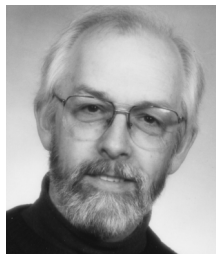


good idea!

A resource for evangelism & congregational development



Teaching the Gospel: The Challenge of Leading Evangelistic Courses

By John Bowen

Jesus' Great Commission, traditionally seen as the motivation for evangelism, strangely enough says nothing about evangelism.

What Jesus actually commands is three things—making disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to obey (Matthew 28:18-20). Of course, one could argue that those three together add up to a fair definition of evangelism. Yet how does one make disciples and bring them to baptism, so that they want to learn to obey Jesus?

The example of Jesus himself suggests that teaching is often the key to evangelism. Consider, after all, how often the words “evangelize” or (as it is often translated) “preach the Gospel” and “teach” occur together in the New Testament. Matthew’s Gospel, in particular, links the two, speaking of Jesus “*teaching* in their synagogues and *preaching the Gospel*” (4:23, 9:35, 11:1).

The Book of Acts follows suit, with five such references. Acts 5:19-20 is typical: “Every day they did not cease to *teach* and *preach* [literally ‘proclaim as good news’] Jesus as the Messiah.” And occasionally (as in the Great Commission), the verb “to teach” seems synonymous with evangelism: “An angel said . . . ‘Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.’ When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their *teaching*” (Acts 5:19-20).

Often evangelism is understood to be the challenge to turn and follow Jesus. Which, of course, is crucial. Yet if I do not know who this Jesus is, nor why I should turn from my present course, nor what it means to follow this strange man, then I need to be taught.

Until then, I cannot understand what the challenge means, let alone respond to it. And in the western world these days, increasingly that is the case: people do not know enough about Jesus and the Christian way to make a thoughtful response to him. Thus evangelism will often begin with teaching. So how is it to be done?

Jesus’ own teaching seems normally to have included:

- Some “lecturing”, as we might call it: the Sermon on the Mount would be the classic example.
- Lots of question and answer—and, just as often, question and counter-question—in other words, dialogue, around what he had said.
- Plenty of meals and parties, which formed the context (and sometimes the stimulus and even a subject) for discussions.
- A practical demonstration of the truth of his words, whether through his compassionate care for the needy, or through breaking bread with the marginalized. (I would argue that this was not just an illustration of his teaching, but part of the teaching itself.)

Since teaching is a cumulative experience, it is important to note also that Jesus spent three years with his disciples, and that by the time he left them, there were still many things they had not really understood.

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Teaching the Gospel: The Challenge of Leading Evangelistic Courses (continued)

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Teaching is a process that takes place over a period of time—a semester, a school year, three years . . . a lifetime. It is, by definition, not a quick fix. So the teacher needs to be patient, to repeat some lessons, to say the same things in a dozen different ways. Jesus does all of these.

I suspect one of the reasons for the phenomenal success of the Alpha course is that it makes use of some of these same teaching strategies. Consider the following. During an Alpha course:

- The teaching takes place in the context of a meal—the traditional (and of course liturgical) symbol of God’s kingdom.
- The video is followed by discussion with the same group each week, so that the content is processed in the context of growing relationships. As a result, people often “belong before they believe” (John Finney’s powerful phrase)—which then catalyzes the believing.
- The length of the course offers people plenty of time to consider what they are learning, to ask all their questions, to “count the cost,” and even to try putting into practice what they are hearing.

I realize that Alpha is not for everybody. People have theological and methodological qualms about it. But evangelistic teaching in some form or other should be a central and regular part of every parish’s program. As John Baycroft said to his clergy when he was Bishop of Ottawa, “You don’t *have* to use Alpha; but if you don’t, then you have to use something better!” If we are not intentionally teaching the faith to newcomers, we are probably not evangelizing at all.

