Gentle Witness

Another Model for Evangelism

Martin Bailey

Some of my earliest memories are of evangelistic activities. In the small Iowa farming community where I grew up, the town streets came alive on Saturday nights. The farmers had finished in the fields, had taken what we jokingly called their "Saturday night baths," and had gotten all dressed up. They drove to town to buy supplies, discuss the weather, and do those other things that farmers do after a long week of work. (Many, it must be added, would be in church the next morning.)

My buddies and I would meet at the corner drugstore and then stroll up and down the two streets. To be honest, I suppose we preadolescents were preening a bit, learning to strut, hoping to catch the attention of what we thought of as a gaggle of giggling girls.

Almost always we would be drawn to the courthouse square, where we would find amusement in the testimonies offered by a half dozen converts to the town's new Pentecostal church. Our parents would occasionally drive us to the frame building where these "holy rollers" met for worship. Their music and loud prayers moved us only to unappreciative wonder.

A year or so later our stolid little Congregational church held a series of dinners and other fundraising activities to pay for a new electronic organ. The melodious instrument was used to accompany the hymns and the choir, which had only just begun wearing black robes. I remember vividly that the church was packed for an evening organ concert by a blind musician, sent by the organ company to demonstrate the wonders of the electronic instrument. The circuits that night were overtaxed and the sanctuary was suddenly thrown into darkness. No one was quite sure whether there were any extra fuses. With a Midwestern sense of humor, members and visitors alike were somehow united by the power failure. The event had been planned as a more sophisticated approach to evangelism. It was important that the church be seen as comfortable, attractive, and "up-to-date."

Those early experiences provided the backdrop for my gradual understanding that there are different approaches to sharing the good news. And variety was certainly evident in that predominantly Irish-Catholic and Norwegian-Lutheran town. The rigid piety of one group was matched by the dour understanding of the faith by the other.

Within two blocks of where my family lived stood the massive brick Catholic church with its soaring tower, as well as its school and convent; a wood frame Lutheran church so small that in good weather they piped the service outside for folk who sat on makeshift benches, a Methodist congregation whose enthusiastic hymn singing sometimes interrupted the Lutherans, and a tiny "high church" Episcopal group. Our "respectable" Congregational church was several blocks away, facing the town square. It was somehow symbolic that it was located just across the street from the Carnegie Library.

So began my involvement with the evangelical spirit. Since then, through Pilgrim Fellowship, during college and then seminary, I've observed, evaluated, practiced, supported, and written about evangelism.

By the 1960s and '70s, I was publishing articles about the need for congregations in the United Church of Christ to be more intentional about their efforts to explain their approach to the faith. Those were more ecumenical days, to be sure, and we were all more accepting of each other's faith expressions. But I felt that we who had become part of the United Church of Christ must be clear about the ways we express our convictions in wor-

ship, in acts of mercy, and in efforts to achieve social justice. And we need confidently to invite others to join us in our pilgrimage of faith.

Some members of what we now call the UCC Evangelism Ministry Team remembered that I once persuaded Presbyterian and UCC evangelism specialists to develop a handbook for the two denominations called "Models for Evangelism in Church and Community." The handbook was published as a special issue of our shared magazine, *A.D.* When the Evangelism Ministry Team asked me to describe how approaches to evangelism have changed in the intervening years, I welcomed the invitation and began digging through my files to rediscover the concerns that had led to that handbook.

The early 1970s were turbulent years in the American church. Vietnam and Watergate were over. The churches had discovered again—as they had during the civil rights movement and on several other occasions in our history—that prophetic leadership is often accompanied by debate and division. There were cries inside the United Church of Christ and other denominations that Christianity should "return to essentials." We were told to "let the church be the church." Several groups in the United States and around the world called for a new emphasis on evangelism. We had failed to convince them that our social witness was an act of faithfulness to the gospel. Conservative church leaders met in Lausanne, Switzerland, and elsewhere and urged greater emphasis on mission based on "things of the spirit" rather than on responses to war, injustice, and national pride. In the United States, some churches organized an elaborate evangelical effort they called Key '73.

