how to respond, and as a consequence say nothing.



But whilst few of us have sufficient grasp of other belief systems to effectively respond, do we all really need to? Whilst it's obviously advantageous, is it realistic to expect the average Christian to have a working knowledge of these competing voices? Isn't it more important for us to be who we are as believers of Jesus, seeking to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in our everyday contact with people? It simply isn't possible for the average person in the pew to take the time to read up on everything, so it is even more critical that we as leaders are in a position to equip them to share their faith in the most effective and relevant way possible in the hugely diverse society in which we now live.

I am constantly amazed at how many pastors do not read books, or go to conferences that will better enable for the ministry of equipping the saints! I have on numerous occasions had discussions with pastors who seem oblivious to the issues of the day, and who never intentionally engage with their community about the message of Jesus. Reading books that give us insight and the benefit of the expertise of others is an essential part of being equipped for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-16), but in the final analysis, when it comes to learning how to share our faith, there is no substitute for seeking to engage those we want to

reach about their belief systems and listening to their stories. The more we understand what we believe about our own faith, the more we will be able to respond to other voices. However, head knowledge alone doesn't break down barriers; it's the way we live and the quality of the relationships we build with other people that opens hearts and minds.

Do we truly understand and experience our message?

Motivation to share the gospel with those outside the church is not only inhibited by the complexity and philosophical confusion of the world we live in but also by our lack of comprehension of our own message. No matter how many opportunities present themselves, we will only be able to respond in the measure to which we truly understand the gospel ourselves. It is surprising how few Christians truly comprehend understand the wonder and awesomeness of what God has done for them. After I had recently preaching on Romans 8 someone said to me, 'Wow, I never realised before that the God of all creation is actually for me!' If we don't understand and aren't excited about what God has done for us in the gospel, why would we talk about it to others? It seems to me that the role of those of us in leadership is to make absolutely sure that no one in our churches can ever say they have not been taught the core principles of their faith. Remember, no truth is ever truly comprehended until we verbalise it in some way to others, for in so doing the message is clarified and it becomes ours.

How we view the lost is the key to being motivated to reach them.

Our lack of passion

When we are walking with God and have a constant hunger to know him better, that in itself becomes an inner motivation to share Jesus with others. Whilst recently chatting over lunch with a group of students about evangelism, one of them asked 'What motivates you to talk with people about Jesus?' I said, 'I'll respond to that when you answer this question: On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your level of passion to know God?' There was some discussion about what I

meant. Then one of the students said, 'I think my passion level is about six,' to which I replied, 'Then that will be reflected in how passionate you are about seeking to reach others with the gospel.' How we view the lost is the key to being motivated to reach them. If our level of passion for knowing God on a scale of one to ten is only six, we will see people through theological eyes,' that is, we will know intellectually that without a relationship with Jesus they are lost, but we won't really don't feel their lostness. One only feels that, when one is tapped into the heart of God. It is important for us to begin to feel the heart beat of God for the lost and like the Apostle Paul cry, 'For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all then all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.'



A passion to see people come to know Jesus is a natural overflow of what is happening within our own lives. Evangelism ought not to be something we just do or some technique we have learned, but a natural part of who we are. No amount of training courses will substitute for that inner desire to share Christ with others, and this desire comes from the overflow of a passion to know God better. As we grow in our walk with him, we begin to see the world through his eyes, not our own. Having our church members reach this point ought to be one of our ministry goals.

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This kind of passion is not something we can manufacture or program into people; it is the result of being part of a healthy functioning church, a place where people are growing in their faith and growing in healthy relationships with others,

with a desire to be a part of what God is doing in that church. A healthy church is built on clear Bible-centred teaching that equips people to understand their faith and live it out in their everyday lives. When a church is functioning as it ought to be, its warmth and acceptance of new people, and the genuineness of believers or otherwise will be seen and evaluated.

I have worked hard to build a good relationship with the owners and staff of a local coffee shop. I meet there with pastors for mentoring and encouragement, sharing and praying together. After I had met a non-Christian businessman there, I was surprised when one of the owners asked me if he was a pastor too. When I said no, they smiled and said, 'We thought he was different.' I realised how closely they watch and evaluate when they told me the other guy was rude to them as he paid the bill. No wonder Paul said that our lives are like living letters from Christ, known and read by everyone (2 Cor. 3:1-3). When we as individuals reflect the reality of Jesus, the gospel is wonderfully enhanced and supported.