In days gone by, confirmation classes, baptismal preparation courses, and even marriage preparation offered some kind of opportunity for clergy to teach the faith. And, of course, in many cases they still do. But there are thousands of people who are not in a space to be enquiring about baptism or confirmation or even marriage, but who are (as the phrase goes) “exploring their spirituality,” and who would respond readily to the right kind of invitation to the right kind of Christian course.

Various possibilities are in use around the world. Many congregations make effective use of videos in the same way that Alpha does. Harold Percy’s recently-released four-part series, “Christianity 101,” has quickly become popular across Canada (see page 8). Some churches use Rico Tice’s “Christianity Explored,” which is similar to Alpha but less charismatic, from All Souls, Langham Place, in London (England). “Seasons of Celebration” (also known as “Emmaus”) is not video-based, but offers a more liturgically grounded program which follows the church’s year. ViaMedia is a new eight part video series being promoted in the Episcopal Church in the US. And some parishes in the Diocese of Ontario have used my own eight-part video course, “Building Blocks.”

The advantages to a video course are that there is less preparation for the leader, the quality is always of the same standard, and viewers feel more free to question and criticize a speaker who is only a face on the screen than someone who is present in the room!

Yet there is much to be said for “home-grown” courses which do not depend on a video. Indeed, some research in the UK suggests that the numbers of people asking for baptism as a result of home-grown courses can be similar to those of (say) Alpha. Presumably the personal influence of the teacher, and the ability to gear the content to local interests and needs, are what make the difference.

This edition of *good idea!* looks at some of the ways the Gospel is being taught across Canada. Two people write about courses they have developed in their parishes; two working with youth talk about how they have “taught the Gospel” to young people. Maybe a video series is right for your context. Or maybe one of these first-person stories will catch your eye and suggest ideas for your situation.

The learners are out there, hungry to be taught. Effective evangelists are those who will provide the appropriate teaching and obey our Lord’s command to “make disciples.”

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good idea! is published twice a year by the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism. The Institute was established in 1991 to encourage and equip the church to engage in ministries of evangelism with confidence, joy and expectation.

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Teaching the Gospel in a Smaller Parish

By Tim Chesterton and Greg McMullin

Two clergy, one in St. John, New Brunswick, the other in Edmonton, Alberta, describe how they have written their own courses, making creative use of already existing materials, and adapting them to the local situation. The results have been profoundly encouraging.

How did you come up with this program?

Tim: Like many Anglican clergy, I spent years preparing parents for the baptism of their children in ineffective ways. I desperately wanted these parents to keep coming to church, and so I would hammer away at the solemn obligation they were making before God and his church. Looking back on this now, I wonder why it never occurred to me that this was not particularly compatible with my commitment to share the Good News of God's free gift of salvation, rather than the demands of the Law!

My practice was revolutionised in the mid-1990's when I first encountered Harold Percy's "Christian Basics" course. I quickly saw that the course would be very effective as a baptismal preparation tool: it made a lot more sense to proclaim the Gospel to people than to bludgeon them with the baptismal promises!

I also saw the potential of the course for many other people—the spiritually curious, new believers, and lifelong Anglicans who had never experienced a personal connection with God, not to mention long-time Christians who needed a refresher course. And so I began to adapt the course, adding in material from other sources, such as Nicky Gumbel, Rico Tice, John Bowen, the Emmaus program, and others.

Greg: *It's always exciting to see newcomers in the pews and to be approached by people seeking baptism, confirmation or marriage. The first question that always comes to my mind is, "How can we as a church provide these people with an opportunity to explore what it means to be a Christian?" And, secondly, "What are some of*

the basics they need to know if they 'sign up' to become disciples of Jesus?" For me, as a parish priest, these are the two most compelling concerns. Hence, after months of gathering materials and ideas, I drafted my own program.

Who is the course for?

Tim: We require all baptismal candidates (or parents of baptismal candidates) to attend it. But we also encourage newcomers, inquirers and long-time members to take the course.