That debate over the meaning of evangelism was, in fact, part of what led the UCC and the United Presbyterians to create a magazine in 1972 that we called *A.D.*—for Anno Domini—as a bold assertion that each year was "the Year of Our Lord." We sought to affirm that our churches were driven by faith in the Incarnation, in the Lord who became flesh and lived and taught and died while working among us. We believed then, as I certainly do now, that we have good news to share with the poor and disfranchised as well as with the affluent and well connected.

We were, of course, only partly successful in our affirmation. Or perhaps I should say we failed to convince some denominational leaders that we meant business about the faith we had inherited. Nevertheless, we tried to say, as clearly as we knew how, that our approach to mission was an evangelical approach, that is, it was based on the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gabriel Fackre, a professor at Andover Newton Theological School, helped us focus the handbook on seven complementary themes to be found in the Acts of the Apostles. With his help, we reported on ways congregations across the nation expressed their biblical faith in deed, word, call, confrontation, growth, and life together and as parts of the whole. Looking back on that November 1974 issue of the magazine, I believe the content holds up pretty well. We offered models that nearly thirty years later seem relevant and perhaps even useful.

But times have changed, and new occasions do teach new duties. Perhaps evangelism itself has not changed so much as the context and the setting in which the church expresses the same biblical faith has. *We* have changed in the meantime and especially since September 11. But clearly our basic convictions have not been altered. They are, after all, grounded in a theology of the Incarnation.

For me that means that all of our evangelism must not only be local but also very personal. We want strong, growing congregations, to be sure. But congregations lack credibility unless they focus the good news on individuals, unless they preach and demonstrate that the gospel is for persons. This is what inspires us in Jesus' ministry. It is the clear implication of our theological understanding.

I am absolutely convinced that the evangelism programs of congregations must reach out, in word and deed, to particular individuals, not to generic groups. Nor to the church as such. Nor to organized groups within the church. We reach out through the church or through fellowship groups, of course. But in an increasingly impersonal age, our approach needs to be personal and our goal must be to reach particular human beings. Furthermore, we need to be clear that Christ came to seek and to save persons, not the church. We may sing about the church's one foundation and assert that "for her life he died," but that hymn can give the wrong impression. Christ died for all persons, not just those with whom we associate in the church. We must be very careful to avoid the heresy that the good news is limited to the members of Christian congregations. All God's children share equally in God's love. Whatever the focus of evangelism in the past, it is clear in this year of our Lord 2003 that the direction of the churches' pro-

grams of evangelism is outward as well as inward; it is to persons and not to holy institutions.

However, we have also learned in recent decades that it is possible to misunderstand the assertion that evangelism must essentially be personal. The good news is for *each* human being, himself or herself. But our message is not for each person in isolation, nor in some next-worldly way. The good news for each person relates to that person's own context. The good news is that God loves individuals in the world, each person in the maelstrom of his or her relationships to other persons. The gospel is for each person who lives and struggles within her or his communities.

Our evangelism is for persons, whom we serve as we work for a just and peaceful society, and as we invite them to join us in that effort.

To say that evangelism is for individuals gives focus to the church's assignment. Our task is to make sure that each individual has some opportunity to hear or experience the exciting good news. We must also acknowledge that, in a certain sense, the church's mission is for communities—for the world itself, for God's blessed creation. We minister to persons within community and seek ways to help individuals discover and create true community. The abundant life that Jesus came to provide is for persons who live and work with other persons, in community, in society. It may be a semantic game, but it helps me to spell it out: Our evangelism is for persons, whom we serve as we work for a just and peaceful society, and as we invite them to join us in that effort.

