

Weaving the Threads of Evangelism Matters
Closing Plenary with Frank Logue and Alex Montes-Vela

Alex and I were talking on the way to our hotel last night and he told me about meeting someone here he only knew through Instagram and the person told him how great it is to be in a place where you don't have to explain yourself. That really resonates with me. We have spent this day and a half immersed in the love of God together with Episcopalians who want to share the joy of Jesus with others in a way that is both winsome and humble.

In recent years, we have heard "The church isn't dying. We are killing it." And yet in this time and in this place we have heard that Anglicans are not allergic to Evangelism and we need not take Excedrin before saying the word. This is a call to go back to who we really are. Instead of saying "The 'E' word", we can claim Episcopal Evangelism not as an oxymoron. Evangelism is not about growing the church, but sharing the love we have experienced with a hurting world.

And as we prepare to go back out into the world renewed by the power of the Spirit, Alex and I want to first remind you of some of what we have heard in our plenary sessions and then to challenge you to consider how you will take this conference home with you.

Our Canon for Evangelism and Reconciliation, Stephanie Spellers, let us all know as we began yesterday saying we are The Jesus Movement: We are following Jesus and growing loving, liberating and life giving relationships with God, with each other, and with creation, alleluia! This is not a program, she reminded us, but a way of life.

Beginning a theme that has threaded through our time together, Bishop George Sumner, reminded us that sharing the Good News is not about church growth. He said we might well in our Evangelism welcome people into our church, but what we are really about is getting people to join King Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Ride on King Jesus.

In our opening Panel Discussion Mary Parmer began a second thread woven through this conference saying Evangelism is helping people fall in love with Jesus. Carrie Headington said Evangelism is an invitation to a feast that is out of this world. Marcus Halley told us that the picture of evangelism is the cross, the nexus of God and man where we see those things that were cast down are being raised up.

Alberto Cutie said many in society have given up on Jesus without having even been introduced because the people they do hear talking about Jesus are scary freaks. So, our biggest challenge as church is what will we offer to help people want to connect with this Jesus we know and love?

Marcus Halley told us that in a society filled with fear and divisiveness, we need to trust in abundance; we have enough to do what God is asking us to do. We need to overflow into our world letting people know that you are always welcome at this table, because there is always enough.

Mary Parmer quoted no less an authority than Wikipedia in a way I found moving as the entry on Evangelism says, “The New Testament urges believers to speak the Gospel clearly, fearlessly, graciously, and respectfully whenever an opportunity presents itself.”

Then when the panel discussion opened up to the nave, we were given eyes to see the larger vision with a perspective from the Dominican Republic about how this a moment for the whole world and how much this work matters. Evangelism is work for the whole church toward the whole world. A participant from Mexico said that evangelism is walking with sisters and brothers and finding out that God has arrived first and then just being present.

We started to trend on Twitter with #evangelism16 as the panel continued. Carrie said, “We need people gossiping the Gospel.” Alberto said, “Sheep make sheep. Shepherd do not make sheep. This is a biological fact.” He was reminding us that work of making sheep is not for the clergy alone or even primarily. Marcus Halley said we need a church where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable.

Then as we told in tweet length answers of the hope that is in us, from the nave we heard, “My hope is that the world becomes on fire for Jesus. I would not have a life if not for Jesus and so many other people are broken and need Jesus in order to have life.”

After lunch Bishop Curry did not preach a sermon. No he was clear it wasn’t a sermon right before he launched into a great sermon. He said that we may be taking part in a re-evangelization of the western world. Taking his text for what was definitely not a sermon, he chose II Corinthians 5 beginning at the 14th verse: saying that the “Love of Christ Urges is on”... “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

Bishop Curry said, “Evangelism is about going home and helping each other find our way home.” We got the people and the brain power, he said, and we are working on the heart power. Then he opened up a real challenge.

What if we became Episcopalians without borders? My mind was blown. We could use the money from closing churches to start new ones as we steward the money entrusted to us even across diocesan boundaries. What if every person being preparing for ordained ministry learned Evangelism as we have learned Clinical Pastoral Education? We would change the culture of the church and would change the world.

Bishop Curry added, “I have no illusion of vast numbers of Episcopalians going out two by two with *Forward Day by Day* and *The Living Church* under their arms. But we have Episcopalians on Facebook. I know, I have seen your cats and your dogs!” To this I say, I have seen your cats and your dogs, but have your friends seen Jesus through your posts. Bishop Curry said, “This may be the new Roman highway. Facebook may be the way to help our brothers and sisters to find their way home to God and to each other.”

