

What do Presbyterians believe about evangelism?

Reluctant evangelists: Telling the Good News may not come easy, but it is an essential part of a Christian lifestyle

(Excerpts)

By Sherron Kay George | Reprinted from the April 2002 issue of Presbyterians Today

Do Presbyterians still believe in evangelism? I quickly discovered in the required class on mission and evangelism I taught at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary that many students had little interest in or even an aversion to evangelism. Isn't that something Baptists, Pentecostals, megachurches, and TV evangelists do?

We Presbyterians station smiling greeters at the front door, and we may take bread to visitors. We may invite someone to our church. But we generally do not feel comfortable speaking publicly about our personal faith.

Presbyterian pastors do not often preach evangelistic sermons or give altar calls, and door-to-door evangelism is rare among Presbyterians. Is there a way to practice evangelism without emotional manipulation and aggressive marketing techniques that lead to superficial decisions? Can Presbyterians reclaim with integrity our historical commitment to evangelism?

Evangelism is one part of God's mission

Many Presbyterians are confused about the relation between mission and evangelism. The word mission comes from the Greek for "sending," and evangelism from "good news" or "public messenger of good news." God is at work in our troubled and broken world. This is good news!

What is God doing in this world where many forms of devastating evil are rampant? God sent the Son and the Holy Spirit and now sends the church into the world as instruments of redemptive mission. God is bringing to fruition the new reality that was manifested in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ — God's reign of life, love, justice and peace. While this reign seems hidden, it is present like yeast, light, salt and a small seed.

Jesus defined the mission of God's reign: "The Spirit of the Lord ... anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

God's "holistic" or total mission activity includes three essential areas, all high priorities for the PCUSA: evangelism, compassionate service and social justice. Jesus practiced and intermingled all three. Each is a distinct and necessary part of God's mission. If any area is neglected, the church's mission is truncated.

Lives speak louder than words

All evangelism is mission, but not all mission is evangelism. Evangelism, compassionate service and social justice are integral to the Christian's lifestyle. Our lives speak louder than our words and are the first Bible many people will read. The attitudes of respect, compassion and humility should characterize our evangelism and all other participation in God's mission. While words are necessary at some point in evangelism, our deeds, attitudes and lifestyle help or hinder evangelism.

Sharing good news — every Christian's responsibility

Every person in the world has the right to hear and respond to God's universal offer of grace in Christ. And sharing this good news is the responsibility of every Christian and the church as a whole. Christians in every country around the globe have the privilege of joyfully sharing the good news of the whole gospel with their friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors and colleagues.

Salvation is a gift of grace that God freely gives, but God chooses to communicate and offer this gift through human agents. We simply take advantage of opportunities to articulate and explain our personal faith in Jesus Christ and our life as his disciples, and leave the results to God's Spirit.

Not only do we evangelize as we share and invite others to respond to the good news, but we too are continually evangelized as we hear afresh and respond to the gospel challenges. This humble approach leaves no room for arrogance. Darrell Guder offers Presbyterians a relevant theology of evangelism in *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. He says: "Evangelizing churches are churches that are being evangelized. For the sake of its evangelistic vocation, the continuing conversion of the church is essential."

How Presbyterians evangelize

Lifestyle evangelism is a matter of speaking, inviting and receiving. We learn to speak about our Christian faith to others, to share what difference the presence of God and the support of the Christian community make in our lives, especially in times of suffering and transition. We tell others of the spiritual resources and guidance we find through prayer, Bible reading, worship and service.

Many people around us are searching and hurting. After we articulate our faith to them, or if we simply cannot yet do that, we can invite people to attend a Bible study, a support group appropriate to their need, or a church service. While not all will accept our invitations, we will find that people are more spiritually hungry and open to receive them than we are to extend them.

First impressions are determinative. Do visitors feel welcomed? Do they feel that we are a warm, inclusive community or a closed, exclusive clique? After all, when we receive the "least of these," we receive Jesus Christ.