Greg: *Although newcomers are encouraged to attend, the course is open to all—anyone wanting to investigate Christianity, or those wanting to revisit the basics of the Faith.*

How is the course structured?

Tim: In the past four years, "Christian Basics" has become a central feature of our parish life. We run the course twice a year, in the Fall and in Lent, and a follow-up course called "Growing and Living as a Christian" at least once a year. We are not a large congregation and so our courses tend to be small—six to eight participants sitting around a table together. This makes our presentations much more interactive than would be the case in a larger setting, and it encourages a deeper sense of community within the group.

Greg: *A typical New Beginnings evening is held on a Sunday. We set it up like this:*

7:00 p.m.	Meet and greet
7:15 p.m.	Presentation
8:00 p.m.	Small Group Discussion
8:30 p.m.	Wrap-up
8:45 p.m.	Home

Because much of the information presented builds upon previous presentations, we ask those who register to do their best to come each Sunday evening, so that they will get "the big picture".

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Finding a Story in Northern Alberta: the Youth Group

By Shaun O'Connor



Youth groups can be intimidating. Often they enjoy the social times but are bored by the requisite “lessons.” But there are exceptions to this rule.

It was a time for firsts. I was a first-time priest in a first-time parish with its first-time youth group, and I needed some ideas for evangelizing teenagers in the small, rural towns of Berwyn, Grimshaw and Peace River in northern Alberta. I reached into my seminary kit-bag and pulled out *Finding a Story to Live By*, one of the Dare Booklet series from the Institute of Evangelism. I had seen John Bowen give several of these talks to college and university students. The booklet covered five short chapters on seeing one’s life as part of a bigger story, identifying what is wrong in our world, appreciating how Jesus fits into all of this, learning in the ‘School of Jesus’, and taking the journey with God.

The chapters are rich in Christian imagery to which young people can relate. For instance, to illustrate the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, I showed a clip from the movie, *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?* starring Johnny Depp and Leonardo DiCaprio, which depicts a small-town mother taking her son’s shame onto herself so that he could go free. This culturally sensitive approach reminded me of a statement by the theologian Stanley Hauerwas, “What Christians need is not better arguments, but better metaphors.”

Our youth group met monthly and was made up of a variety of fifteen high school students, including academics and athletes, church-goers and non-church-goers. At each gathering we played games, ate, sang, and thought about a new chapter of *Finding a Story to Live By*. I followed the booklet

nearly word-for-word, using my own cue cards. Pictures, diagrams and videos were also aids. I found the best sessions were the ones which involved question-and-answer rather than straight lecture, since high school students seemed to be less accustomed to listening to 20-30 minute talks than are university students. The next time I use this series, I will try to simplify each session even more, as one seminary supervisor instructed me, by focussing on “one thing to know, one thing to feel, and one thing to do.”

Driving back from Peace River to Grimshaw with a van-load of kids after our third fulfilled evening of *Finding a Story to Live By*, I overheard one teenage boy ask another who had come for the first time, “So what did you think?” Trying to appear nonchalant, the other boy answered, “It was pathetic!” to which the first boy asked, “Are you coming next time?” The second boy quickly replied, “Oh yeah!” And he did. As he has faithfully continued to attend all our youth group events, his spiritual growth has been remarkable.

The Rev. Shaun O’Connor is Rector of the Parish of Berwyn-Grimshaw in the Diocese of Athabasca.

The Challenge of Confirmation Classes: Teaching the Faith to Teens



By Stephanie Douglas-Bowman

Confirmation classes are a traditional forum for teaching the Gospel. But they can also be a real headache. One priest explains how she has been exploring creative new ways for engaging teenagers with the beliefs and practices of Christianity.

Confirmation classes provide a great opportunity to challenge teens to wrestle with the basics of their faith, and to invite them into a deeper commitment to Christ.

