

Chapter 13

Community in Outreach

Bogdan Scur

SABBATH

Gospel and Community

“This line shall not break where I stand,” is a phrase that is recited after the Ordinance of Humility in some churches. When a group of believers join hands and make such a pledge, each person is expressing the fact that they belong to something bigger than themselves—a spiritual community. It is a community that gives them identity and in turn each one has a duty to represent the community and advance its objectives. Each one is a cog in the community wheel.

This principle is especially important in the church’s witness to the world. We Adventists see ourselves in the light of the First Angel’s Message, as tasked with proclaiming the everlasting gospel to all the peoples of the earth (Revelation 14:6). This task of sharing the gospel with everyone is a part of our identity, and, therefore, it is not just the work of the pastor or the professional evangelist. It is the work of the entire community,

This task of sharing the gospel with everyone is a part of our identity, and, therefore, it is not just the work of the pastor or the professional evangelist.

As each member contributes to the church sharing the gospel as a community, the witness of the church becomes powerful and persuasive.

the work of each cog working in tandem. As each member contributes to the church sharing the gospel as a community, the witness of the church becomes powerful and persuasive.

The gospel has brought Christians to salvation, and as the community that has been saved through the proclamation of the gospel, their work now is to proclaim the gospel to others in order to bring them to salvation. "The gospel word and the gospel community are closely connected. The word creates and nourishes the community, while the community proclaims and embodies the word."¹

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis argue, "Ideally evangelism is not something to be undertaken in isolation. Of course, if opportunity presents itself, the gospel word should be spoken clearly and sensitively in conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit—whenever, wherever and to whomever. But evangelism is best done out of the context of a gospel community whose corporate life demonstrates the reality of the word that gave her life."² In other words, individual Christian witness is very important, but even more powerful and persuasive is the witness of the entire church community through the life lived together. It is by the witness of the community that the world will know that God sent Jesus to redeem humanity (John 17:20-23).

What are the differences between evangelism as individuals and as a community? Explain these differences in your own words. How can you demonstrate that you understand the significance

¹Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 55.

²Ibid, 58.

of the church evangelizing as a community of believers?

SUNDAY

Christian Community Is Evangelism

The witness of the entire church community is essential if the world is to see the display of God's power in the lives of believers. God brought Israel into existence in order "to show off his splendor to the nations through their life together."³ In Deuteronomy 4:6-7, God enjoined Israel, "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"⁴

A similar concept is expressed in the New Testament, when Jesus says to the church in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." While personal evangelism is important, it seems that there is no witness that surpasses that which is done by the community as a whole. A case in point is Acts 2, where we read about the life together of the new Christian community. Who would not be attracted to a community that cares for each other and ensures that the needs of every member were met? ". . . [W]ithout introducing non-Christians to the local church, evangelism ignores the greatest evidence we have for the truth of the gospel."⁵

Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, in a *Washington Post* article in September 2016, wrote that

The witness of the entire church community is essential if the world is to see the display of God's power in the lives of believers.

³Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 188.

⁴All biblical quotations are taken from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵Dever and Dunlop, 189.

Effective evangelism takes place as people see our love for each other and the principles of the Christian faith at work in our lives.

⁶Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, Brad Griffin, "To attract young people to your church, you've got to be warm. Not cool," https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/06/to-attract-young-people-to-your-church-youve-got-to-be-warm-not-cool/?utm_term=.75c191a3595b. Accessed August 2, 2017

what attracts young people to a church community is authenticity and connection. The authors came to this conclusion after researching 250 congregations and interviewing 1300 young churchgoers. Terms used by the young people to describe the church of which they wanted to be a part were *welcoming, accepting, belonging, authentic, hospitable* and *caring*.⁶

Christian community, in the truest sense of the term, is evangelism. If all Christian communities were functioning as described by these young people, our proclamation would be powerfully supported by our life together. The world would know that we are Christians by our living, and the glory of God would be displayed in our lives (2 Peter 2:9). Effective evangelism takes place as people see our love for each other and the principles of the Christian faith at work in our lives.

What changes do you need to make in your relationship with the Sligo community to ensure that you are helping it to fulfil God's purpose?

MONDAY

The Hermeneutic of the Gospel

Great missionary and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin describes the local congregation as the "hermeneutic of the gospel." By this he means that the local congregation is the means by which people understand the gospel. "I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the

gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?"⁷ Newbigin further writes, "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel—evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one . . . But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community."⁸

It appears that over the years we have been emphasizing the secondary things, as described above, as opposed to the main thing. Church leaders and members have been busy leading or being involved in various evangelistic events, all of which are admirable, but the main thing of being a loving and Christ-like community in which God's power is displayed has had scant attention. The following passages describe the kind of Christian living that is guaranteed to have an extraordinary impact on the world:

Isaiah 1:17—"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

Matthew 5:16—" . . . let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."

