

“Outreach: Why we don't and How we could” Seminar

MTS Shopfront 17-09-2015

Introduction (5 mins)

- By way of introduction: Come with me to the Batcave. It's 1989 (Tim Burton's original), and Batman is about to tell Vicki Vale how the Joker's causing people to laugh themselves to death.
 - *“The police have got it wrong, they're looking for *one* product. The Joker's tainted hundreds of chemicals at the source ... The poison only works when the components are mixed. Hairspray won't do it alone; but hairspray mixed with lipstick and perfume would be toxic and untraceable.”*
- Guys, let me start with a few of my assumptions:
 - #1: I don't think me and my church are doing so well at outreach.
 - #2: I don't think you and your church are doing we well at outreach—with my limited view of other churches, that is. And I may be wrong.
 - #3: I don't think we've really got a clear sense of why we aren't growing.
 - We put it down to vague issues in culture, or theology of sovereignty, or claiming there are too few evangelists.
 - #4: I do believe that I'm surrounded by smart, talented, creative, and gospel-centred church leaders.
 - #5: I believe we aren't growing for whole families of reasons.
 - Reasons (for instance) to do with our actual proclamation—how we preach Jesus.
 - Reasons to do with how we do church, and what that says—about Jesus, faith, and the Christian life.
 - Reasons to do with structure—which we've probably laboured a lot in our circles, and some of us are doing well at.
 - Reasons to do with our disengagement from from the needy around us, in ways that are in-step with our culture, but out of step with the church down the ages.
- But today I'd like to share with you the family of reasons that I've been trying to understand and address in my context:
 - and those reasons are to do with why so few people actually come to my church: “Why do I see so few new people, Sunday by Sunday?”
- May I sketch where we're going?
 - First, I'm just gonna lay out the “tainted chemicals”—the problems.
 - You may be avoiding some. But I bet we're all drinking a few, at least.
 - That's the big download—then I'll pause for comments.
 - Second—once we've done that—I'd like to show you what we're doing at Good News, and perhaps we could toss that around as a case study, throw-in your ideas—which I can then pinch!
- Any questions?

Why aren't we growing (30 mins)

- I have 8 points here. The key one for me came from this story:

Expectations

- Have you heard of Takeru Kobayashi?
- Here's the scene: Kobayashi takes his seat at the Coney Island, fourth of July hotdog eating comp, in 2001. It's a big ol' American eating comp. Kobi is flanked by big ol' veterans: taller and bigger than the little Japanese guy. The clock started with 12 minutes, and the record was 25 1/8 hotdogs. So if you eat 26 hotdogs, chances are you'll kill the field and you'll hold the new record.
 - Now: Just think about that: 12 minutes: 26 hotdogs—that's more than 2 hotdogs every single minute for 12 minutes. Dogs and buns.
 - And you've gotta hold it in. There can be no “reversal of fortune”—as it's known in the pro-eating circuit.
 - Let me cut a long story short: Kobayashi killed 'em. In his twelve minutes, he smashed the record. There was a guy who took his shirt off and waved it in surrender when he was on just 8, and Kobi was already on 30.
 - Kobi went on to stop the clock at 50--!--hot dogs in his twelve minutes
 - The guy has gone on to do televised eating comps—including one against a one tonne Kodiak Bear on a starvation diet—which Kobi lost.
- Now: I tell the story, 'cause it got me wondering: why are we ok with the current standard, the current “record” of newcomers at church? Could it be that basically a failure of imagination has locked us in at 25 1/8 hotdogs—in terms of church attendance.
 - I don't know what your church is like: Picture them there: Most of us are probably at—what?—one a week? Average. Maybe a couple every second or third week—genuinely new people?
- And you might say--”Hey!, we're not “ok” with that! That's not fair!”
 - But I guess I mean this: we're “ok” with it in the sense that: it's not a crisis for us.
 - Yes: We say we're trying to reach the 217,000 people in Hobart, or the 106,000 people in Launmy, or the 35,000 people in Kingborough, or the 50,600 people in Clarence—where I am.
 - But for some reason: when we see only new one person per week—we're not in the situation room with our elders. We don't fly into crisis mode, we don't drop everything and gather our most-creative thinkers, the greatest minds in our congregations, we don't open up our budget and get them thinking crazy ideas.
 - Why not?
- So: After hearing Kobi's story I had this moment where I imagined:
 - what if I was sitting around this table—like, actually this table, with you guys—you were all chewing over, like: how do we bust through 20? Karl and Dan and Jono and Graham: how do we bust through 20 new people every week, it's this ceiling for us! Meanwhile, I'm sitting in the corner—just terrified and ashamed. 'Cause I'm limping along at two every three weeks!

