

Downing Place United Reformed Church and Evangelism

*After careful consideration by the Evangelism and Service Group,
and the Elders' Meeting,
they have agreed this statement of their understanding of Evangelism,
and of their commitment to it as part of the congregation's purpose.*

It is in the first person singular because it began as an individual reflection by Nigel Uden.

In a sense, it reflects a journey upon which many of us have been going, and our sense was that its personal nature might assist others in their personal consideration of the topic.

‘At the most profound level, Christians talk about faith because it is a truly human act to want to tell the truth.’

Thomas G. Long in *Testimony* (2004) (p 5)

1. Evangelism is a word I have come to value as I matured. Even so, it isn't a word that I use all the time. Evangelism, though, is fundamental to the church's being. It is not the totality of our life. Worship, service, caring and learning are other intrinsic elements, too. But just as the church is incomplete without any one of those four, so it is incomplete without a commitment to evangelism.
2. Evangelism is an activity for those who believe that in the risen Jesus Christ, God is alive, God is with us and God is for us, through all time and eternity. That is the truth of which we seek to speak as the Church. We do so in order that people might find in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the answer to their needs and desires and searching, and having unearthed that answer in the triune God, might find ways into worshipping God. Enabling the discovery of the very presence of God intruding into the midst of ordinary life is one way of expressing the purpose and fruit of evangelism.
3. In his 1986 book, *Risen Today*, the former General Secretary of the United Reformed Church, Bernard Thorogood, suggests that ‘of all the means of meeting Jesus, it is people who are his highway. Since God came to us in a person it is a proper interpretation for us to say that God is personal and is speaking to us most of all in people.’ (p18) People vary, though, and so it is that our approaches to evangelism are widely diverse.
4. Labelling one another is rarely of value, and least of all in the church. Attempts to sum up a person's theology as *evangelical*, *liberal* or *middle of the road* (to cite but a few of the options) too easily descend into assumption and misunderstanding, into judgement and division. Evangelism, however, is not a label. It is a vocation; it's part of the Church's purpose. Although the word does not appear in the New Testament, terms from which it is derived do, and they are related to ideas of ‘good news’ and its messengers. Were labels to be useful, I would eschew evangelical as a description of myself, because of its associations with a particular sort of social, moral and cultural mind-set that I struggle to own. I believe profoundly, however, in evangelism – it is vital and central to the church's task to be a thoughtful yet passionate messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ, of telling the truth. Even if we do not all feel called to be evangelists, oughtn't we play our part in ensuring that it is understood and supported as central to our identity?
5. As Downing Place Church continues to evolve an understanding of what should characterise its life and work, four writings prompt me to urge this encompassing of evangelism alongside other priorities like education, inclusivity and openness, pastoral care, spirituality, service in the community and worship. Three are Biblical.
 - a. Matthew 28 narrates the risen Christ commissioning the church to ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.’ (28.19-20) That's evangelism.
 - b. The first Epistle of Peter urges its readers, ‘Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.’ (3.15) That's evangelism.
 - c. And, with a logic that I find at once both relentless and challenging, Paul asks the Romans, ‘how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom

they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?' (10.14-15) That's evangelism. Moreover, it is not just to be aimed at people 'like us'. As Downing Place Church said in its application for a Special Category Ministry Pioneer Post, 'we cannot simply be concerned with evangelism which seeks to bring people into *our* cultural world; we need to enable forms of the life of the Church and its worship to emerge that allow those immersed in cultures other than our own to develop a living, worshipping faith.'

