

The Confession of a “Post-Modern,” “Post-Whatever” Evangelist!

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I CONFESS THAT EVEN THOUGH I was born on the way to a new church start meeting, and as much as I spoke about “it” in my ministry, evangelism was not a real part of my ministry and faith until a hurricane struck my life, literally. My upbringing in the Evangelical tradition, which stressed deeds of piety over words, and my postmodern private mindset combined to judge what others called “evangelism” as showy rhetoric and I was turned off by “it.” In my ministry, I institutionalized evangelism into the programs and the language of church growth. I did not speak with a heart that had the passion, energy, and eagerness to tell the wonders of God’s transforming power and grace to others.

I will give thanks to God with my whole heart; I will tell of all God’s wonderful deeds.—Psalm 9

My enthusiasm for evangelism, for telling the gospel of Christ, and sharing the community of Christ, was energized and focused in the fall of 1998 while leading a Habitat for Humanity mission trip to Nicaragua. I experienced God’s power and grace when my working group got caught and stranded in the devastation of Hurricane Mitch. Everything that I, as a North American, relied on was stripped away from the group and me: information, communication, work, goals, security, immediate availability of food, water, energy, and, finally, our possessions. While everything else was stripped away from us, we continued to know and support each other with the one thing that is never taken away from us, our faith in God’s presence and spirit. At the same time, we received and witnessed incredible acts of Christ-like courage and compassion from Nicaraguan campesinos who reached out to us, risking their lives and leaving



their homes to bring us food, water, communication, and spiritual support. As the hurricane raged around us, pouring down sixteen inches of rain a day for six days, more and more people who had lost their homes came to stay in the shelter of our camp and community. Together we sang, prayed, had parties, discovered our individual gifts, and encouraged each other, translating Spanish and English, but often communicating in ways that needed no translation as we bridged barriers of language, national, religious tradition, and economics.

That experience was a powerful call to me of the good news we have to tell and of the community we have to share. Each day we are recipients of God’s power and grace (sometimes it takes a strong storm to remind us of what we take for granted). As Christians, we particularly see God’s grace and power revealed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Jesus came to us that we might have and know life, abundant and transformed. That life and love can never be taken away from us. The church, the community of Christ, is God’s witness to what

we have seen, received, and shared. In the midst of life's storms that threaten to undo us, the church projects God's support and power for all.

The community of believers in the hills of Nicaragua became the model of what the church is for me—a community of support, hope, and strength in the midst of the strong winds of destruction and despair. A community that reaches out to embrace all and overcomes the barriers of the world that would divide us. A place where people of many languages, races, cultures, theological understandings, economics, and lifestyles can join together to sing, praise, and pray with diverse but united voices. Where discipleship is a call to reach out to others with Christ-like compassion and courage. Like our camp in the mountains, the transformed community of Christ, the church, is a place of shelter and well-being that is inviting, welcoming, encouraging, and embracing for all.

The hurricane was an eye-opening reminder of that which is always with us, God's presence and strength, and a stirring awakening of a passion to tell others. That is the heart of the good news and ministry that I now love to share and invite others to know also. I give thanks to God that, in my ministry, I had learned that evangelism is passion as much as program, transformation more than growth.

Another turning point in my becoming an evangelist was during a period as a pastor when I was frustrated by a decline in worship attendance and membership and questioned the future of the congregation I was serving (and the whole church, as well!). Despite all of our best efforts, we seemed stuck on a declining plateau. Through a time of sabbatical leave, when I studied firsthand the ministry of vital and dynamic congregations, I saw that God was preparing a future for the church and for our congregations. God has a future for the church. The question is not whether there is a future, the question becomes: "Do we choose to live into the future?" Just doing what we did well, even better, is not the answer. We have to learn to do God's new thing for a new millennium.

Jesus' commission to us could well be translated today, "Go forth into the twenty-first century and as you go, make disciples." The task of an evangelist today is to go into the world to meet and minister among the people and context of the twenty-first century.

The beginning of the twenty-first century, much like the first century church, is an exciting, challenging and wondrous moment full of spiritual power, mission potential, and faithful risk. Like the world that the first apostles went forth into, the world today is filled with multitudes who do not know the good word of God or the community of Christ. Much like Paul, called to journey to Greece, we are called into the midst of a world that is not

churched and can be very different from the places we have known. Yet, the hunger and thirst of today's spiritual seekers seem so much like that of the crowds that gathered around Jesus and the apostles. The multitude of languages and diversity of

communities in which the gospel is proclaimed are echoes of the first Pentecost. The twenty-first century seems very much like that first century, and our work like that of the early disciples who were commissioned to go forth in Christ's name to spread discipleship to others.

Congregations that are thriving and growing into the twenty-first century are focused on reaching out to people and seeking to meet the needs of the people with their gifts of faith (rather than just meeting the needs of the church). Churches that are thriving are reaching out to the large and growing unchurched populations around them with a sense of mission that begins at their front doors. Today's spiritual seekers and new believers are looking for worship that is upbeat, engaging, and addressing the issues and nature of their lives. Faith communities that are making a difference find ways to address people's needs not only in worship, but also in ministry throughout the week. Dynamic congregations are filled with people who are empowered to discover and use their spiritual gifts for ministry. Denominations that are expanding in outreach are filled with excitement about

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you go, make disciples.
—Matthew 28:19**

starting worship services, new congregations, and ministries that invite, welcome, and speak to all generations and all communities in today's multicultural, multiracial, unchurched world.

Many of today's spiritual seekers and new generations yearn for the very values and vision of the United Church of Christ—a vision that includes: the wide embrace and welcome of all; biblical understanding based on freedom of inquiry and thought; passionate commitment to reconciliation and unity; and a community based on justice and mission. These are the very values that shaped the United Church of Christ and are the key to our future in a new age. The world and today's generations are ever more diverse and multicultural. The United Church of Christ has a heritage and future that embraces and speaks to just such a world. The world and today's spiritual seekers need and look for the vision that we have. We need to learn how to share it in a new age.

In my evangelical journey, I confess that I continually find myself seeking the strength and

insight to learn how to speak and tell God's good word in refreshing and authentic ways to others. I am also learning how to hear and learn the stories, needs, and contexts of those who are seeking the word in the twenty-first century.

That's my evangelism journey and confession. You may not have a hurricane in yours, but I bet you have a story to tell, also. I invite you to tell me, or, better yet, someone else. I invite Christ's disciples, congregations, and conferences to join the Evangelism Ministry Team and me to reach out to individuals and communities with the transforming power of God's good word in Jesus Christ.



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