

ONE MORE TIME: WHY WE DO RESEARCH ON THE MINISTRY OF EVANGELISM

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Abstract

George Hunter has spent a lifetime studying the ministry of evangelism. Following his teenage conversion, he discovered that the ministry that helps pre-Christian people become new Christians was the most understudied of the Church's ministries. In this article, he reports on how he studied, from multiple perspectives, the Church's most essential (but most academically neglected) ministry.

Hunter gradually discovered at least a dozen assumptions about evangelism in Protestant folk-wisdom that are typically more counterproductive than productive. He interfaces with these assumptions to suggest alternative views that are more academically warranted and practically effective. He concludes by inviting a generation of younger scholars to invest their lives in studying "apostolic ministry."

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I have experienced, explored, observed, practiced, researched, thought, and reflected about Christian evangelism for most of a lifetime. I was raised in a nominal Christian home in Miami in the 1940s and 1950s. Our small family assumed that the civil religion in *Readers Digest* was Christianity. My mom and dad became Christians after I did.

Several Christian friends had talked with me about the faith. Although I attended churches and youth meetings occasionally, I had not yet discovered

faith. Then, in the summer of 1955, I attended the international Key Club convention in Detroit. For the program one evening, the actor Gregory Wolcott—bearded, sandaled, and robed in ancient Galilean attire—delivered the Sermon on the Mount in the original King James English!

Somewhere in Matthew 6, I sensed the presence of God. After the program, the Presence accompanied me to my hotel room. In the Gideon Bible next to the telephone, I somehow found the Sermon on the Mount. I fell asleep that night reading and rereading Matthew 5–7, still aware of the Presence.

Overnight, I became the most proactive seeker I have ever met. I found several people at the convention who were known to be Christians, and they recognized and encouraged what was happening within me.

When I returned home to Miami, I visited the four churches in our community. Three of the churches were not interested (or interesting). However, the Fulford Methodist Church welcomed me “home.” That fall and winter, they loved, taught, and coached me, and then my mom and dad, into the life of the kingdom. Within months, we reached some of my friends, some of their friends, and some of my parents’ friends.

Fulford church taught me three things that especially rooted me. First, the gospel is not just one thing. It is a gospel of forgiveness, justification, redemption, reconciliation, salvation, the kingdom, the new covenant, the new Israel, the new life, eternal life, and more. Second, I started studying the Scriptures and learning verses and passages by heart, and I discovered John Wesley and other reformers. Third, I learned that Fulford church’s desire to reach, welcome, and minister to pre-Christian people was normal Christianity. The gospel is, after all, entrusted to the church for the sake of people who are not yet followers of the Way.

When I experienced my second birth that autumn, like Charles Wesley of old, something came with it. When Charles Wesley and his brother John both experienced justification on the same night, May 24 in 1738, Charles also experienced the gift of hymn writing. He wrote his first hymn that night; he was to write over six thousand more.

I am no poet or hymn writer, but I received another gift. My mind, after seventeen years of underachievement, was switched to “on”; I became an intellectual. Within weeks, the people in my high school who were bound for Ivy League schools included me as a peer.

Since I was a new Christian, and was pulling and praying for friends to become followers of Christ, I wanted to know more about evangelism. That was when I made my first serious intellectual discovery. Virtually no one was engaged in serious thinking about Christian evangelism.

Furthermore, I could find no serious useful literature to help me make sense of how to reach new people. I found good literature for ministries like preaching, worship, Christian education, and pastoral care and counseling, but not much on evangelism—the one ministry for which the risen Lord had especially commissioned his church.

It took some digging to discover why the study of the Great Commission was the great omission. Virtually everyone assumed that they already understood it, but their assumptions varied. You schedule a revival. Or you bring in Billy Graham to lead a crusade. Or you preach on the radio. Or you pass out gospel tracts. Or you visit house-to-house, two-by-two. Or you present “the Roman Road.” Or you invite people to church.

Many Christians who “knew” how it is done added that they, however, were not wired to do “that sort of thing.” I learned that no denomination has escaped this escape. In 1975, at a Baptist gathering, I heard, “We all read a book by Truett; now we know how, but we still don’t do it!”

I was least impressed by the “architectural evangelism” of the 1950s. Thousands of churches put up new facilities, stating, “If you build it, they will come.”

I was most impressed by the Sunday evening service that was the last institutionalized outreach expression of many churches. The Sunday evening agenda was introductory Christianity; the service and the attire were casual, and the music was inspired. Seekers were invited to attend, to inquire, to pray, to commit. I received Christ one of those evenings in October of 1955.

Four decades later, in 1995, I was amused by the controversy then swirling around Willow Creek “seeker services.” Essentially, Willow Creek had only updated the old begin-where-they-are seeker-friendly Sunday evening service and rescheduled it for when the most seekers might come.