Part of the changing context of our modern life is that we cannot escape being part of a global society. This is far more evident today than it was in 1972. We spoke of "one world" then, of course. We worked for peace. We sent missionaries abroad, and we received Christians from overseas into our congregations here. We participated in the World Council of Churches, supported the United Nations, and spoke of a global society. But that fact seemed somehow distant. It is inescapable today.

In 1972 there may have been persons who had little or no personal exposure to the wide, wide world. That is hardly true today.

THINK OF—and pray for—the African child born with AIDS, the same disease that kills Americans and Chinese, believers and atheists.

THINK OF—and pray for—the Iraqi woman seeking safe water for her family.

THINK OF—and pray for—the Spanish fishing villages whose livelihood is suddenly threatened by a spreading oil slick.

THINK OF—and pray for—those who hunger and thirst because American priorities favor weapons rather than solving food and water shortages. Our prayer list is endless. And because we believe in Jesus, in the Incarnation, our prayers must be matched by our actions. That is the implication of the good news, the test of our evangelism.

I began this little essay with some personal examples of how I learned the meanings of evangelism. In closing, I want to offer an example that stands in contrast to those opening illustrations. When we retired, my wife, Betty, and I moved to Israel and Palestine where we lived for several years. We were "missionaries" of the Common Global Ministries Board, representing Disciples of Christ and the UCC. We did not go to start new UCC or Disciples' congregations but to offer our services to existing churches, many of which began their witness on the first Pentecost.

On one particularly hot day in Bethlehem, I walked close to the buildings seeking a little shade. I was headed to Jerusalem, and my briefcase seemed especially heavy in the heat. Across from the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church, I turned toward the bus stop several blocks away. Then a familiar voice called from a minivan: "If you need a ride to the checkpoint, hop in back."

It was Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center. I climbed in, welcoming not only the ride but also an opportunity to talk. I got the ride but no chance to visit because my friend was deeply engaged in conversation with an elderly Arab, dressed in the traditional flowing white robe of a Muslim headed to Friday

prayers. At the checkpoint, Zoughbi said to me, "Walk with this haj [an old man, often one who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca] through the checkpoint. Maybe the soldiers will let him pass." I did, and that day we got through.

The following Sunday, when I saw Zoughbi and Elaine and their family at the English service at Redeemer Church in Jerusalem, I asked about the old man. "Never saw him before," Zoughbi explained. "Sensed he'd appreciate a lift on that hot day. Part of my ministry of transportation."

As we talked, the ebullient Palestinian Christian told how providing transportation was one way that he could befriend Muslims. "The haj knew I am a Christian. He saw the cross around my neck and he asked why I offered him a ride. I told him my religion teaches me to show kindness to strangers. Then we talked about our hope for peace with the Israelis—peace with justice, a peace where Muslims can get to the Mosque in Jerusalem and Christians are not stopped on their way to church."

Zoughbi works hard at his faith. His Wi'am Center, located on Manger Street, combines traditional Palestinian methods of dealing with conflict, known as sulha—careful, patient listening led by a trusted leader or leaders until a new consensus can be achieved—with modern methods of reconciliation and intervention. Zoughbi learned his skills during a course on peace studies at Notre Dame University.

I often think about Zoughbi Zoughbi's gentle witness and his deep concern for all the people of the Holy Land. These days he is busier than usual. Unemployment in Bethlehem is reaching staggering proportions, because Israel has sealed off the West Bank and put up so many roadblocks that farmers sometimes can't get to their fields. Family conflicts seem to increase whenever the men can't find work. One of Zoughbi's current initiatives is to raise some money from Western friends and offer jobs with a small stipend for cleaning, painting, and fixing up classrooms and hospital grounds. It gives individuals hope and dignity.

Peace with justice is his goal. A cup of cold water, a temporary job, or a ride on a hot day is his way. In this man many see Jesus, who also ministered by the roadside. His is contemporary evangelism at its best in a place where proselytism is forbidden. It may also be more effective than complex theological arguments. In any case, I am inspired by his witness; he is for me a contemporary model for evangelism.

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