

# Evangelism: How to Do It, How to Stifle It

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"Episcopal evangelism" -- oxymoron?

Millions will never know God's love if we Episcopalians do not incarnate it.

Too readily we Episcopalians abandon some of our most effective ways to evangelize. For example, we have dismantled scores of college ministries over the last two decades, deeming them "not cost effective"--accountability inspired by Big Business.

God reckons differently. I can name over 30 acquaintances now Episcopalians who first learned about our church while they were in college. For some of these, Episcopalians provided the first evidence that Christians can respect the mind. For others, Episcopalians provided the first evidence that Christians can love non-judgmentally:

"Father Gribbin came right into her house like he was perfectly comfortable there!" The young atheist referred to Emmet Gribbin, chaplain at Alabama in the 1960s. The student's friend had had a baby out of wedlock, and the student observer was pleasantly shocked to discover that a religious person could respond without scorn. Instead, Father Gribbin saw to it that the mother and the baby got what they needed, materially as well as spiritually. The baby is now grown, and its mother and stepfather are now Episcopalians, as is the prominent lawyer, who was the undergraduate atheist student at that time. Through love and simple kindness Father Gribbin spoke far more cogently than most of their childhood pastors.

Just as true, unlove and unkindness stifle evangelism:

For example, racism now severely inhibits growth in most parts of the Episcopal Church. Recently I taught at a small black school where I had taught 18 years earlier, in my native South. On the earlier occasion, most of my colleagues attended the various churches of their youth. Last year, many stayed at home, except on

Easter and Christmas. Many who knew that I am religious, told me that they are anxious not to throw the baby out with the bath water, but are unhappy with traditions that leave little room for their intellect. Ripe for becoming Episcopalians? Yes, but....

That town has two Episcopal churches, about 300 yards away from each other. The white parish operates a youth camp with funds that it received from a black family; but it removed a deacon, another Southerner, when the deacon suggested that he might occasionally invite youths from the black parish to join the white youth for church functions. 1969? No, 1989.

Classism also inhibits Episcopal evangelism. The Southern black parish to which I belonged, has the highest percentage of Ph.D.'s that I have ever encountered in any congregation; yet few people without Ph.D.'s feel comfortable worshipping there. If they knew how much God loves, the parishioners would jump to share God's love with everyone. Even their vicar, my dear friend, long ago quit bringing in guests, not wanting to subject the guests to subtle forms of rejection in that congregation. These same rejectors were kind to me personally, at risk to themselves, and I love them dearly. They are not evil, only myopic. With better vision, the Episcopal Church everywhere could double its membership in five years.

Sexism also inhibits evangelism in the Episcopal Church. For several years I lived in one of the dioceses that still refuse to recognize the priesthood of women. A retired woman priest was frequently a house guest, and on one occasion we held a house mass, inviting anyone and everyone to come. The huge crowd spilt into the front and back yards on a hot summer afternoon. Most of the women at the local Catholic convent came, as did women leaders in the local Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations. When the bishop wrote a letter asking my house guest not to celebrate, the local newspaper took the Good News of God's unconditional welcome all over the county. While one member of my parish refused to share the Peace with me after that time, at least two other persons date their first interest in the Episcopal Church from that occasion. One was only ten or eleven then; last week she sent e-mail to me from her campus, noting that she has become an Episcopalian and may become a priest.

We have worried too long about how our positive convictions will drive people away who disagree with us. It is high time for us to celebrate those whom our convictions welcome, many for the first time.

Homophobia inhibits our evangelism. Millions of lesbians and gays have fled churches, in other denominations even more than in our own. Some lesbians and gays stick around church not fully convinced that they belong. Other lesbians and

gays have understood clearly that God loves us all unconditionally, not on our own merits, but on Christ's. We need help in spreading that Good News.

Clericalism also inhibits evangelism in the Episcopal Church. Bishop Frey has poignantly warned, we're in danger of becoming a club of clerics with fewer and fewer members. While individual priests sometimes encourage us to place them in charge of everything, more often we lay people put priests in charge against their will. "We pay you; now you do all of God's work," we seem to say.

We can't evangelize in that way. Professional ministry is indeed important, but no more important than "to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord." That's everyone's vocation.

The remedy for excessive clericalism is not anti-clericalism, but instead, a strong vision of lay ministry. Even the most dedicated professionals cannot do lay ministry. Even the most charming of priests lack ubiquity. They can never see and influence all the people whom we lay persons touch. Simple neglect also stifles our evangelism. Few people ever bring any non-Christians to church with them. Do they fear non-Christians will misunderstand their motives? Are they afraid to seem pushy? I bring a steady stream of visitors, especially house guests, and even those who are atheist and agnostic seem to understand that I am not trying to convert them when I take them to Church with me. I never pressure them to pretend they're anything that they are not. I respect their decisions, and they respect mine. Many seem to enjoy my sharing what they know to be an integral part of my life. Taking them to Church is an unconditional part of my hospitality.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit, the real Evangelist, has made good use of these visitations. At least four non-Christians who first traipsed off to church as my guests over the last two decades, are now priests in our church.

Hundreds of gay people won't come to church if I ask them to join me, but many will begin to come if heterosexuals will start inviting them.

If every person in our pews invited just one person every three months, God's kingdom would grow phenomenally, especially if we invited those whom others have made to feel unwelcome.

To evangelize, we do not have to corner a stranger, thrust a tract at her, and ask, "Are you saved?" We don't have to buy a share of the copyright some people think they hold on the words "Born Again." We don't have to memorize a dozen Bible verses to convince a sinner that he is lost and that we alone hold his only chance..... For many of us, all these tactics sound like bad taste, even bad news, especially if delivered by someone concerned more to get herself into heaven than to bring love to our lives.

While the Anglican style is not for everyone, God's love is, and many there are who will not know God's love if we Episcopalians fail to incarnate it. The most serious barrier to evangelism is that we lose sight of how much God loves us and how fully God wants us to love the world.