Gradually but persistently, I became a scholar wannabe in evangelization. I hoped to study evangelism in divinity school, but my seminary had no curriculum in the field; maybe because there was no such academic field. (The seminary reminded me of a medical school with no curriculum in obstetrics!)

However, I spent the summer of 1962 in ministry to the people at Muscle Beach in Southern California. That experience birthed my obsession with communicating the Christian gospel to “secular” people—roughly defined as the offspring of the secularization of the West, with no Christian memory, who often cannot tell you the name of the church their grandparents stayed away from, who have no idea what we Christians are talking about.

God rubbed my face in secularity that summer. Now with a special heart for secular people, I gradually discovered that any renaissance in “apostolic ministry” would be informed by Scripture and theology, AND by insights from wider learning. (St. Augustine was the Christian movement’s interdisciplinary pioneer. He “plundered the Egyptians for their gold” by adapting Cicero’s rhetorical theory to inform Christian preaching.)¹

¹ Augustine’s treatise on preaching, *De Doctrina Christiana*, was the most influential book on preaching for over a thousand years. It remains on anyone’s “top ten” list.

I did a PhD in Communication Studies at Northwestern, where I read sources in Greek and Roman classics, history, rhetorical theory, cultural anthropology, psychology, social psychology, semantics, social movement studies, and other stimulating literatures. In the process, I developed the confidence to tackle, and make sense of, about any literature. I wrote my dissertation on the communication of Christianity's message to secular populations in England.²

I became convinced that evangelism should and could be studied and taught as an academic subject. Providence brought me in contact with perhaps the first "mainline"³ seminary to reach a similar conclusion. I taught in a new chair of evangelism at the Perkins School of Theology at SMU. In those years, I added Sociology of Religion and Psychology of Religion to my reading list, and I discovered Donald McGavran and his Church Growth school of thought. Since McGavran was asking many of the same questions I was, and was many miles ahead of me, I learned all I could from him.⁴

I then led the evangelism staff for my denomination for six years. In those years, Michael Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church* came out; I resolved to study more of the history of evangelization.⁵ Meanwhile, I was also doing field research—interviewing converts, studying the rare Christian advocates that I could find who were engaging pre-Christian populations, and studying churches that were discipling new people in significant numbers.⁶

² I continued such research in the years that followed and eventually wrote, *How To Reach Secular People* (Abingdon, 1992). My later project, *Should We Change Our Game Plan? From Traditional or Contemporary to Missional and Strategic* (Abingdon, 2013), updated and advanced our thought about understanding secularity and reaching secular populations.

³ Southern and Southwestern Baptist seminaries, as well as Asbury and Fuller, were offering courses by this time—drawing mainly from Scripture and the history of their respective ecclesial traditions.

⁴ *The Contagious Congregation: Frontiers in Evangelism and Church Growth* (Abingdon, 1979) was my first attempt to express this lore in print. McGavran and I then co-authored, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Abingdon, 1980). Among my later books, perhaps *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Abingdon, 1987) and *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Abingdon, 2009) may be my most enduring contributions to this line of thought. *Should We Change Our Game Plan?* commended more generally a strategic perspective for a congregation's mission.

⁵ *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* and *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* (Abingdon, 2000, revised edition 2010) show how we can inform a more strategic and effective future by mining insights from the strategic geniuses of Christianity's past.

⁶ *How to Reach Secular People* and especially *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon, 1996) are rooted in this field research, and *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* (Abingdon, 2003) is informed by biblical, historical, and field research.

I then taught in the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Seminary, as founding dean for 18 years, then as distinguished professor for 10 years, before taking “early retirement” at age 73. In those years, I continued some of the prior studies, such as the history and the social movement studies, while also absorbing the growing literature in conversion theory, intercultural communication, and the leadership of organizations and movements.⁷

Since 1979, I have published over twenty books, but I cannot pretend to have achieved anything within light years of completion. The world changes, and new literatures proliferate. Since one cannot read everything, I learned to read the normative (and readable) sources. Even so, I never got to some literatures; I know next to nothing, for instance, out of the considerable Roman Catholic literature on evangelization.

For many years, I have known that this intellectual challenge is too much for any one lifetime persistent student. There is too much to read, too much field data to gather, and the communication of Christianity to secular populations and to different cultures is a complex challenge. In the 1970s, I founded The Academy for Evangelism and, in the 1980s (as Pete Wagner’s co-pilot), The American Society for Church Growth. Great Commission research and reflection became more of a team game.

In the face of the challenge’s complexity, however, most church leaders are more clueless than they know. They seem to rely only on denominational folk wisdom; they *assume* they already know how people become new Christians, and they navigate their church’s future even more from assumptions than convictions.