A unique message

What is there about our message that makes it unique or that commends it above all others? Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. In the midst of this smorgasbord of religious systems, I have found that the consistent affirmation of the uniqueness of the Christian message is the key to gaining an audience. We are affirming our conviction that there is no other God like the biblical God who is the one and only creator and sustainer of the universe. The gospel is unique in that it comes from a God who not only created the heavens and the earth, but also created us with a clearly declared purpose, that we might know him and reflect his image and likeness. Our message is not about embracing a religious system, but about having a relationship with God. Religion is about what we must do in order to gain a place of acceptance with God, the gospel however is about what God has done. It doesn't demand of us that we work to gain an acceptance with him or a place in heaven through our own efforts or goodness. Indeed, it tells us that we do not have the capacity to do that. It is unique in that God promised the gospel in the Old Testament, hundreds of years before Jesus came. Jesus himself is unique, in that he is declared to be God, the creator and sustainer of the universe who took upon himself the form of a man. The message is unique in that it declares that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, provided a way for us to be forgiven and reconciled with God. Isn't that a wonderful message? There is no other like it! I suspect that we Christians know it so well that we sometimes lose sight of its wonder and uniqueness. I say again, no religious system or philosophy brings such a wonderful and unique message. It is a one only, no-other-like-it message and we have the unspeakable privilege of sharing it with the world.

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So how do we go about it?

If we are going to take seriously the need to demonstrate a greater level of visible commitment to reaching the lost, we need to intentionally embrace the concept and actively plan for it to happen in our churches. Apart from encouraging and equipping people to grow in their walk with God and to see the world through his eyes, we need to provide them with

training to give them a better understanding of their faith and encouragement to find simple strategies for witnessing to others. People rarely take the leap straight from confusion to conversion! They generally embark on a journey of discovery about the reality of the gospel. Something usually happens to provoke them to curiosity. It may be what has been said, or something observed, but curiosity will be a growing thing. When engaging with people during this process it is important to do the following things:

Build genuine friendships

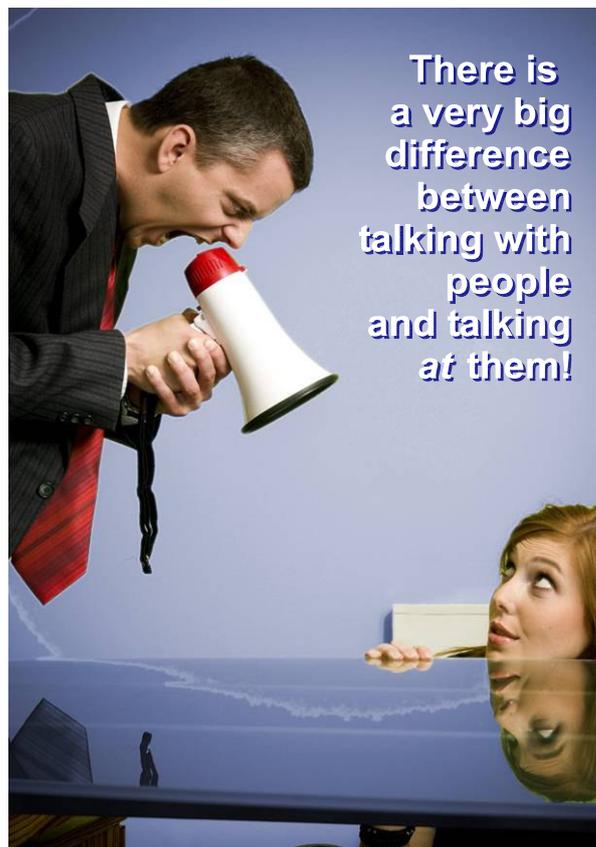
I once heard Peter Adam, principal of Ridley College, say that in today's culture, it generally takes two to three years from significant contact to genuine conversion. We live in a world that is confused about life and religion. Many have had bad experiences or know of others who have. There is a culture of tolerance that reacts to strong views about what is right and wrong. It is therefore important that we understand the value of taking time to build relationships with people and give the Holy Spirit time to bring people to an understanding and conviction of the uniqueness and truth of the gospel.

When we as individuals reflect the reality of Jesus, the gospel is wonderfully enhanced and supported.

A few years ago we had some renovations done on our church and as we got to know the builder he conveyed to us that his experience with Christians was not always good. Some owed him a lot of money and others had been most un-Christian in their behaviour and attitudes. He and his family came to the reopening of the church building. We maintained contact and he has done some renovations on our house. Recently he confided that his daughter now goes to an evangelical church, and said, 'Could I ask you a question about the resurrection?' What is happening here? We have built a friendship and he feels safe to ask the questions that he is thinking through. Be it the builder, the staff in a coffee shop, or our neighbour, we need to allow time for God to work and create within people's minds the possibility that the gospel might be true after all. I am acutely aware of the fact that we always speak in stereo! People not only hear what we verbalise; they also subconsciously read our body language. If there is something about us that doesn't ring true, they will evaluate our message accordingly. An important principle in sharing with others is to take care never to be argumentative. A combative atmosphere simply creates polarisation and we place people in the position of subconsciously defending themselves rather than defending their beliefs.

