



A Program for Parish Evangelism

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Pastors who have spent years of their lives working on Greek and Hebrew, mastering the intricacies of exegetical method, pondering the varieties of theological expression, plumbing the ambiguities of human experience, are often very suspicious about any attempt to simplify theological processes or to program parish responsibilities. The arch-enemies of truth are the cliché, the broad generalization, the incomplete thought, the misleading oversimplification. The most despised offenders are likely to be those who reduce the life of faith to a series of procedures or rules or programs that are paraded as sure-fire techniques of success.

The suspicions are legitimate and important. On the other hand, equally to be suspected are ways of thinking and proceeding which hinder, rather than help, theology from enjoying the buoyancy of actually accomplishing that which it is intended to accomplish. Theology which does not preach well is often said to be bad theology. The same may be said of theology which does not evangelize well. Faith and mission, theology and ministry, are infinitely complex. But they are also infinitely simple. At least it ought to be possible to proceed on that assumption until proven false. The following is an obvious and simple method by which a group of believers can effectively begin the complicated processes of evangelism. Step by step it is possible to bring theory and practice together in a way which will lead to repeated and continuous examination of the meaning of what is being done.

Let us say that the group of believers, in all probability a local parish, is concerned to do evangelism in a community of people of varied interests and abilities in a reasonably complex social environment. Let us say that the group of believers has no more than average intellectual ability and that it has no more than ordinary financial resources with which to work. Let us also say that the program is taken to be merely a first move toward an effort that may well develop in directions and depths not at first even dreamed of. Let us say that the group is already equipped with at least a rudimentary, but essentially accurate, notion of what Christian faith and life are about. Let us say that the group is willing to begin even without as thorough an understanding of what it is doing as it would like to have, that it is willing to try something even if it is laid out in "steps."

Step One. Limit the field of effort. The field in this case is not the world, but rather a few streets, a few square miles, a few farms, a few social or political islands, a few strata of a particular population. If anything is to be accomplished, it is necessary to know the limits and the boundaries of this endeavor with some accuracy. It is necessary that the Gospel be proclaimed to everyone everywhere, but everyone cannot reach everyone everywhere. This group, in this time

and place, must decide what the boundaries of this particular effort will be. There is great freedom in choosing not to do some tasks in order to focus on others, knowing that other tasks can be taken up at other times or by other groups.

Step Two. Gather data on the field. The question concerns the human needs and resources of this particular piece of geography. It is surprising how little many parishes know about the area in which they are set. If an effort is going to be made to reach people it is essential to know who these people are, and one way to know that is to do a profile of the community in terms of schools, churches, businesses, industry, libraries, hospitals and clinics, farms, traffic patterns, law enforcement, social service agencies, age patterns, income levels, family structures. A few well-put questions to a few knowledgeable people will quickly mushroom into a flood of information to be organized and interpreted. Nothing can be as detrimental to an evangelism effort as a naive or unrealistic notion of the people whom one is seeking to reach.

Step Three. Identify access routes. The question has to do with already existing channels of communication between the group of believers and the people whom it is attempting to reach. One might do business at a delicatessen, have a library card, know someone in an apartment building, deliver milk to a dairy, work for or employ someone, teach a student, have one's car repaired, sell a cultivator, be acquainted with a police officer. If there are enterprises or individuals or schools or agencies or groups of homes to which the group has no access, that should also be noted. A decision should be made to set aside these areas until a time when they can be dealt with.

Step Four. Determine the content of communication. The question concerns what the group wants to say. Of course it wants to say the Gospel. But in what way? There is a very wide set of options between "Is there any way in which we can be of any service to you?" and "Do you know where you'd go if you were to die tonight?" Ought the message to be in words only or also in deeds? How specifically "Christian" ought the contact to be? The question will drive the group into theological reflection on the Christian faith and life, and that alone would be worth the effort. Whatever the message and however it is stated, it should be remembered that it is not the only thing that will ever be said. It should be the beginning of a long series of attempts to make contact and to communicate. If the content of the communication is open-ended, both parties can look forward to continuations of the conversation.

Step Five. Say or do what has been decided needs saying or doing, through the access routes that have been identified, to the people in the enterprises and structures within the limits of the area which has been selected. Stay with it. Don't just talk about doing it. Do it. It is an extremely simple procedure that has the ring of authentic Christian evangelism. It is a systematic effort to make theology happen. It is a simple way to get at doing that which needs to be done. A thorough rationale or a complete strategy is not necessary in order to begin. Just do it. It can make the desert bloom.