- You know what I'd do, right? Shame would force the crisis for me: I'd go back and I'd pray, I'd call meetings, I'd pull my best people out what they're doing now—bible study coordinating, or Sunday school leading, or whatever. I'd tell session we've gotta give them a budget—as much as we can.
 - Can you put yourself in those shoes?
- Basically: I think it's time for some sustained aspirational crazy creativity instead of the uncreative, tried-failed-and-stuck-at methods we've been going with.
 - Alright?! Cards on the table now!
- Expectations More quickly now...

Doctrine

- I'm gonna be so bold as to suggest that we have wooly theological thinking in two areas that keep us locked-in unimaginative outreach:
- *Number 1*: we confuse “coming to church”, with the miracle of coming to Christ.
- What do I mean by that?
 - I'm just saying: Listen to our prayers, how we talk about newcomers—I include myself—We talk as if it's a miracle of regeneration that anyone even comes to church—which isn't true! “God, only you can draw them...”
 - And I think we unconsciously, therefore, back-away from being too practical about “getting people to church”—'cause it's God's business! and we can't influence it.
 - It's almost like our criticisms of hyper-calvinists not bothering with evangelism.
 - And I just wanna confess: that's a confusion of categories.
 - Sure: we rely on God and God-alone for salvation. And, sure, he's sovereign in them coming to church, as in all things. And yes, there's a due humility in us, therefore.
 - But drawing a person to church: I'm not passive in that.
 - And I guess I wonder: If I saw it more as my work: might I feel that responsibility to reach new people with compelling invitations to church (or to that evangelistic course, or this playgroup at our church, or...).
- *Number 2*: we (pastors especially) we shield ourselves from “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5), by hiding behind our doctrine of church.
 - So: my assumption is that you—if you're a pastor, you are probably more-evangelist, than anyone else in your congregation—certainly better trained, and as-gifted-as-anyone in your congregation. And I'm convinced that the work of an evangelist falls squarely on our shoulders—as pastors—that's my assumption.
 - Now: how do we squirm out of that with our doctrine of church?
 - I think we do this weird thing: where we say...
 - ... On the one hand: church isn't *for* evangelism. Church is *for* church. The gathering of God's people isn't the means, it's the end. It's not a means *for* evangelism, or anything else, except the glory of God, and enjoyment of Him. And I think that's right.

- Consequently: we mustn't bend church to be all about evangelism and ideal for non-Christians. We don't reframe it into their language, their questions, their issues, their songs (or no songs), or whatever.
- On the other hand (we comfort ourselves): church is pretty good *at* evangelism—1 Corinthians 14: “when an unbeliever comes in among you”.
 - And that means, I—as pastor—claim church-time as evangelism-time.
 - I hear, “Do the work of an evangelist”, and I internally translate it to: “just do church really well”—which is handy, because I'm pretty flat-out doing just that.
- And I wanna say: I think that's a fudge.
 - Maybe if we had the 20 new people every week, it'd count for evangelism. But we don't at my church...
- Pastors: might we need to feel that burden a little more keenly.
- Apprentices: might you need to agitate for it in your portfolio of jobs.
- Elders: might you need to free your pastor up to do it?
- *Expectations. Doctrine...*

Programs

- My point here is simply that unless we meet a modicum, a minimum in terms of evangelistic programs, what we do do just won't be viable—so, we'll have to cancel that Intro God course 'cause only one person signed up.
 - In our circles: I think we're all fans of the long-term, low-key, relational evangelism—we must do that. But let me be blunt: that's not a strategy, that's just the faithful Christian life.
- But if we're going to run evangelistic programs—be they events, missions, courses, whatever—then that requires a certain minimum, otherwise you never build momentum within the congregation, or credibility among your target newcomers, or probably cred even among your your congregation.
- Let me just leave that hanging, because I think you'll see it in my proposal.