The Christian Movement cannot fulfill its calling in the next generation on folk wisdom alone. We must love the Lord of the harvest with our minds, as well as our hearts. Increasingly, the knowledge-leaders who pay the intellectual price will inform the church’s effective outreach.

In this space, I cannot do justice to what I think we have learned so far, but let me state a dozen evangelical assumptions that I have often discovered and what an informed response to each might be.

1. Many church leaders seem to assume a very limited goal for people. They want to recruit a new member now, who will then go to heaven in God’s good time. Actually, the Scriptures are clear that God calls lost people to enormously more than that. It is written, “Our eyes

⁷ *Leading and Managing a Growing Church* (Abingdon, 2000) applied management studies to church leadership. It turned out to be the worst titled of my books. It demonstrates how churches, when effectively led and managed, experience growth. (Many people saw the title and assumed that the book was only for church leaders whose church was already growing!) *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (Abingdon, 2011) is informed by some of the more useful perspectives from social movement studies.

have not seen, our ears have not heard, and our hearts have never imagined, all that God has in mind for those who love Him.”

2. Many mission leaders seem to assume that the goal is to establish a loving presence among a population and to indigenize (or contextualize) the faith’s expression for them. Actually, that should not be the goal but a necessary means. Presence and contextualization are prerequisites for reaching a people; the mission has only adapted enough to make the gospel a live option among them.
3. Many Christians assume that we reach and convert people by preaching, witnessing, or testifying “at” them. Actually, the ministry of multiple two-way conversations is much more reproductive than a one-time, one-way presentation, and, as they become open, we include God in the conversation.
4. Many Christians shrink from apostolic ministry because they perceive the responsibility as too much, like “It’s all up to us.” Actually, we are merely the Holy Spirit’s junior partners.
5. Other Christians assume that it is all up to God; we can only pray for lost people to be found. Actually, as Charles G. Finney rediscovered, we are called to discover and employ the “means” through which God works.
6. Still other Christians assume that evangelism is the pastor’s job. Actually, laypeople have many more contacts in the community and more credibility than the pastor does, and they are called to reach across their networks. Moreover, when the pastor does win people, they often do not really join the church. They join the pastor!
7. Many church leaders believe that their outreach should target the “winners” in the community and the people most like the people we already have. Actually, the targeting of a local society’s influencers is a proven strategy, but the focus on “people like us” can overlook some important history. The “Judaizers” within the early Christian movement thought that only culturally-Jewish people were fit candidates for becoming Christians; but Gentiles became disciples in Antioch, and Paul convinced the movement that this was God’s will. Again, by the third or fourth century, the church assumed that only people who were “civilized” (urban, Roman speaking, Roman cultured) people could become Christians. St. Martin of Tours, however, demonstrated that rural populations could be reached, and St. Patrick demonstrated that “barbarians” could be reached.⁸

Churches should, of course, find and invite the people who are like the church members, because we already know how to serve those people. However, a congregation in mission is called to look

⁸ My *Celtic Way of Evangelism* draws from this early history to reveal ways to reach the post-modern “new barbarians” that now populate Western societies.

past the winners and the people like us for no more profound reason than Christianity has demonstrated that it can reach any and all people groups, and Christian ministry mediates a Power than can transform “losers” into “winners.”

8. Most groups of Christian leaders assume that “they” will become Christians like “we” did. Actually, lost people who need to be found come from many different backgrounds, with different cultures, needs, issues, and points of contact, and they will usually become Christians in somewhat different ways.
9. Many Christian leaders assume that the church will reach new people when it finds and adopts the right evangelism program. I used to assume this; I was wrong. Actually, evangelism’s effectiveness substantially depends on how the church does almost everything—from parking, planning, programs, preaching, people skills, and pastoral care, to hospitality, catechesis, spiritual formation, liturgical life, music, small groups, lay ministries, and children’s, youth, and seniors ministries, and much more, as well as the local church’s involvement in wider concerns—like community relations, social justice, and world mission. At least a hundred known issues influence the church’s outreach, so one cannot really study and teach evangelism as a sequestered ministry.
10. Many church leaders who believe in evangelism assume that it is a priority but only one of a dozen or so equal priorities. Actually, reaching and discipling new people should be a church’s top priority, if for no other reason than expanding the ranks of committed disciples is the only way to expand and multiply the many ministries that the church is called to fulfill.
11. Many Christians believe that reaching pre-Christian people is very important and ought to be done, but the church must first become “revived,” “renewed,” “healthy,” or “revitalized,” and once we are renewed, we will reach out. Actually, there is a kernel of reality in this view; no one wants to put a live chick under a dead hen.