Then our Presiding Bisop talked movingly about helping someone find his way home. He met with a drug dealer who he came to know through his parish in Baltimore engaged in its community. Over time they shared stories and it became clear that this man who wanted out really wanted to know more than just to know about Jesus intellectually. He wanted to know Jesus. Eventually, the man wanted to be baptized. A small community gathered. Bishop Curry said that he never heard the service of baptism in that way. “When that man renounced Satan and the powers that rebel against God, he took his life in his hands.” You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. “He was out. He was free. Jesus set him free. That is the movement we are a part of and that is what is what evangelism is about, a love so profound it can call us home and set us free.”

Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon spoke of the two legs of evangelism as proclamation and mission. Mission flows from first coming to experience the power of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Then the Archbishop took up the title of our Presiding Bishop as Chief Evangelism Officer and said that if we really want to have a movement, we need to add to this by getting each bishop to be the Chief evangelism officer of his or her diocese, and then each priest to be the chief evangelism officer of his or her parish, and then by getting each individual Christian to be the chief evangelism officer of his or her family. Then we would have a movement.

During the Eucharist, Bishop Curry took the Great Commision to go to all the world and make disciples and connected this to the Great Commandment “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”

He gave us a song to sing “Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.” And I don’t know about you, but I have felt my heart revived in our time together. Bishop Curry then gave us a way of Episcopal Evangelism from the old spiritual, “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, ‘He died for all.’”

Baptism is about being immersed in the life of the Trinity, which is a life of love. In sharing this love we see that the Jesus Movement is not about bigger churches; it’s about a better world. This connection to telling the love of Jesus means, “Evangelism isn’t about Christian imperialism. It’s about saturating the world in God’s love.”

This morning after Morning Prayer, we gathered in Plenary once more and Canon Stephanie Spellers asked “Why do we need a conference to proclaim that Evangelism Matters?” Proclaiming evangelism is counter-cultural to the Episcopal Church. She then noted how Episcopalians have shied away from this work and asked us to consider why. And shouting out the answers, participants said that we have a fear of rejection, a fear of looking tacky. Hurtful things have been done in the name of evangelism and people think this is for the clergy or that you have to be especially gifted in Evangelism.

Stephanie said that what we need to get out there and tell a different kind of story. We can begin this by noticing what God has done in our lives, seeing what God is doing in the lives of others and then letting people know how we see Christ in them.

Then she led us through cardboard testimonials. I don't know about you, but I saw how readily we could identify the pain, the hurt, the loss in our lives. My partner in the exercise and I quickly got real about some deep hurts and then the great joy we found in Jesus. I heard the level of energy go up in the room as we all shared our cardboard testimonials. It turns out evangelism wasn't as difficult as we thought. When you see the pain and the joy on inverse sides of those signs, you see that we are less interested in evangelism because it will get people to heaven one day as wonderful as that is. We share the joy of Jesus to get people out of the hell they are living in right now.

This work of evangelism is embedded within the baptismal covenant where the baptismal candidate, or his or her parents and godparents on behalf of a child, are asked, "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" The answer is, "I will with God's help."

We know that this work is not about growing our churches. Evangelism is about falling in love with Jesus and then sharing that love as naturally as we recommend a restaurant, book, or movie. Then when we really listen to others and when nudged by the Holy Spirit humbly and gently proclaim the difference knowing our triune God has made in your life.

What I have heard is that this evangelism is a work of the Holy Spirit in which we get to participate. I have no fear that Episcopalians will hear this message and go out handing out Forward Movement pamphlets in front of the 7-11 or that you will get so inspired by the Good News of God in Christ that you will beat people up with Bible passages to prod them toward heaven. That is not going to happen. Fear not.

My hope is that we will really hear the word from our brother in Christ, Archbishop Josiah who said that if we really want this to be a movement, we have to move beyond our Presiding Bishop as the Chief Evangelism Officer. As much as I love and admire Bishop Curry, he is not Jesus and we need to not leave him alone to the work of lighting a fire across our church and then the world.

What excites me most about this day and a half is the passion I have heard, the joy in this gathering, and the hope of lives transformed by the loving, liberating, and life-giving power of Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen. The bishops among us need to go proclaim they are now chief evangelism officer of their diocese. The Rectors and Vicars need to proclaim that you are now chief evangelism officers in their parish. And all the baptized need to become chief evangelism officers in their families. That, my friends, is a movement. And that movement begins with changed behaviors and concrete next steps. I want to turn this closing time over to my friend and fellow church planter, Alex Montes-Vela who will guide you in making a small, practical next step that you will take in response to this time together.