Target

- I reckon we're vague and fuzzy about who we're even trying to invite to church.
 - *Where are new people actually gonna come from?*
 - *Neighbours of my church building?—then how will they hear about us?*
 - *Young families in our general area?—then how will we invite them?*
 - *Students at uni?—then what's your plan*
- Yes: the gospel is for everyone.
 - But I'd argue that a vague target prevents us from making specific efforts to reach anyone. So: ironically, our conviction that the gospel is for everyone, leads us to invite (almost) no-one—at least in a compelling, winsome, thought-out way.

- This goes hand in hand with (fifth)...

Perspective

- When I ask you: “Tell me about your outreach at your church...?”
 - My hunch is: you've got an answer: there's your mum's group—which is good for pre-evangelism, at least in theory. Your Easter and Christmas services have good sermons. You've got that September mission.
- Here's my thing about Perspective: from our perspective—we're busy. This event. That sermon. This...
- But let me ask you to view it through the eyes of your target newcomer:
 - (I picture it like this:) A neighbour at my church: They they got a flyer for our Easter service back in 2014, but they didn't hear from us again until... well, actually next Easter 2016, because our Christmas flyers went to other houses. And we did social-media only for that evangelistic sermon in September, and they'd never hear about the mums group, because we rely on word of mouth there, and the Easter 2015 flyer person for their street never actually delivered those flyers, they quietly went into the recycling bin to assuage their guilt...
- And: I just don't think one flyer every two years is a credible invitation.
 - I can't reasonably assume that my church has brand identity in the eyes of that flyer-recipient. Why? Because of the flyers. Because we have basically no signage on Clarence St. Because the signage we have is old and has the wrong phone number on it anyway and doesn't even match our brand identity on anything else.
 - It's not really their fault when they don't take that flyer very seriously; or when they bin it with the Chemist Warehouse catalogue.
 - Put it this way: when's the last time you actually went to an event based on a flyer from a group you've never heard of?
 - I'd go to the Olliebollen festival because of a flyer. I'd go to the Taroona book fair thing because of a flyer...
- *Perspective, Target, and Programs*, then plug into... (sixth)...

Promotions

- Imagine for a moment that your church had a sustained promotions plan that thought about who was being invited, to what, how they'd be invited, how frequently they're being asked-along to anything (and the message that sends), and if they do come: what they're being invited to next.
 - We're starting to talk now about the relationship that we're cultivating with people whom we've never even met—and the opinions they form about us.
- Engineering that: means long-term. It means coordinated. It means that if you invest in flyers—as part of your plan—then you might see zero return for six iterations of mail-outs. But you're ok with that, because it's made that seventh flyer—about your Couples Workshop—a credible invitation in a way that it would never have been on its own.

Edginess

- Let me make one quick comment here: print may be dead, and Facebook may be so last decade. Instagram is OVER. Don't even talk to me about phone books, or

flyers, or A-Boards, or signs.

- But unless you've got a better idea, don't try to be so edgy and cool that you ignore obvious avenues—of print and location-based social media space, actual billboards, an actual market stall—unless you've got a better idea.
 - According to Facebook's first Q 2015 stats, Facebook had 936 million Daily Active users. Daily. 936 million. Of which, 270 million are in the Asia-Pacific region—I'm guessing some of those are in Howrah.

• Finally...

