**Contemplative Evangelism: A Proposal for Outreach in the 21st Century**

The ministry of evangelism is all about inviting newcomers into the church, into faith, and into a life-transforming relationship with Jesus. Indeed evangelism is the very lifeblood of the church.[[1]](#footnote-1) Without the ministry of evangelism, the church dies slowly. And the mainline church, which includes the UCC, has been in steady decline now for over 50 years.[[2]](#footnote-2) But the problem is that we scarcely engage in evangelism any more. In fact, we are embarrassed by word evangelism. The whole idea of evangelism has become toxic for us in the church, and I might add, it is also toxic for those outside the church who view evangelism (with good reason as it is often practiced) as coercive, manipulative and exclusionary. Many have suggested that we cease using the word evangelism at all anymore and instead talk about outreach, invitation, growing the church, sharing faith stories, etc.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But whatever we name it, such a form of ministry is part of our DNA as followers of Jesus. As Mark says, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mk 1:14-15).[[4]](#footnote-4) And Matthew reminds us at the end of his Gospel as he shares the final words of Jesus to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing 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. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Surely there are ways to fulfill this commission with integrity and love so I want to suggest one option by which we might engage in evangelism in the 21st century; a way that focuses on spirituality. I call this Contemplative Evangelism.

Here is my proposal: to engage in evangelism in this postmodern world in ways that are productive, authentic and have integrity what we need to do is create options for postmodern people to explore spirituality so as to encounter God in life-changing ways. (One of the characteristics of postmodern people is their interest in the spiritual).

A definition: *Contemplative Evangelism is all about creating safe spaces and creative places where the spiritually curious can explore their own spiritual pilgrimages in the context of a hospitable, loving, interpretative community of living faith.*

Let me unpack this definition.

• *A Safe Space*: Postmoderns are often not interested in the church. In fact the church is seen (wrongly I think) as a spooky place inhabited by judgmental people with manipulative leaders. So, we often have to use more neutral spaces than church buildings, such as conference centers, schools, retreats, homes, etc. to do contemplative outreach. These are places where people feel comfortable. To be invited to attend a weekend retreat with a friend held at a monastery is viewed by many spiritually inclined people as a welcome invitation.

• *A Creative Place*: These spaces need to be filled with inputs of all sorts that spark spiritual inquiry such as books, art, music, and information from various sources such as lectures, seminars, liturgies, small groups, and abundant conversation.

• *The Spiritually Curious*: The focus needs to on the many individuals who claim to be spiritual but not religious. Such folk are engaged in a culture-wide conversation about spirituality which is often portrayed in contemporary films, TV, music, and art. Such events are not about those who sponsor them but about those invited to attend them.

• *Spiritual Pilgrimage*: The goal of contemplative evangelism is to explore our spiritual pilgrimages together. This is possible because we are all on a spiritual pilgrimage whether we know it or not since this is how God has created us. In sharing stories of pilgrimage we learn about God from one another.

• *A* *hospitable community:* The church is good at hospitality but we need to be intentional about inviting those outside our walls to share our hospitality. Sharing good food and congenial conversation has long been a hallmark of our hospitality.

• *A loving community*: No mystery here. The Great Commandments calls upon us to love God and love others. This is what following the Way of Jesus is all about. Those engaged in contemplative evangelism need to be characterized by Agape-love.

• *An* *interpretive community*: Our Christian world view enables us to help others to understand how to reach out to God, who God is, what it means to notice God, and what their experiences of Transcendence are all about.

• *A* *community of living faith*: Faith is not just taught; it is caught as it is modeled by others.

Contemplative Evangelism takes many forms. My favorite way of such outreach is via half-day *retreats*. Gather together a group of interested people from both inside and outside the church to meet from 9:00-1:00 on a Saturday morning and explore together a topic of spirituality. I recently did such a retreat on the theme of *Noticing God* in which we looked at various ways in which God has met men and women down through history. This included not just short lectures but personal spiritual exercises and small group conversation. Other themes I have explored include Bible study of a powerful passage in which the text is examined first with our minds (inductive Bible study) and then with our hearts (*lectio divina*). In another retreat I explored the writings of the mystic Julian of Norwich and how she could assert that “all shall be well” even though she lived in a world of plague and endless war.

*Seminars* are useful too. I did a 5-week Lenten series on spiritual pioneers and their practices that was preceded by a dinner together each week. It is in this seminar format at key times during the liturgical year (Advent, Lent, Pentecost) that you can teach about topics of spirituality on which you are understood to be the experts. The key will be to include spiritual practices and small groups in the seminar.

*Small groups* meeting weekly in homes allow for a comfortable, conversational approach to spirituality. I find that small groups in which each person takes one session to share his or her spiritual autobiography is a powerful experience (as long as these stories are carefully prepared, presented, and debriefed).[[5]](#footnote-5) In fact, small groups are the ideal context for exploring a host of spiritual practices, all of which seek to open one to the Transcendent in one way or another.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The intensive experience of *travel* together to religious sites (such as the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain and France which ends at the shrine of St. James) is another powerful form of contemplative outreach.

In the end, contemplative evangelism is not difficult. We simply have to offer programs on spiritual formation and invite the spiritually curious to participate. This is not something new or extra since engaging in spiritual formation is a key part of ministry (as we seek to create disciples). What makes our formational activities *outreach* is our willingness to invite outsiders to join us.

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1. See “Rediscovering Evangelism: Outreach in the United Church of Christ in the Twenty-First Century” by Richard Peace (Cleveland: Congregational Vitality and Discipleship, UCC, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A recent study by the Pew Research Center projecting U.S. religious groups population shares by 2070 (September 13, 2022) states: “None of the scenarios project growth in the Christian share of the U.S. population because we do not have empirical measures of any recent switching patterns that favor Christianity in the United State. In other words, there is no data on which to model a sudden or gradual revival of Christianity (or of religion in general) in the U.S. That does not mean a religious revival is impossible. It means there is no demographic basis on which to project one.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Holy Conversation: Talking about God in Everyday Life* by Richard Peace (InterVarsity Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The word translated “good news” (or gospel) in the Greek original is *euaggelion* which is the root of the English word ‘evangelism’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story* by Richard Peace (NavPress/Pilgrimage Publications, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also other small group books in my Spiritual Formation series: *Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey Toward God* (NavPress/Pilgrimage Publications, 1995); *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God through Scripture* (NavPress, 1998. Reprinted by Wipf & Stock in 2015); *Meditative Prayer: Entering God’s Presence* (NavPress, 1998. Reprinted by Wipf & Stock in 2015); and *Spiritual Transformation: Taking on the Character of Christ* (Wipf & Stock, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)