Really listen

Most people are confused about Christianity. Be they antagonistic or simply apathetic, most are unclear about what it means to be a Christian. Even those who are sympathetic are often confused about what is involved in following Jesus. One of the best ways of finding out where people are at spiritually is to simply listen to them. That's something most of us are not good at; we like to tell our own story! There is a very big difference between talking with people and talking at them! Talking with them implies that we are engaging as equals. Most people tune out the moment they feel they are being talked down to or are not being heard. I was recently flying home from Brisbane and began to engage the lady next to me, who poured out a tirade about how she had been 'targeted' by a Christian in her street, who (in her view) wasn't interested in her as a person,



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let alone her point of view on religion. 'Every time I see her she wants to bang away about how good her church is and how I need their message. I suspect that's where the term 'Bible basher' comes from!'

It is important to ask the right questions. Questions about the other person's beliefs are important, because they not only give you more insight but also demonstrate your willingness to see their point of view. Often a great conversation begins with the question, 'Tell me what you believe about God.' I have learned so much from asking Buddhist and Hindu friends the 'please help me to understand' questions. Recently whilst having a meal with a group of Hindu friends I discovered that whilst many of their gods are good, many of them are corrupt and evil, and that my friends are confused about how these gods influence their life now and after death. This opened up a whole night of discussion, and despite our different perspectives they were very comfortable about allowing me to make a comparison with the wonderful and unique message of forgiveness and certainty.

In fact, I spent more than half that night simply listening, with a genuine desire to understand their Hindu framework. As a result I learned several new things about the Hindu faith. My questions, then, arose in response to their statements, as I sought to gain a greater understanding of their faith, demonstrating respect for them as people as well as giving me new insight into the contrast between our worldviews. It troubles me to hear Christians trying to 'witness' and trotting out clichés without first engaging people as equals and demonstrating genuine interest and respect for the other person's perspective. Whatever their worldview, the right attitude with the right questions will almost always open up healthy discussion.

Recently I conducted a memorial service for a special saint who had died. It was the third time in as many years that we had engaged with this particular family in the context of a family death. Many of her relatives are antagonistic towards Christianity, but have now had cause to think on the emptiness of life and the meaninglessness of death. At the wake, one of the family members said how nice the service was but that he had never been interested in religion before, to which I replied, 'What is your view about Jesus?' That opened up a conversation that went for an hour and engaged others in the room.

It is surprising how many people are willing to engage on spiritual things when we give them the opportunity. Earlier in the year I was in hospital and one of the nurses said he was from Burma. When I asked if he was Buddhist he affirmed that he was. I only had to ask him why he was a Buddhist and what he understood of Christianity to engage him about the gospel. He actually came back the next day and said, 'We didn't finish our conversation.' It is so simple to ask people what they think of Christianity or what their faith is. Whilst some will not want to engage, most will. It is important to listen and demonstrate an acceptance of the other person's right to think as they do. Many evangelism opportunities are lost because we insist on people listening to our viewpoint as the only valid one. It must not be about nailing people to the wall but about engaging them in a way in which they feel comfortable. The moment they become uncomfortable it becomes confrontational. It is important at that point to affirm our respect for their right to think differently. In listening and seeking to understand what others truly believe, and why, we are better able to engage them with the gospel.

Use good literature

Shabby or badly written tracts or literature give a wrong impression that the Christian message is simplistic or jingoistic. I suspect that in today's culture randomly distributed literature is often a turnoff rather than a challenge. When I was in hospital recently I had several interesting discussions with the ward sister. However, one morning she came storming into my room holding a very poorly printed tract and asked, 'Did you put this on the breakfast trolley?' I assured her that I hadn't and that I would speak personally to anyone I wanted to engage about Christianity. Her response was, 'That's what I told them at the nursing station. I'll find the gutless wonder who did and when I do...!' I wonder what the person who'd put the tract there would feel if they knew the negative effect it had had! The gospel is a message of substance and must be seen to be both relevant and credible. In the context of today's world, with so many voices declaring their differing views on spirituality or their antagonism towards the church, it is hard to find suitable literature to hand out. One of the most helpful is Blanchard's little booklet '*Ultimate Questions*' which is well written and presents the gospel in a simple, understandable way.



