

Getting better at evangelism

By John Baxter-Brown



The Christians in the first church in Europe were encouraged to shine like stars in the sky in a warped and crooked generation (cf. Phil. 2:15). This imagery of tiny points of light twinkling in the midst of the darkness is both beautiful and powerful. It remains just as much a calling for Europe's Christians today as it did when the infant church was tentatively stepping from one

continent to another.

In less than 300 years the church had become a major spiritual and political force within the Roman Empire: this happened because individuals and communities were converted. However, over the past 2,000 years 'converting' people has had its controversial moments and the early years of the 21st century are among the most contentious.

In some places in the world there are 'anti-conversion' laws and people who convert, particularly into the Christian faith, can face extremely harsh punishment (including occasionally, martyrdom). This is clearly a religious liberties issue: but it also raises issues about how Christians at times actually do their missionary work. Sadly, there are cases when the methodologies used actually discredit the gospel of Jesus and damage the credibility both of the faith and of the Christian community.

The best response in these challenging circumstances is not to shy away from the evangelistic calling Jesus has given to us, but to do more evangelism and to do it better. This is what the new document *Christian Witness In A Multi-Religious World: Recommendations For Conduct* seeks to do by helping churches, para-church and ecumenical organisations, mission agencies and individual Christians reflect

more deeply on both what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Arguably this is one of the most historic documents produced so far this century: it is the first time in history that the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance have collaborated and agreed on a joint document. These three Christian families represent over 90 per cent of all those who claim the name of Jesus Christ around the globe. But what also makes this document significant is the content.

It is not yet another dull ecumenical text that people either leave on the shelf to gather the dust of the ages or remain blessedly ignorant of. Rather, it's a text that addresses the contentious issue of conversion, thus, it is a missionary text. It addresses the now global multi-religious context in which we all find ourselves, making it an interreligious text, and it is an ecumenical text, developed over five years of hard work between the three communities.

The document has four parts: a short preamble followed by a biblical basis for why Christian witness is essential, demonstrating that in witnessing the key example to draw upon is that of Jesus himself "the supreme witness. Christian witness is always a sharing in his witness, which takes the form of proclamation of the kingdom, service to neighbour and the total gift of self even if that act of giving leads to the cross."

There follows a section of 12 'Principles', which tackle some of the most contentious criticisms made against Christians, particularly within the interreligious context. These principles both point towards the love of God as found in Jesus as well as to the implications of that love for how we do our witnessing and evangelism.

To offer one example, 'Acts of service and justice' (education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy) are acknowledged as "an integral part of witnessing to the gospel." We have no authentic gospel if we do not care for, in Matthew's words, 'one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.' But "Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements, including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service" to try and 'win' converts. People will be drawn to Jesus Christ not by bribery but by God's love as it

is expressed through God's people.

This section also includes ministries of healing, rejection of violence, religious freedom, false witness, mutual respect and building inter-religious relationships.

The last section is the 'Recommendations,' the first one of which is to study the document and "where appropriate formulate guidelines for conduct regarding Christian witness applicable to (your) particular contexts."

The drafters are aware that it is not possible for a centrally produced document to include the specifics of each particular culture: tropical Latin America has some different issues from cold northern Europe which again differs from the splendour of the African plains or the beauty and bustle of south east Asia: therefore the document is intended to be used and adapted to local contexts.

It is not the last word from central hierarchies but is intended to be the start of a process of a local "bottom up" reflection leading to stronger ecumenical relationships, better interreligious relationships and significantly more witnessing and evangelism of a higher calibre to bring glory to God – and to shine like stars in the darkness.