However, the policy overlooks four realities: a) God has not left himself without witness in this church, some people are experiencing grace, and there is already more health in the church than some pagans are used to. b) Within the “renew first” paradigm, the church never *feels* renewed enough to launch into outreach. c) While the church waits to reach out and invite, membership strength declines as it loses five to seven percent of its members each year to death, transfer, and reversion. d) More renewal comes to churches as a byproduct of new grace-experiencing converts entering the church’s ranks than from any (or all?) of the renewal programs.

12. Many Christian leaders assume another delay policy—that when people confess faith, then and only then should we welcome them

into the fellowship (“believing before belonging”). Actually, the forces of secularity and evil do not stack our fallen world on the side of many people finding saving faith. More and more people have to experience vital Christian fellowship before they can believe (“belonging before believing”). For most people, the Christian faith is even more caught than taught.

In summary, in a conversation in 1977, Donald McGavran asked the question that drives our research agenda: “We know how people *ought* to become Christians, but how do they *really* become Christians?”

Some of us, but not nearly enough of us, have discovered the imperative to claim, study, and teach evangelization as a serious academic field, with all of the objectivity and rigor of any other academic field. I have enough experience in this project to predict several experiences for anyone who takes it on.

First, it will take longer than you thought it would. You will be learning your whole career. Your job will always be interesting, energizing, and inspiring, but never finished.

Second, evangelism in the college or theological academy often experiences a “respect” deficit. Some professors in the more traditional disciplines, like theology or homiletics, may smugly claim superiority!⁹ Oh, and no matter how hard you work at the craft of writing in evangelization’s service, do not expect a Nobel Prize for literature!

Third, in this field, as in others, one’s commitment to academic openness and objectivity can come with social costs. As one studies Scripture, history, or studies in communication, conversion, or catechesis, for example, one may discover something that does not ratify the folk wisdom of one’s church tradition.

Consider one example. In the 1980s, Win Arn researched the then-widespread assumption that Billy Graham crusades increase the membership rolls in a crusade city’s churches. His post-crusade studies in several cities revealed that church membership growth from crusades was statistically negligible. His report was not popularly received in some quarters. Arn’s writing and teaching were collegial and diplomatic, not at all polemical or adversarial. In time, more church leaders became open to more effective ways to help people become disciples of Christ and responsible members of his church.

Fourth, do not expect evangelical folk wisdom to go away. Our challenge is analogous to the one that obstetricians face. A professor of obstetrics informs me that his field’s biggest challenge is “folk obstetrics”—most

⁹ That is one reason why I started referring to my field as the study of “Apostolic Ministry.” On several occasions, I suggested to stuffy colleagues, “You prepare chaplains; I prepare apostles!” (I do not commend the term as a mere ploy, however. “Apostolic Ministry” may become the field’s primary name.)

expectant mothers are more likely to take their grandmother's advice than their doctor's.

Our inherited denominational folk wisdom can be so entrenched that very few church leaders are likely to accept a much better idea the first time they are exposed to it. That is why Lyle Schaller, who knew more about churches than anyone else who ever lived, featured many of the same strategic insights in book after book.

Actually, we now face a second challenge in our people's collective folk wisdom. Our post-modern people often have little interest in their tradition's wisdom; they get to redefine issues to suit themselves, and, in our society, these people inhabit the entire ideological spectrum. The shifting meanings that people attach to marriage, sexuality, and the United States' constitution's second and third amendments, are a few of many examples.

Do not assume that this post-modern sense of entitlement to redefine issues has not infiltrated our churches. We have all experienced it. How many times, for instance, have you attended a group Bible study where the leader asked, "What does this text mean to YOU?" and that was ALL that the group wanted to talk about?

Generally, however, people do not usually reach important conclusions by themselves. As people converse together in their clans, tribes, peer groups, and subcultures, they define "reality" together. When the group agrees on something, a sense of infallibility rather than humility is more likely to be attached to their conclusion.

As we recover and advance the strategic lore that can inform the church's outreach, the stakes are enormous. In the generation following McGavran's contribution, and the impact from McGavran's and Ralph Winter's theories in the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, several thousand new people groups were reached, and at least a hundred million people became new Christians.

As the gains of that era are forgotten, however, or dismissed with a wave of the hand, or eclipsed by whatever is new and trendy, the need and the opportunity for academic research and influence in evangelization's service is greater than ever.

About the Author

George Hunter is Dean and Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, of Asbury Theological Seminary's School of World Mission and Evangelism. He has published over twenty books related to Christian Evangelization—including How To Reach Secular People, To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit, Church For the Unchurched, The Celtic Way of Evangelism, Radical Outreach, The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation, The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement, and Should We Change Our Game Plan? Abingdon Press will publish GO: The Church's Main Purpose in 2017. He hopes to publish a "Reader's Digest" primer that will summarize many of the insights of a lifetime of research, reflection, and ministry.