The nature of true conversion

In most cases becoming a Christian is a process, and at some point on the path towards a relationship with God, people begin to make the connection with the relevance of the gospel. It may be a new realisation about the person and uniqueness of Jesus, or an awareness of the true nature of sin, but the gospel will begin to make sense. One of the most difficult things is to see people just sitting on the edge of becoming a follower of Jesus, and I like many others would sometimes like to give them a little push! I so want them to become followers of Jesus. However, I am restrained from doing so because I believe that when the Holy Spirit begins a work in the life of an individual he will continue that work until there is a true faith response in their heart.

It is important that we recognise the true nature of conversion. The gospel comes to us as a revelation from God and we need the enabling of the Holy Spirit to both expound and comprehend it (John 16:8-10). When Paul gave his testimony in Acts 26 he realised that he had been brought out of spiritual darkness into spiritual light and then sent with a message to the world that would 'open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins.' We need to bathe our evangelism in prayer that the Holy Spirit will open blind eyes, so that people may see and hear the wonder of the gospel and respond with submission to the authority of Jesus.

It is important to be prepared; one never knows when an opportunity will present itself. Following is a list of some helpful books on the matter. If you really want to be equipped to take the opportunities to share your faith, read some of them and ask God to give you positive connections with people who are not Christians. Seek to live a life of genuine integrity, one that honours Jesus, so that you model the gospel you want to proclaim to others.

These books have been suggested by Angelo Gratsounas, pastor of the Narwee Baptist Church:

1. *Promoting the Gospel* by John Dickson

This is an extremely helpful book for the church. John writes 'Perhaps the best-kept secret of Christian mission is that the Bible lists a whole range of activities that promote Christ to the world and draw others to him.' [p12] It allows those who are not 'evangelists' or gifted speakers to play a part in the mission of the church. Dickson includes chapters on promoting the gospel through prayer, money, the works of the church, Christian behavior, and through public services as well as in daily conversation.

2. *Just Walk Across the Room* by Bill Hybels

Hybels outlines 'simple steps pointing people to faith'. The key principle is that we should 'walk across the room'. Engage in meaningful conversation and relationship with the stranger at the business meeting, or your son's football coach, or the local baker, or the next-door neighbour. It's a challenging book to move out of your comfort zone and be led by God's Spirit as you share God's love with others.

3. *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Bill Hybels and Mark Wittenberg

The authors offer a practical plan of action for bringing the message of God's love to others. Beginning with the truth that people matter to God, the book provides strategic teaching on the gospel and how to share it, barriers to belief, finding your own style, the pull of compassion and the importance of spending time with non-Christian people. [A helpful book to read when doing the 'Becoming a Contagious Christian' training course - a DVD based course from Willow Creek]

Kel suggests you read the following:

4. *The End of Reason* by Ravi Zacharias

This book deals with some of the claims of the New Atheists. In simple, precise terms the author shows that many of the arguments presented by people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are simply straw men. Ravi demolishes the arguments of Atheism and shows that Naturalistic Atheism, taken to its logical conclusion, robs us of all that makes us truly human. It gives an excellent overview of the frightening depravity and intellectual shallowness of Atheism. A must read for those who want to engage many in today's culture.

5. *Clearing the Cobwebs* by Kel Willis

If you're looking to have a better understanding of the gospel and how to appropriate its message for your own personal life, this book is for you. It expounds the wonder of God's provision for us, and the liberty and enabling that he gives to those who engage with him in their daily lives. The book expounds the total sufficiency of God's provision for us and why this is needed, and how embracing these truths can transform our lives. (available through Christian Growth Ministries or good Christian book stores.

6. *Jesus Among Other Gods* by Ravi Zacharias

Contrasting Jesus and his claims with those of the founders of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, Ravi provides a compelling insight into the alternatives to following Jesus. Written with a great passion to reach the lost, this book is a must read for those wanting to reach across cultural boundaries to those of other faiths.

The following book is recommended by Leon Stead, pastor of Narrabeen Baptist Church:

7. *The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller

The first half of the book provides cogent and engaging answers to the questions that modern skeptics raise about Christianity. Whilst these are familiar questions, the tone, wisdom and sophistication of Keller's treatment strike right at where the contemporary mind is employed. These are not hypothetical answers to possible questions. This book is born out of decades of pastoral ministry. The second half of the book moves to an exploration of the most important reasons for faith in God. These chapters are so clear, persuasive and centered on Jesus that you can confidently place this book in the hands of anyone with doubts about God and know that they will be impacted by his gracious gospel.

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