

Why is Evangelistic Growth So Slow?

Most agree that evangelistic growth has slowed to a trickle. Only slightly faster than the line at the DMV. Few adults are coming to Christ and even fewer are incorporating into local churches.

Why is evangelistic growth so slow? This question should keep us up at night.

Many are proposing reasons for this sluggishness, but there is one major reason that is rarely talked about.

Evangelistic growth is slow because so few are practicing DISCOVERY EVANGELISM.

What is discovery evangelism? Discovery evangelism is meeting tons of people and preaching the gospel broadly in order to harvest those who are ripe for the gospel.

A careful study of the first four chapters of John's gospel shows us how Jesus used discovery evangelism during the first few weeks of starting His movement. He demonstrated discovery evangelism, and then He taught about it.

In Jesus' very first recorded training time with his future church planters, He taught them about discovery evangelism:

Do you not say, 'There are still four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I tell you, raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the one who sows and the one who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have come into their labor." John 4:35-38

Discovery evangelism requires trusting Christ's words, "the fields are white for harvest." It involves faith to believe it is possible to find some who are ready to respond.

It does not require four months of relationship building and serving before sharing the gospel. The slow relational approach is what I call "cultivative evangelism," which we will explore later.

Church planters are reapers who stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them. They capitalize on the cultivative labors of others.

To better understand discovery evangelism let's look at two types of discovery evangelism and then contrast these with three other types of evangelism.

Five Types of Evangelism

Five types of effective evangelism are: personal discovery evangelism, corporate discovery evangelism, oikos evangelism, cultivative evangelism, and sending evangelism. All five are vital strategies and need to be focused upon at different stages of church life.

1. Personal Discovery Evangelism

Personal discovery evangelism is when an individual evangelist or church planter searches for those God has prepared for salvation. They go out to seek and save those who are “ripe for harvest.”

Jesus practiced personal discovery evangelism by repeatedly visiting a gathering of the most open unsaved people in His God-assigned target group (John 1:19-36). Jesus invited a couple of the most teachable of John the Baptist’s disciples to spend the afternoon with Him. At this home meeting, He explained that He was the Messiah (John 1:37-41).

In John 3, Jesus had a gospel appointment with a religious leader named Nicodemus, who was seeking. In John 4, Jesus met and shared the good news with a broken woman searching for fulfillment.

In each of these situations, Jesus did not build deep relationships for many months before proclaiming the gospel. He quickly got to the good news and there was an immediate response because God had prepared their hearts.

An example of personal discovery evangelism

When we moved to California to plant our second church, we started by using cultivative evangelism exclusively. We met some neighbors and shared the gospel with them. They were open to friendship, but not ready to come to Christ. After a couple of months, we realized this approach would be too slow to get a church going in a reasonable amount of time.

So we switched our focus to discovery evangelism. We began going door to door doing listening surveys. We asked people about the needs of the community and getting their opinion as to why many people do not go to church.

We were searching for those whom God had already prepared. Not all were open, but through this sifting process we found some who were. Here is one story:

I knocked on the door of a young man named John. He was about 30, and like many native Californians, had never been involved in church.

The night before I arrived, he had a loaded gun and was contemplating suicide. But God graciously reached out to John. While he was in the shower, God impressed upon him that He was going to reveal Himself.

That next day I showed up. John saw it as a sign from God and listened to the gospel. He came to our Bible study next door, along with another couple we met surveying. Within a couple of weeks, both John and his live-in girlfriend accepted Christ.

Two doors down, we met another young couple living together. They also came to the Bible study and committed their lives to Christ! Long story short, both couples were baptized, were our first two church weddings, joined the planting team, and later became leaders in the church for several decades.

Most likely, I would not have met these precious people, and John might not be alive today, if I had not done intentional personal discovery evangelism. The majority of the 97 adults we baptized the first two and a half years of the church plant were first met through our surveying efforts.

My sons, who also practice discovery evangelism, call this “going on spiritual treasure hunts” to find prepared people who are already ready to receive the gospel.

2. Corporate Discovery Evangelism

In addition to personal gospel conversations, Jesus regularly preached to large crowds. John 4:39-42 is one example.

Throughout history, God has empowered evangelistic preachers to draw the net on crowds of unsaved people. Just think of how God used the preachers of the Reformation, as well as movement makers like Wesley.

More recently, we have witnessed the Billy Graham crusades and the harvest crusades of the Jesus Movement. We have also seen the seeker-oriented weekend services of the 80's and 90's. Over and over we see God using large group evangelistic events to draw many people to Himself. We should never underestimate the awesome power of the preaching of the gospel to crowds (Romans 1:16-17).

An example of corporate discovery evangelism

Our third church plant, Seabreeze, is an example of corporate discovery evangelism. We were sent to plant a new church by our second church plant less than ten minutes away with five young Christians. This was in Huntington Beach, an older suburb of Los Angeles known as a church planting graveyard.

In my impatience, I led our team to launch the church too soon and it flopped. We had only one guest from our target community and that young man even ended up joining

our sending church. I was discouraged, but God gave the following Scripture to one of the young Christians on our launch team.

The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than arrogance of spirit. Eccel. 7:8

So with renewed faith, we started over. This time, we spent three months doing personal discovery evangelism. We did door to door surveys with hundreds of people in our community and had two important results. We gained a better understanding of how the unsaved thought, and we enlarged our launch team by reaching new people from the target community.

