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**The word “evangelism”** brings a number of images to mind. To some it brings up memories of attending or watching on TV a Billy Graham Crusade with streams of people flowing to the altar after the last stanza of the gospel song “Just As I Am.” For others, particularly those of the older generation of Pentecostals, it brings to mind wood shavings and tent meetings.[1] Both of these images, though old and perhaps even obsolete, are fairly positive ones, but that isn’t always the case when the word evangelism is mentioned.

For many the word conjures up images of door to door witnessing or street corner preaching. Sometimes it connotes just another program the pastor is trying to promote among somewhat reluctant volunteers. My experience as a pastor is that most people become quite nervous when I talk about evangelism and many think, and some come right out and say something like: “This isn’t going to be pleasant but if it is what I have to do to be a good Christian, I’ll give it a try.” Too often evangelism training is somewhat like foul tasting medicine. We take it because we know it is good for us but we really would rather avoid it.

We need to create new and more positive models for reaching out with the Good News to lost people. Whatever we are doing now, it’s not working. George Barna the founder and directing leader of the Barna Group, a research and resource firm, comments in his book *Revolution* that “the typical church member will die without leading a single person to a lifesaving knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ.”[1] Thom Rainer writes: “Our research team has come to similar conclusions. Less than 4 percent of churches in America meet our criteria to be an effective evangelistic church. Only one person is reached for Christ each year for every eighty-five church members in America.”[2] Interestingly, Barna suggests that “after exploring the religious life of adults attending a variety of Protestant churches, only three types of churches-Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, and nondenominational churches-had a majority of adherents who had shared their faith in Christ with a non-Christian in the past year.”[3]

I do not know the answer to this problem but from my reading and from my experience as a pastor and from our limited success in reaching lost people I have come to the following conclusions regarding evangelism in our Canadian West Coast context. These are my best take on what is working. Somewhat like a fly fisher sharing notes with a fishing buddy, I am suggesting a couple of methods that seem to be working in our part of the stream. I have two suggestions.

The first is that we need to think about reaching younger people. The newest generations are more open to the spiritual and less taken by modernity's enthusiasm for the empirical. Our children, youth and young adult ministries are perhaps the most fertile ground for receiving the Gospel seed. Not only are they more open to spiritual things than the older generations, they also have not been jaded by unfortunate experiences with dysfunctional churches. It is a sad thing to realize but as someone has said: "Many have tried the church and found it wanting, and many have found the church and find it trying." Aubrey Malphurs in *A New Kind of Church* claims that somewhere between 11 and 54 percent of those who are unchurched may know Christ as Saviour yet have rejected the church as helpful to their spiritual journey.[4]

In reaching out to younger Canadians it is important to remember that they tend to be wired for community involvement more than their elders. Our experience is that many join our community before they accept our values. They seem to want to hang out with us before making a decision to follow our Lord. They want to make sure we can really live up to our claims of being followers of Jesus. This takes time and the journey that leads them to faith involves many conversations and interactions along the way. This requires patience and an openness to people who may not believe exactly what we would want them to believe while they are part of our groups. It requires a willingness to be involved in dialogue and spiritual conversations at every level and sometimes at inopportune times. Teaching sessions tend to be more dialogical and interactive when these folks are present in our gatherings. I think that Leonard Sweet's recommendation that we make sure our gatherings are EPIC (Experiential, Participatory, Image Rich and Connecting) will help us reach this generation.[5]

My second suggestion regarding effective evangelism is to move away from a programmatic approach to a more relational approach. Most people come to faith through the influence of a friend. Years ago when I was involved in a Billy Graham Crusade I was surprised to learn that the unchurched people who attend his meetings don't come because of mass advertising but because they are brought by a friend. Months in advance of his meetings the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association would send teachers to the city of the crusade and they would work at helping churched folks cultivate friendships and begin spiritual conversations with

friends so that when the crusade finally came to town they could invite someone to the meetings. So while the evangelistic event appeared to be drawing huge crowds of people, actually, people were drawing people. I understand that under Franklin Graham the evangelistic method of the association is changing somewhat and moving to a smaller group format that looks somewhat like the "Alpha" meetings that have been so popular this last decade.

As we move to a more relational approach we will want to prioritize what I call salty friendships and salty conversations rather than conversions. The goal is to be involved in helping others along their spiritual journey rather than the programmatic goal of simply counting those who say the "sinners prayer." In order to do this we must begin to value authentic relationships with lost people. We must enjoy the process as much as the results of evangelism.[6]

It seems to me that we need to take our lead from Jesus in this regard. The Gospels reveal him sharing the Good News in a great variety of relational contexts. Mainly he uses everyday events in the everyday world to speak about his values. While on the road, while visiting at friends' homes and while in the marketplace, Jesus models a kind of witness that just seems so natural and relational and we would do well to follow his example. Michael Green in his book *Evangelism Through the Local Church* credits the spread of the Gospel during the first century with the fact that it tended to spread "like gossip over the backyard fence." [7]

A year or so ago a student just beginning High School after a number of years in a home school environment began chatting online with some of the youth in our church in one of our website chatrooms. She shared her fears and anxieties regarding her new context. Some of our youth responded with words of encouragement. Someone even wrote her a poem/prayer that she thought might help. They then arranged to meet her in the cafeteria on her first day of classes. You can imagine the kind of impact this had on the new High School student. This is the kind of story that encourages me to think that there is hope for this next generation of evangelists.

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[1] Up until about the '70's Pentecostal revival meetings and evangelistic crusades were often held during the Summer months under large circus style tents. The ground was inevitably covered with wood shavings to keep the dust down. In fact the smell of sawdust still brings to my mind the tent meetings, altar calls and prayer vigils of my childhood.

[2] George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary*. (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2005), 32.

[3] Thom S. Rainer, "Shattering Myths about the Unchurched," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 47.

[4] "The Year's Most Intriguing Findings," Barna Research Online, December 17, 2001, <http://www.barna.org>, 2.

[5] Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church: Understanding Models of Ministry for the 21st Century*, (Grand Rapids: Baker), 19-21.

[6] Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook), 21-30.

[7] I have discovered that I am not much of a fisherman. I enjoy fishing as long as I am catching fish but if there is no "bite on" I am bored. My brother-in-law on the other hand is a fanatic fisherman. He enjoys a day of fishing even if he never gets a nibble. As a result, he is a much more successful than I.

[8] Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 1990.