1 Peter 2:12 (NLT)—"Be careful to live properly

Church leaders and members have been busy leading or being involved in various evangelistic events, all of which are admirable, but the main thing of being a loving and Christ-like community in which God's power is displayed has had scant attention.

⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

⁸Ibid.

The church is described as the Body of Christ, with Christ being the head. This means that some members are to be the hands, some the ears, some the feet, some the heart, some the eyes.

⁹Thomas S. Rainer, *I am a Church Member* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 12.

among your unbelieving neighbors. Then, even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world.”

The gospel in word only during the first century of the Christian Church would not have made much sense on its own. As Newbigin implies, claiming that a man hanging on a cross is the Savior of the world was not in any way an attractive message, but none could deny the power of God in the life of the church community. The early Christians lived the life that they preached about.

In what ways does your own life exemplify the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected? How can the Sligo community live the gospel out more faithfully?

TUESDAY

The Body Motif

So far, we have established that evangelism is best accomplished by the church community as a whole. However, as the church is made up of individual members, if it needs to evangelize corporately, then each member has to play a role in doing so. As Thomas Rainer says, “With a country club membership you pay others to do the work for you. With church membership, everyone has a role or function.”⁹

One analogy that is used for the church in the New Testament is a body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:18, 24). The church is described as the Body of Christ, with Christ being the head. This

means that some members are to be the hands, some the ears, some the feet, some the heart, some the eyes. And each part of the body needs to contribute to the function of the body. This is a concept that has the potential to make some members nervous or fearful, because they are of the opinion that they could never do evangelism or be involved with outreach. They see it as a work for professionals. The good news is that God has already taken our apprehension into consideration and has gifted each member for the work He wants them to do (Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; Romans 12:3-8). He has given each Christian at least one spiritual gift, which is to be identified and used in building up the church and expanding God’s kingdom.

In using the metaphor of the body to describe the church, Paul is saying that the church on the one hand is a unified whole, as the body is. It is to be unified in spirit and mission. On the other hand, the body is not only unified, it is also made up of many parts. Because we are different parts of the body of Christ, with different gifts and abilities, we will function differently. We may be comfortable with some outreach programs of the church and not others. “. . . Our different gifts and personalities can complement one another. Some people are good at building relationships with new people. Some are socialites . . . Some people are great at hospitality. Some are good at initiating gospel conversations. Some are good at confronting heart issues.”¹⁰

While living the gospel is the most effective way of evangelizing, evangelistic events are often necessary to attract people to the embodiment of the gospel

The good news is that God has already taken our apprehension into consideration and has gifted each member for the work He wants them to do .

¹⁰Chester and Timmis, 62.

While every member is required to live in such a way as to contribute to the corporate impact of the community, they are also expected to use their spiritual gifts to attract others to the community. There is no such thing as an inactive Christian.

that is found in the community of believers. While every member is required to live in such a way as to contribute to the corporate impact of the community, they are also expected to use their spiritual gifts to attract others to the community. There is no such thing as an inactive Christian.

What are your spiritual gifts and how may you use them to contribute to the function of the Body of Christ?

WEDNESDAY

Practical Ways to Evangelize as a Community

Often the initial contact between a person outside the church and the church itself is through an individual member. In their book, *The Inviting Church*, Roy Oswald and Speed Leas say that 86 percent of people who join the church were initially invited by a friend or a relative.¹¹ In this segment we examine how an individual and the church corporately can work together in sharing the gospel:

1. Demonstrate in your day-to-day living that your identity and happiness come from your relationship with Christ and not from your possessions, education, or job. People will be attracted to a Christian whose joy is in Christ.
2. Make a list of specific people that you would like to bring to Christ and intercede for them daily. Identify ways in which you can build relationships with them and introduce

them to the community of believers.

“Introductions might involve nothing more than inviting both Christian and non-Christian friends for a meal or an evening out.”¹²

3. Invite those with whom you have built a relationship to church. The worship service on Sabbath morning is a good starting point. It may not be wise to invite your guests to both Sabbath School and the worship service to begin with. That may be too long a time for someone new to be sitting in church.

The most important part of the steps above is the introduction of your contacts to the church community, where they can see the church “at work” and experience its loving relationships. The church community, where members love one another, will always be attractive to the outsider. If Jesus is exalted by the community of faith in word and deed, people will be drawn to Him.

How can my local church community be more attractive to the surrounding community?

THURSDAY

Community in Social Outreach

Taking an active interest in the community or doing anything that addresses social needs, such as poverty or powerlessness, can be easily separated from the idea of evangelism by some, but Jesus does not make such a distinction. Speaking of the poor and the needy, Jesus says in Matthew 25:40, “. . . whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of

The church community, where members love one another, will always be attractive to the outsider. If Jesus is exalted by the community of faith in word and deed, people will be drawn to Him.