Now we were ready to relaunch our corporate discovery evangelism strategy. Our original planting team had two men with unique gifts. One was an excellent marketer and the other was a cartoonist. The three of us created an innovative invitation to our first public service. It was designed entirely to appeal to unsaved adults, especially men.

We were short on cash, so we asked our launch team members to give six months of their tithe in advance and many did! We raised \$3000. We sent out 35,000 invitations and 165 people showed up at our first service at a community center.

Two months later, we did a follow up introductory service and had 240 show up. We grew from 30 to over 200 in about three months from our launch date. It was extremely exciting for us.

We wondered if those who were coming were churched people or unchurched people. So one Sunday morning, we surveyed those attending. We found that 80% of those attending had not been attending church for five years or more. We had hit our target audience!

Another important part of corporate discovery evangelism is involving as many people as possible in serving together to better reach people on Sunday mornings. We worked hard at this and at the six month mark after our launch, we had 100 adults serving in one of our two Sunday services. The vast majority of these workers were faith beginners from the ranks of the unchurched.

Seabreeze, now led by Bevan Unrau, is now one of the stronger churches in Huntington Beach with over 1,000 regularly attending.

3. Oikos Evangelism

Oikos or “household” evangelism is when disciples reach out to those already in their sphere of influence, such as family, friends, and coworkers.

This is an especially powerful evangelistic strategy for new disciples because they have many trusted relationships with unsaved people. Oikos evangelism gives you access to people you wouldn't otherwise know.

Andrew and Philip were our first two heroes of oikos evangelism (John 1:41-52). After being convinced about Jesus, the first thing Andrew did was find his brother Simon and tell him "We found the Messiah."

Likewise, Philip invited his friend Nathanael to "come and see" who Jesus was.

Also, the woman at the well in John 4:29-30 was a "super spreader" in Samaria inviting many she knew to come listen to Jesus.

An example of Oikos evangelism

In our first church plant, I met an unsaved man, named Gary, in our apartment complex. I built a relationship with him and he came to our first Easter service in the apartment clubhouse.

After the service, he came over to my house and I shared the gospel with him. He accepted Christ and I asked him the oikos question: "**Who do you know that might be interested in Christ?**" He said his wife. So the two of us went to their apartment and shared the gospel with her, and she came to Christ.

Then I asked Gary, "Who else do you know that might be interested?" He answered, "my brother Jerry." So we called him and set up an appointment with him that week. Jerry also committed his life to Christ, as did his wife. These two couples became key members of this church plant.

I had to spend a lot of effort to win Gary over a period of time, but the next three came to Christ quickly. Why? Because they each had a trust relationship with Gary.

4. Cultivative Evangelism

Cultivative evangelism is the "four months and then comes the harvest" type of evangelism introduced above. It is the most popular approach today. Unfortunately, it has become so popular, that many only focus on this one method. As a result, discovery evangelism has been ignored or disparaged.

Vital ministries like loving neighbors, building friendships, compassion and justice ministries are examples of cultivative evangelism. All disciples are called to engage in these ways of being salt and light in the world, Matthew 5:16. Cultivative evangelism becomes more and more important as the church ages. Pastors are called to equip their church members to do it.

An example of cultivative evangelism

My wife Diane is a great example of cultivative evangelism. She intentionally meets all our neighbors, finds ways to serve them, and she listens to them. They fall in love with her and over time she is able to cultivate their hearts to respond to the gospel.

Cultivative evangelism has the advantage over discovery evangelism, because it is better at reaching those who are hardest to reach. Plus, more people are willing to do cultivative evangelism. Cultivative evangelism is a wonderful tool.

The disadvantage of cultivative evangelism is that it is by nature slow. Church planting is generally time sensitive. Church planters need to establish evangelistic momentum quickly. Therefore, it is generally best for planters to focus mostly on the speedier discovery evangelism.

The younger the church, the more important discovery evangelism is; the older the church, the more important cultivative evangelism is. But at every stage of church life, it's not EITHER/OR; it's BOTH/AND.

5. Sending Evangelism

Sending evangelism is a powerful evangelistic strategy. It is when a church discovers, develops and deploys a church planter to start an evangelistic growth church. It is like sending a shepherd out to rescue lost sheep and develop a new church nearby. We plant churches to reach people.

New churches, planted with evangelistic growth principles, are often filled with lots of other faith beginners. This creates a sticky environment that the unchurched and unsaved feel comfortable attending. They like learning with others who are at similar stages of spiritual development.

The fastest evangelistic growth occurs when church planters major on personal and corporate evangelism during the first few years of their plants. We have seen a good number of new churches grow from 5 to 50 or 15 to 150 in a year. This a 1,000% annual growth rate. This is a much faster rate than the fastest growing mega-churches, which typically grow at about about 20% per year. It makes sense to me, using a bit of math, that church planting is the best way to fill the earth with local bodies of Christ.

There are three reasons why I am convinced that prioritizing personal and corporate discovery evangelism accelerates evangelistic growth. First, the Biblical example of Jesus. Second, our repeated church planting experience. And third, we have seen it work in hundreds of church plants we have helped train and coach.

In future articles, I plan to address other reasons evangelistic growth is so slow and how to accelerate it. Stay tuned!

About Dr. John Worcester: John and his wife, Diane, have planted eight evangelistic growth churches in three states, as well as in Russia and Canada. They also founded Church Planting Leadership that equips leaders to accelerate evangelistic growth globally. Through CPL, John has trained thousands of church planters and pastors in many countries. John and Diane have raised two sets of twin sons who are all planting evangelistic growth churches or collegiate ministries full-time. For more information see churchplanting.net.