

## **CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION**

If the mere mention of the word EVANGELISM makes you shuffle nervously in your seat or sends a shiver down your spine, then you are not alone.

Over the past five years as The District Evangelism Enabler I have had many conversations with people about sharing faith. The responses I get range from; 'I couldn't possibly share my faith, what if they asked me a question that I don't know the answer to' or 'that's a job for the minister' to 'my faith is private' or 'I can't remember all the verses I'm supposed to quote'.

I have become increasingly aware that in many of our churches people are finding it difficult to meaningfully share faith and that spiritual conversation has often become a neglected part of the life and ministry of the local church. It seems that we are getting better at finding ways to engage with the communities around us in mission, but are still struggling to have conversations about life and faith.

In a society which has, by and large, rejected institutional religion we may need to discover different, gentler and more humble ways of sharing faith, alongside some of the more proclamatory ways which we may have been used to.

So, what if evangelism could be

- Spontaneous
- As natural as breathing
- As easy as conversation
- Something that doesn't feel clumsy
- Didn't require a script

### **Thinking differently about evangelism**

Some time back now I was involved in setting up a Fresh Expression of Church. I learnt a lot of valuable lessons during that time, particularly in relation to faith sharing. The most important of these was that creating environments where people could freely converse about life and faith leads to rich, deep and meaningful conversation.

The emphasis here is on the word 'freely', a conversation which is not agenda-driven, but natural, honest, transparent and offered with integrity.

Before leading the Fresh Expression, my experience of evangelism had mostly been about acquiring and then passing on 'facts' about my beliefs, acting as 'teacher'. I often avoided conversation with people because to set myself up as 'teacher' left me in a defensive position where the burden of proof for the existence or otherwise of God became mine to carry. The kinds of conversations I had seemed less about the joy of interpersonal sharing, less about freely conversing about life and faith and more about coercion, less about listening and more about talking and persuading. These types of conversations seemed to be driven by a particular method of evangelism in which the person 'with faith' shares it with those who 'don't have any'. I became convinced that this was not a helpful model as it made some assumptions which I felt uncomfortable with. Firstly that faith is a clearly defined commodity, which a person either possesses in a recognisable format and in its entirety or not at all and secondly, that in such an exchange, the communication of faith happens in only one direction.

My experience through my Fresh Expression led me to believe that it is very difficult to make a distinction between those who 'have faith' and those who do not. I became convinced that everyone has something

of value to bring to a conversation about life and faith. Each of us possesses a set of unique experiences about human living through which, we may, at times have heard the still small voice of God.

God, I discovered, is alive and active in the experience of 'ordinary' people, even if the language they use to express their experience of God is not familiar and their experiences are just as valid in a faith journey as those which we may recognise in our received understanding of what it means to have faith. Moreover, there are treasures in these experiences which need to be shared to enrich our own faith journeys.

In research conducted by Dr David Hay (formerly at the Alastair Hardy Institute and latterly at Nottingham University) results show that well over two thirds of British people claim to have had personal experience of some higher power above and beyond themselves, that they would identify as God. When we consider that less than 10% of them attend church, it is a remarkable statistic. It would seem that in spite of the obvious rejection of religion in what has been called our 'post-modern' society there remains at the heart of our world, the still, small voice of God.

Through my Fresh Expression experience I have come to understand my role as a Christian in conversation to be less about convincing people of something I don't think they understand and more about opening up their experiences with them to see the presence of God; less teacher and more enabler, starting where people are and not where I think they should be, less about being the guardian of orthodoxy and more about letting go and letting God-opening the space for conversation and then watching the Holy Spirit at work.

It is because I have found this way of evangelism so liberating and so rewarding that I have been looking for a way of sharing it with others.

By chance I attended a day with Mark Davis of Shoreline Conversations organised for the District by MWIB. My conversations with Mark led to further conversations with other members of the District team through the District Policy Committee about how we might facilitate people across the District to find confidence and joy in sharing their faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and through that experience to connect in a meaningful and relevant way with what they believe.

Mark has a wealth of experience in this area as well as resources to equip and enable faith sharing in this way and so it was decided that Mark, myself and Revd. Jon Doble should work together on a programme which would, over a five- year period aim to increase the confidence and joy in faith sharing across the District.

At this point it would be fair and very human to say that I'm nervous!

As anybody who has taken on a project of this size will know, what seemed like a good idea at the kitchen table feels very different when you step outside of the house. However, I have had such positive responses following my presentation at Synod and in my conversations with individuals around the District, that I truly believe that there is a hunger for a different way of doing evangelism. People want to share faith, but they just don't know how. I would go as far as saying that they want to talk about their own faith, to have the opportunity to express their own doubts and fears, but they don't know where to do that, especially when we have created a church culture which expects them to know the answers.

I want us to put the joy back into evangelism and to have a District which is full of people who are confident to talk of life and faith. To do this, I believe that we need to re-learn the art of intentional, spiritual conversation. This is what Christian Communities in Conversation aims to do.

Christian Communities in Conversation is a District Evangelism Project. It is currently at the development stage, with a plan for the first pilot groups to be starting in early 2018. Initially, we will be facilitating the formation of 16 people in a new way of faith conversation, those 16 people will then practice their new skills in their own contexts and go on eventually to facilitate others.

If you would like to be considered for the first cohort, then you will need to:

- Read the role description and person specification on the District website (on the 'mission' page)
- Complete an application form (available on the District website on the 'mission' page)
- Undergo a safer recruitment process which will include an interview and reference
- Be available for residential training in 2018 on January 19, 20<sup>th</sup> and April 13, 14<sup>th</sup> and June 22, 23<sup>rd</sup>

I would welcome the opportunity to make a presentation to your church or circuit about this exciting new project, or if you would like any further information, contact me:

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