Over the years, I have adapted for confirmation classes a book by Kevin Giles, called *Count Me In: A Confirmation Workbook for Young People* (Acorn Press, 1992). In some fifteen sessions, the course takes the teen through the basics of Christianity. The lessons range from credal topics (“The death which brings new life” and “The Holy Spirit”) to sources of authority (“The Bible” and “What on earth is the Church?”), to sacraments and Anglican distinctives, right down to Christian living. I have modified the content substantially to suit my own teaching style, and have added more interactive components such as video clips, dramas, group work, and art. The structure of the course, however, comes entirely from this book.

Perhaps as important as the program itself, however, have been the “extras” I keep in mind when working with the teens:

Commitment: From the very start, I make it clear to the teens that confirmation is a very adult decision. This is not about pleasing their parents or grandparents. If, at the end of having taken the course, they decide they do not feel ready to be confirmed, then I will back them in that decision.

Before the course begins, I write a letter to each teen outlining what the course is about, how long it lasts, what they can expect from me, and what I in turn expect from them. I have five basic expectations of the teens:

- 1) regular and punctual attendance in class;
- 2) regular participation in worship on

- Sundays and in Youth Group;
- 3) doing any prep work for class (usually about 1/2 hour per week);
- 4) respectful treatment of one another in class;
- 5) a willingness to ask questions and be open to God.

The teens must sign at the bottom, stating that they have read the letter and still want to participate in the class, or that they have read the letter, and do not want to participate at this time. (Since I usually already know the teens personally, this letter doesn’t come across quite as dictatorial as it sounds!)

Teens often come to us with very loose church connections. Adding participation in youth group as a requirement for confirmation has helped teens form friendships with other Christians—itsself a part of their learning about the life of faith.

Sunday morning worship is an obvious expectation. Interestingly, we sometimes see parents also becoming more regular in attendance because of the family habit developed over the 14-week program.

I try to meet with the teens individually at least once during the course, to learn more about them, and to ask and be asked questions. If I expect them to be committed to the program, then I want to show that I am equally committed to them.

Creativity: *Count Me In* offers some good ideas of ways to teach complex concepts to teens. Engaging teens in the material, and getting them to wrestle honestly with their questions—this is the greatest challenge of teaching confirmation classes. Again, I am constantly trying new things, to see what works and what doesn’t.

Affirmation: Throughout the course, I do my best to learn about each teenager, and am always on the lookout to see what gifts,

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Teaching the Gospel in a Smaller Parish (continued)

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What is the content of your introductory course?

Greg: *Our first course, “New Life in Christ,” consists of five parts:*

- 1) What in the world is going on? The hunger for something new. *There is something drastically wrong with the world—and with each of us. Is there a God who is for real and who is good who can help us?*
- 2) The weight of morality: Whose values anyway? *Here we look at films such as “Dead Poets Society” and “A Few Good Men” to observe people’s natural sense of right and wrong. Where does this quest for what’s right come from? Answer: we are made in the image of a God who is good.*
- 3) Divine Intervention: Myth or Miracle? *We talk about God’s self-revelation by exploring the identity of Jesus Christ—the Incarnation and the claims of Christ.*
- 4) What Matters to God?—Bridge-Building. *We know people matter to God because of the Cross. We watch the crucifixion as portrayed in the “Jesus” film and then explore the meaning of the Cross.*
- 5) Head Belief and Heart Faith. *People are challenged to consider where they would plot themselves on a “Spiritual Growth Graph”—either committed to Christ or still on the way. At the end, we invite those who are ready to turn from sin and trust Christ to do so.*

Tim: “Christian Basics” as we offer it has a four-part structure:

- 1) *Finding a God to Believe in, Finding a Story to Live By.* This is an overview of the Christian story as a play in six acts, and of our place in the story.
- 2) *Why Should I Consider Jesus?* This session focuses on Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and what they mean for us today.
- 3) *Making a Connection with God.* This

session summarises the Gospel as it deals with the Kingdom of God and reconciliation with God. It invites the response of faith, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The session ends with an opportunity for people to make a decision about the next step in their journey.