- d. And the fourth is from Stanley Hauerwas, the American ethics teacher. In *Hannah's Child: a theologian's memoir*, he asserts that the theologian's task is to help the church understand what God offers it in Jesus Christ. (p34) For me, its corollary is that the church's task is to help the world understand what God offers it in Jesus Christ. It is not about hectoring, or proselytising, nor about colliding insensitively with those of other convictions, but about enabling people to be clear what we receive in Jesus as 'the gift of God's very self to the world'. That's evangelism.
6. Evangelism, of course, is not a 'one size fits all' activity. There are many styles that wouldn't authentically reflect the ethos of Downing Place Church. Door to door visitation, street corner soap box oratory and altar calls are all activities by which non-evangelicals might carelessly characterise those who are. They are not things to which I feel called, though I thank God for many who do, because they communicate with people who would rarely listen to me. Nevertheless, leaving such things to others should not release us as a church from the call to be messengers of the good news in a way that is true to our heritage, our understanding and our way of being the Church.
 7. Whilst not being an exclusive list, here are several examples of how Downing Place Church, as a congregation and its members as individuals, might be enabled to offer an evangelism that enables those with ears to hear, to believe, to worship and to serve.
 - a. First, life-long study. Even when we are part of the Church, there is much to learn. Discipleship is not so much a one-off decision as a lifestyle, within which many value the opportunity to keep on discovering. If Anselm is right, that theology is 'faith seeking understanding', then that seeking legitimately continues all our days. How will Downing Place Church provide chances for life-long learning?
 - b. Secondly, the Church is true to its calling when people who are not part of it but have faith-related questions can feel welcome to enquire. How can Downing Place Church evolve a culture of safe enquiry, both for those within its walls and for those who knock on its door?
 - c. Thirdly, preaching has its place as a vehicle for evangelism. Alongside exposition of the text and application of its lessons to life in today's world, preachers are conveyors of the message that hearers might believe.
 - d. Fourthly, many of us find ourselves faced with chance encounters by the workplace water cooler, during the village coffee morning, when we are patrolling with Street Pastors, or while we are volunteering with one of the charities we support. From time to time, faith arises as a topic that interests the sceptic or perplexes the struggling. Such moments are normally opportunities for conversation rather than conversion, but even so, how easily Christians feel out of their depth when put on that spot. In part, that is because few of us have a neatly worked out theology. If we wait until we do, would any of us ever speak of our faith? But the very act of talking about Christian things is how we grow in understanding ourselves – 'trying to put our faith into words is a part of discovering what we know about God, believe about God and trust about God', says Thomas Long. (Testimony p 6) In what ways might Downing Place Church develop its members' confidence to give an account of their Christian hope, to share the loaves and fishes of their Christian life, as and when the occasion arises?
 - e. Fifthly, I am persuaded that everything we do as a Church ought to arise out of theological reasoning and conviction. We are not a branch of social services, though we may complement what they offer. Rather, we are servants of God's mission, and another aspect of evangelism is to help us understand

how our mission motivation emerges from the commitment to ‘participate in the movement of God’s love towards people, since God is a fountain of sending love’ (David Bosch *Transforming Mission* p 390). How does Downing Place Church equip its members both to understand and to articulate theologically what we are doing with our premises, and in the city?

- f. Sixthly, Downing Place Church has never had a vision confined to its own membership. There is an essential outward facing that on the one hand defines our desire to be ‘a community of communities’ focussed upon what we are calling the Hub, and on the other inspires the initiative for a pioneer minister. Even as these are rooted in a desire faithfully to serve God’s mission within the church building and beyond it in the city, is it not basic to their purpose that they can help people to find that God has found them in Jesus Christ? That does not mean that everything everyone says is about God, but where it is appropriate, how do we ensure that at least some of us are able to engage appropriately?
- g. And finally, for me a commitment to evangelism is an expression of pastoral care. It is born of the desire for others, through Christ, to find light in the shadows, to find faith, hope and love for this life, and for all that’s beyond it. Moreover, when all else is finished, we will die, every one of us. How does Downing Place Church proclaim good news that sustains us through this life, and outlives it, so that the church’s associates are ready for death, able to say with Simeon, ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace’? (Luke 2.29-32)
8. None of this is definitive. Our understanding of evangelism is surely an ongoing, an evolving discussion. But the foregoing is the result of an irresistible sense that Downing Place Church will miss a trick if it does not embrace evangelism as part of its *raison d’être*. Conversely, if it does, it will be faithful to its calling so that even though the Church in these islands is ‘on the edge’ of contemporary society, it will still be alive and life-giving in Christ, with Christ and for Christ.

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on behalf of the Elders’ Meeting

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