

*Life and faith in rural Britain...*

# COUNTRYWAY



## Ethical Evangelism

If I had to choose just one cardinal virtue for ethical evangelism, it would be honesty.

At its simplest, ethical evangelism involves making sure that what you are saying and doing are consistent with what you believe. What do you and your church believe about being a Christian. Do the details matter? What difference do you think it makes? There is still a prevailing caricature of evangelists that often takes some effort to overcome, so be prepared to explain your motivation for sharing the good news of God's love. What difference do you think it makes? What difference does it make to you?

Be honest with the person you are talking to about your own faith and doubts. Be honest about your own religious experiences, whatever they may be. Be honest about the bits you struggle with, too. Don't give them 'the script' or try to second guess what the right answers might be, or why you think your minister would like to hear you say; have the confidence to trust that the story God has given you, in all its naked truth, is enough. Like the story of Jesus feeding thousands with the five loaves and two fish, all we have is all we can share, and when we offer that to God and to the world in all its simplicity, we can be astounded at how it is more than ample to feed all who are hungry.

Here are three specific ways in which honesty in evangelism is important...

### 1. Be honest about what an event will involve.

When you are planning an outreach event, think about what will attract people: what would you genuinely and enthusiastically invite your friends to? A community barbecue or a comedy night? And if you decide to have an explicitly evangelistic element to the event, don't ambush people with it.

Make it quite clear, for example, that the quiz night will also include the chance to hear the bishop as an after dinner speaker for 10 mins, that the barbecue will include community hymn singing, that the Halloween tour of the graves in the cemetery will include an explanation of the Christian view of life after death. Don't force people who weren't expecting it to sit through a testimony when that's not what they thought they were invited to.

### 2. Be honest about what you want.

Our evangelism must never treat other people as a means to an end. This can be really hard for clergy who feel constantly judged on numbers and attendance, but recruiting new members so that we look good as a growing church is not a noble reason to evangelise. We can't remove our less-noble motives, but we can take care not to let them drive us into theologically dodgy territory.

In particular, be careful to avoid the toxic combination of spiritual and financial abuse. We all know that one of the many mixed motivations we have to grow our churches is that we need more people to be giving to keep the doors open, the roof on and at least a very part-time minister employed. But we must never give the impression that financial giving will affect someone's salvation. God's grace is free and poured out without demanding anything in return; though God longs for our response of love, we don't need to prove ourselves to him.

If, however, you want enough people to come to church for the building to remain viable, there's no harm in being honest about that. How sad if it closed and people said, 'we'd have come if we'd known'?

If what you really want are Friends of the Church to increase your giving base, then be honest about that and consider starting a Friends group. You might then find you have a group of people who are happy to be 'flying buttresses', supporting the church from the outside. Don't despise them but welcome them, and free yourself to talk to others about your faith without the financial pressure. You may even find that the long-term relationships you build are a good basis for gentle conversations about faith in the future.

3. Be honest with yourselves as a church about your capacity for growth and what you can realistically offer. In small businesses periods of expansion and growth are the most dangerous time. Think carefully about how many new people you as a church realistically have the capacity to absorb, and be honest about the level of support you can offer. There's no point offering perfect pastoral care and a listening ear in your publicity, or holding out the promise of making loads of new friends, if the ten people at your church, including you, are up to the eyeballs with friends and pastoral care already.

With the best will in the world, if ten new people showed up craving meaningful friendships and significant pastoral care, could you actually deliver? You may need to train and develop new lay leaders first, or at least have identified people who can step up as and when needed. And be honest about the limits of what the church can provide, or you risk disappointing people and – at worst – inoculating them against Christian faith. If what you can realistically offer are simply quiet, contemplative services, just say so. You may attract the person who has avoided church for years because of the threat of being expected to join in loads of things but would love to come if that's all there is to it!

Be honest: with yourselves, with God, and with those you speak to.

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