- 4) *Where is Jesus Leading Me?* This session introduces people to Christian disciplines and the challenges of Christian living.

What goes into your follow-up course?

Greg: *Our second five-week journey, “New Growth”, focuses on discipleship:*

- 1) *New Joy: What about worship? We look at what the Bible says worship ought to look like, and why public worship ought to be the priority of every Christian.*
- 2) *New Food: Why come to the Lord’s Table? We stress the importance of the Eucharist, underscoring the fact that it brings the Cross of Jesus even closer to the believer, and helps us grow in Christian character.*
- 3) *New Character - How can I become more like Jesus? This session is about issues of Christian living and lifestyle. We also explain the importance of daily prayer and Bible study, and how such spiritual disciplines help us not just “talk the talk” but “walk the walk.”*
- 4) *New Traditions: Who are the Anglicans? Here, without making things too “churchy,” we talk about the meaningful and unique traditions that every denominational family has, and how we do things in the Anglican branch of the family.*

- 5) *New Family: Where do I fit in at church? The focus here is on every member ministry, putting the right people in the right places for the right reasons. Here, in this final week, we present our vision for our local church.*

Tim: Our follow-up course, called “Growing and Living as a Christian,” lasts six weeks, and covers the topics of Prayer, the Bible, the

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Teaching the Gospel in a Smaller Parish (continued)

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Church and the sacraments, the Christian way of life, money in the life of a Christian, and “making a difference for God.”

What is the effect of these courses?

Tim: We have not seen hundreds of people added to St. Margaret’s because of “Christian Basics.” However, we have seen God touch people’s lives in very real ways. One man who had been a churchgoer for about three years commented, “This is the first small group Bible Study or spiritual learning course that I have taken. It has inspired me to go out and practice my faith. I never expected this!” A young woman bringing her child for baptism said, “Over the years I feel that I have lost my faith, and I have enjoyed starting the journey back, even though I have a long way to go.” A lifelong churchgoer said, “The most significant learning for me on this course was understanding, *finally*, why Jesus died on the Cross.” A teenage girl shared that “I’d like to have a closer relationship with God, and this course has helped me to realise that, and showed me ways to achieve it.”

However, my favourite story from “Christian Basics” concerns a woman in her forties who was preparing for her own baptism. During the third session, I had introduced the idea of a “response grid,” a line from zero to one

hundred, with fifty representing the point at which we accept that Jesus is the key to knowing God and so we put our lives in his hands and become his followers. In a private chat the week before her baptism, I asked this woman where she would place herself on the response grid. She replied, “Right now I’m at 49, and after Sunday I’ll be at 51!”

Greg: *New Beginnings has in fact been a “new beginning” for us as a parish. Having been Rector for less than a year, I am already seeing the fruits it has borne. I consider it to be both a thrilling privilege and an awesome responsibility to help people discover a new direction in life—the narrow path of following Jesus in newness of life. As a pastor, this is what makes it all worthwhile.*

The Rev. Greg McMullin is Rector of St. Mary & St. Bartholomew’s Church in Saint John, New Brunswick.

The Rev. Capt. Tim Chesterton is an Anglican priest and a member of the Church Army. He currently serves as Rector of St. Margaret’s Anglican Church in the city of Edmonton. Tim’s book, Starting at the Beginning: Christian Basics for Faith and Life, which includes material on how to teach both his courses, is to be published by the Anglican Book Centre this summer.

The Challenge of Confirmation Classes (continued)

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abilities, and shining characteristics they might have. On the day of their confirmation, I write each teen a brief note, suggesting ways in which I see that God has gifted them, and encouraging them to use those gifts in service to God and to others.