¹¹Quoted in Linton Thomas, “Imperatives of Evangelism,” <http://www.firstsubchurch-bronx.org/sermons/imperatives-of-evangelism/>. Accessed August 2, 2017.

¹²Chester and Timmis, 61.

Christians should not become politicized, but they should work for the right of every person to be treated as a son or daughter of God and with the dignity that befits such a title.

¹³John Coffey, *The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action*, <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-christian-conscience-and-political-action-by-john-coffey/>. Accessed August 3, 2017.

mine, you did for me." As Christians, we are required to exercise our compassion and love for others in tangible ways.

Christians should take their beliefs and values into the public arena and apply them to the important social issues of the day. This is a powerful demonstration of the nature of the kingdom of God. "On 22 May 1787, twelve devout [Christian] men assembled at a printing shop in the City of London . . . The twelve established themselves as the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade . . . The cause was promoted in a flood of publications: sermons, pamphlets, treatises, poems, narratives, newspaper articles, reports and petitions . . . Within twenty years of that seminal meeting in the printing shop, the slave trade had been abolished throughout the Empire."¹³ This was as a result of the church's work and witness.

The church also played a major role in ending desegregation in the United States. Churches provided financial support, the Bible provided the rhetoric, and Christian ministers, such as Martin Luther King Jr., provided leadership.

Christians should not become politicized, but they should work for the right of every person to be treated as a son or daughter of God and with the dignity that befits such a title. How can we work for the amelioration of conditions for the poor and disenfranchised in the society? We can support non-partisan organizations that work to improve the lives of people in our local communities, nation, and the world. We can seek to influence government policies

for the good. We can also vote for those whom we believe will address the injustice problems in the society that concern us.

Until the church takes a sincere interest in the plight and lives of those outside its walls, there is no real reason for the "outsider" to want to join the church community. The mission of Jesus, as expressed in Luke 4:16, is not designed to be just a mantra that is recited from time to time, but rather a springboard for kingdom work among those outside the church.

What are the social issues that our church should be addressing? How can you participated in these causes?

FRIDAY Worship and Evangelism

The worship services of the church have enormous evangelistic potential, and church leaders should make every effort to ensure that this potential is realized. Churches that are growing today are most likely those that understand the magnitude of this potential and organize and conduct their services in such a way as to harvest what God has grown.

First, services are to be done in such a way that leaves worshippers in no doubt that God is present, that His Spirit is at work in the music, sermon, fellowship and all else that takes place. There must be evidence that God is at work in the lives of church members and that Christianity is a palpable reality and not an elusive ideal. "Let us never forget that worship is part of what defines us as a church. People in our

The worship services of the church have enormous evangelistic potential, and church leaders should make every effort to ensure that this potential is realized.

Sermons that are most effective for both believers and non-believers are those that deal with their hopes, fears, struggles, dreams, values and current events.

¹⁴Sally Morgenthaler, *Enlarging the Circle: How to make your worship evangelistic*, <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1997/enlarging-circle-how-make-your-worship-evangelistic>. Accessed, August 3, 2017.

¹⁵Dever and Dulop, 194-195.

culture—in your community—are longing to meet God. The marvelous thing is that, when they come into a corporate worship setting, they encounter this God inhabiting the praises of his people (Ps. 22:3).¹⁴

Second, our worship services should be accessible to non-members. Outsiders who are in our services should be able to understand what is happening and what is being said. Terms that are understood only by Adventists should be clearly explained or avoided. Non-members should not have to leave a worship service wondering, “What was that all about?”

The sermon should address the world in which non-members live and the issues that confront them, which usually are the same issues that confront Christians as well. Sermons that are most effective for both believers and non-believers are those that deal with their hopes, fears, struggles, dreams, values and current events.

Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop list three things that happen when worship services are accessible to non-Christians: (1) unbelieving attendees are able to engage with the service; (2) the church is taught that it is normal for non-Christians to be present, and that not everyone they meet after the service is a Christian; and (3) the church is taught how to engage with unbelief, how to apply scripture winsomely to the objections of non-Christians.¹⁵

God needs a community that loves lost people passionately, one that understands that it represents God’s character and the kingdom that Christ came to establish. If each congregation is truly the community of faith in character and practice, there would be no limit to its reach.

How can our services be more evangelistic, without diminishing worship of God? What is the role you can play in this endeavor?

Where exactly would you take your non-believer friends to introduce them to your Sligo community? Would you feel comfortable bringing them to your community? If your answer is no, what would make you more comfortable?

How has your understanding of the church and evangelism been challenged as a result of studying this chapter? What changes are you prepared to make in order to ensure that Sligo church evangelizes and serves as a community?