



Introducing a Practical Theology of Episcopal Evangelism

For Episcopalians today, evangelism is front and center. At General Convention 2015, Presiding Bishop-Elect Michael Curry promised to serve as C.E.O.: the Chief Evangelism Officer. He shared a vision of a whole church freshly oriented toward the proclamation and embodiment of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we exist to follow Jesus and help the whole world to grow loving, liberating and life-giving relationships with God, with each other and with creation. Evangelism is one of the most important ministries in the Movement – this is where we focus on accompanying our neighbors and communities as we all develop more loving, liberating, life-giving relationships with God on the journey.

So what exactly is an Episcopal practice of evangelism? Scripture tells us it is rooted in the Greek word *evangélion*, meaning gospel, glad tidings or good news (see Mark 16:15). With the Great Commission, Jesus sent his followers to go make disciples everywhere, baptizing and teaching people to follow his commandments (Matthew 28:16-20). In the Baptismal Covenant, we promise to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” and “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself” (Book of Common Prayer, 305).

Here is a practical definition collectively crafted by members of the Presiding Bishop’s Evangelism Initiatives Team, the Task Force for Leveraging Social Media for Evangelism, and many more partners:



We seek, name and celebrate Jesus’ loving presence in the stories of all people – then invite everyone to MORE. #EpiscopalEvangelism

Note it’s the length of a tweet. We think evangelism is best practiced utilizing modes real people use to communicate. But there’s lots more to share and learn, so let’s unpack each word:

Episcopal Evangelism

We as a Church are starting to embrace the word “evangelism.” Episcopal evangelism is not some heavy-handed duty. It is not a tool, and not merely for use to get more people as converts, church members, or pledging units. At its heart, Episcopal evangelism is a spiritual practice. When we do it, we embody the very life and practice of Jesus in the world (active); and we are filled with the Spirit and formed ever more into the likeness of Christ (receptive). It’s a joyful sharing of what you know to be good news and deep truth, and a celebration of how you see God at work in others’ lives and in the world. It wells up from the experience of God’s love poured out for us and into us, so much love it can’t help but overflow from us in grateful story and celebration. . . .

Seek

As Episcopalians, we promise “to seek and serve Christ in all persons.” To actively listen for God present in others is a bold statement of faith. We dare to go out like sleuths, genuinely curious and assuming we will find the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that God has gone before us into all places and is at work in every life.

Name

Evangelism is the telling of God’s good news. It involves our words and all of our expressive powers. It can be so simple: “You know, I hear God working through you in your story of how you and your family handled that situation.” This is one of the great gifts of evangelism – announcing God’s goodness and presence in people’s lives, and holding up a mirror to let them know. If we do not name God as the one we see, people around us may never know.

Celebrate

When we seek and find Christ, we find ourselves encouraged, grateful, surprised and delighted, like the widow who finds her lost coin and goes out saying “Rejoice with me!” (Luke 15:8-10). Note, there is nothing naïve about this celebration. Ask people who have struggled for liberation, and they will tell you mature Christians celebrate every breath – not always by jumping up and down, but with a contagious surge that says “yes” to life and to God.

Jesus’ Loving Presence

We are Trinitarian Christians: the Father has created us in love, the Son has redeemed us in love, the Holy Spirit sustains us in love. Lots of us feel hesitant talking about Jesus, perhaps because we’re worried about negative stereotypes. We are Christians, patterning our lives after the one who was and is God among us, revealing the truest and fullest incarnation of the Holy ever to grace the earth. In our evangelism, we invite people to discover more of life with him. Without Jesus, it’s not evangelism.

Stories of All People

At the heart of our Christian faith is the Great Story, the collection of stories of God’s creating, redeeming work in scripture, especially in the story of Jesus. We are all part of this Great Story – all made in God’s image, all moving through a world shot through with God – but we need to grow our capacity to seek, name and celebrate God at work in our own lives. Practice telling the stories of God’s goodness in your life – journal them and practice with others. Then, ask people for their stories. It is an amazing dance when we welcome others’ stories, share our own and link it all to the Great Story.

Invite Everyone to MORE

Evangelism is more than conversing, being a friend or even listening. Celebrating the good news of Jesus’ loving presence inspires us toward something MORE. We’re not turning people into projects or objects. Simply invite someone to more dialogue (“Could we meet again?”), more reflection (scripture, books, poems, videos or movies) or more Christian community (worship, outreach, study group, link to others with mutual interests). It could be the invitation to see more of God at work in themselves, in us, in the world.

Episcopal evangelists are not selling Jesus or the church, nor are we in charge of whether anyone follows Jesus. That movement belongs to the Holy Spirit. Still, the more we’re in tune with the loving presence of Jesus, the more we’re experiencing the fullness of a loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, it wants to overflow. That overflow is evangelism.

¹Adapted by David Gortner and Stephanie Spellers from “Good News Everywhere: A Practical Theology of Evangelism and Social Media,” a white paper by Steve Pankey, Andy Doyle, David Gortner, Nick Knisely and Stephanie Spellers, members of Episcopal Church’s Task Force on Leveraging Social Media for Evangelism. This adapted version was published in the Episcopal Church Foundation’s Vestry Papers in May 2017.