Involvement: When the teens go through confirmation class, I ask them to get involved in different ministries in the church: as readers or servers, as leaders in our kids’ programs, in Day Camp, in music, or wherever their gifts may lie. Most teens respond enthusiastically to requests for help; this in turn helps them feel more connected, and continues their own

learning about what it means to be a member of the body of Christ.

Ongoing contact: Finally, I try not to lose contact with teens once confirmation classes are over.

Confirmation need not be a graduation ceremony for teens out of church. Instead, I view it as a golden opportunity to encourage teens to embark on an ever-maturing faith journey.

The Rev. Stephanie Douglas-Bowman is Associate Priest at St. Timothy’s Anglican Church, in Scarborough ON.

Sources of Resources

From the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism:

The Wycliffe Booklets on Evangelism

This summer, the Institute of Evangelism will begin publishing a new series of booklets entitled The Wycliffe Booklets on Evangelism. The series is intended for clergy and lay leaders, and each booklet will offer help with a specific aspect of congregational evangelism. They will be short (20-25 pages), practical, and biblical.

The first three titles, due out in June, are:

- #1 Preaching the Church's Mission: Sermons Towards Self-Understanding by John Bowen
- #2 Just the Basics: Teaching Christian Faith to Beginners by Harold Percy and John Bowen
- #3 Becoming an Evangelizing Community: How LifeKeys Helps People Discover their Gifts by Judy Paulsen

Future booklets will deal with such topics as baptismal preparation, evangelistic youth ministry, preaching to those with no Christian memory, welcoming and integrating newcomers, parish missions, and making church accessible to seekers.

To pre-order any or all of the first three titles, contact Tracy at the college, by phone at (416) 946 3535 or by e-mail at wycliffe.college@utoronto.ca. They will be sent to you as soon as they are available. The booklets will also be available at Crux, the Wycliffe College bookstore.

The price is \$5 each, plus postage and handling.

You can also ask Tracy to put you on a list to receive each new title automatically as it is published.

From The Centre for Congregational Development:

"Your Church Can Thrive"

This is Harold Percy's third book, and (according to Institute of Evangelism staff) his best to date. In it, Harold gives guidance about reaching four groups of people: those already in the pews, those who visit the church, families, friends and colleagues of church members, and those in the neighbourhood around the church. Each chapter is packed with wisdom that is biblical, practical, and born of hard-won experience.

Copies may be ordered at a cost of \$17 plus P&H from Shirley at (905) 826 1901, or by e-mail from shirley@trinitystreetsville.org.

Christianity 101 Videos

These videos are now being used in over 200 churches across Canada. Here's what people are saying about them:

We just wrapped up last week and it was extremely well received. I am amazed at how Anglicans who have sat in the pews for many years are being so very nurtured by this elementary teaching of Christianity 101.
The Rev. Don Hamilton, Diocese of Fredericton

Christianity 101 was an accessible presentation of the core of our Christian faith. Harold Percy's easy manner and down-to-earth presentations were well received, and created an appetite for more learning.
The Rev. Dr. John Palmer, minister of Emmanuel United Church, Windsor ON

The videos may be ordered from Shirley at (905) 826 1901 or by e-mail from shirley@trinitystreetsville.org.
The cost is \$75 plus P&H.

Developing A Vital Congregation

Harold's one-day seminar "Developing A Vital Congregation" continues to draw enthusiastic reviews from participants. This seminar is intended for clergy and lay people who desire to see the ministry of their congregation thrive. The seminar runs from 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. and combines teaching sessions with opportunities for the participants to reflect on the ministry of their own congregations. The morning sessions focus on "Looking In", thinking about the things that need to be in place for a congregation to have a truly vital life and ministry; the afternoon sessions then focus on "Looking Out", thinking about those whom the congregation can reach. To book this seminar, or for more information, phone Diane at (905) 826 1901 or e-mail diane@trinitystreetsville.org