Competition

- In a sense, this flows from the perspective thing—but I don't think we're very good at articulating what it costs a person to come to our church.
 - I need to ask myself this: what do they have to give up?
 - Hint: other churches ain't the competition. The charos aren't the comp.
- To come to your church, I'd have to give up...
 - Getting one decent sleep-in in the week.
 - Taking a run with the girls.
 - That lazy late breakfast with the family, or the cafe with the girlfriend, visiting mum and dad for morning tea, catching up on the gardening, ironing shirts for the week ahead...
- Why do I raise this?
 - Basically: I wonder if we could cut people a bit of slack. I wonder if church would just feel way more doable if... say, we had amazing break-out spaces for casually enjoying a flat white, with babycinos for the kids
 - What would it cost us to just lower the cost for newcomers.
- And I guess I want to frame it that way, because I'm not interested in luring people with that stuff. But I just want to acknowledge: sleep ins are good. Unhurried time with the kids, or running with the girls, or whatever—those are good things. And they're likely the favourite things in those people's week. If I can—in some small way—take the edge off that cost: then why not?!

Questions and Comments? (5 mins)

- Pause for questions and comments... have I missed the mark? Should I have gone further? Things I've missed?

How we could (grow)... (10 mins)

- For this section, I'd just like to put in your hands what we're doing. And I'll just talk you through the structure of the 12 months ahead, and what I've included here.
 - Now: the context is: my session discuss this plan every single meeting. We look at what's next. We talk about what's just been.
 - I think we need to get better at whole-church ownership, and we're going to talk about this at our AGM.

- I guess what I'd like from you is:
 - #1: Am I practicing what I preach? Or have I conveniently fudged a few things myself?
 - #2: Does this spark any ideas for you in your context? I'd really like to hear them.
- (Hand out Coordinated Outreach Plan copies)

Preliminaries

- The only preliminary I want to draw your attention to is on the first page:
 - We've chosen a very specific target—two targets. (*Read it*).

The Plan

- From October to October.

Questions and Comments (5 mins)

- Stuff I've missed. Ideas for your context?

Bonus: Extra Thoughts for Renters (5 mins)

- Before I close: I had some thoughts for renters. Because I think there are some unique challenges for you. Can I hit you with those?
- Renters have a bunch of problems: you're invisible for most of the week, you need to differentiate yourself from your host (whether that's a church or a school or whatever), you don't have a physical presence (of the pastors) in the community you church amongst...
 - Basically, my advice is that you *identify* and *own* every single short-coming and actively overcome each one.
- Here goes:
 - **Target.** The temptation for renters is to have an especially vague target: if your target is "Hobart" or "Launceston", I'd say that's way too vague, unless you're implementing strategies that have those 100,000 people in mind. Like sky-writing with a plane, or tv, or radio, or very expensive Google ads.
 - Narrow your target. Pick your suburb, and be ok about that.
 - **Permanence.** I think it's a pitfall to say, "Well, we're renting, so we might move!"—as if that's a reason not to target the area directly around where you're meeting. Chances are, you'll be there for years, and "years" is the kinda timeframe you need to reach a people.
 - **Dependence on your Landlord.** Ask yourself: if we owned the building, what actual difference would it make to how we do outreach. Would we have the whopping billboard? Would we have pamphlets stuck to the front door? Would we have A-Boards chained to the street corner each day, and taken in at night? Would we use the carpark for a twice-yearly market?
 - I just want to say: you probably can do all of that stuff: there's just an extra layer of negotiation, cost, and compromise. If you're renting from a church, offer to buy them a massive exterior sign, on the proviso that you get one third of the surface area. If they have a church office, ask if they'd do the chained A-Board thing for you, just to scratch your back.

- **Hassle.** Renting adds a layer of hassle to every attempt to get a sign, or to install little pipes to anchor your little flags or whatever. My encouragement to pastors at this point is: that's what the chairman of your board/committee of management is for. We appoint wonderful people to these roles who have gospel-hearts and negotiating nous. So put them to work. My experience has been that they're delighted to be able to tackle something that has actual direct benefits for outsiders, rather than squabbling internally over how to name budget line-items. So don't cut them out; it could be the highlight of their year in the role to help with outreach.
- Final comments/questions?

PRAYER

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