

Last Fall, Bishop Lyght organized the task force on evangelism, and asked me to be the Chairperson, and Bill Deel to be the Vice-Chair; The task force is a large group, made up of many persons representing many areas of our Annual Conference. Our team leaders are Bill Dawson, overseeing Prayer Emphasis and Listening; Mark Flynn overseeing Major Events, and Michael Richards, over Education and Training. We thank all of you who are participating in this Annual Conference Priority on Evangelism, and it is our hope and prayer that every local church and every believer will join together making evangelism our emphasis. The work is already begun, as we work in these areas to lay the groundwork and build the foundation that, hopefully, will become an evangelism lifestyle in the life of our WV Annual Conference, our Districts, our local churches, and in the lives of the people who individually make up the Body of Christ.

If you would like to see a rough timeline of how we hope to proceed, please see 2006-24 in your notebook.

As most of you were here yesterday afternoon, you no doubt heard the Healthy Church Assessment statistics given by our Bishop. It was sad to hear that over the years our churches, for the most part, have been in the declining mode. We do not seem to be very healthy when it comes to evangelism.

Evangelism, no matter how many fancy definitions we might give, is still all about reaching out to hurting people, to people separated from God, who have no hope in their lives; evangelism is still about making disciples of Jesus Christ; it is still about “seeking and saving the lost.” Evangelism is about sharing with others the new life we have experienced in Christ, and inviting them to repent and believe the Good News as we did.

Why aren't we doing evangelism? If we've really got it, wouldn't we really want to pass it on to others who are still quagmired under the law of sin and death, as Wesley put it? Wouldn't we want others to experience the freedom and grace we have been given?

It's time we open our eyes that we might see the struggles, pains, sufferings, hurts, and deep wounds of the people around us.

Have you ever heard the term “separation anxiety?” I remember studying this when I was a student here at Wesleyan back in the 80's. Anyone can experience it, but what the teacher was focusing on, for the most part, was little babies. When a baby is separated from the mother for the first time, it experiences anxiety; she is always looking for her mother or father, someone familiar to them, who can bring comfort and peace back into their lives.

Well, look at our world, it is filled with people who are experiencing “separation anxiety”-- from their Lord and God! from Hope that is in Christ Jesus; from the life of the Holy Spirit, as poured out abundantly to all who believe.

Let me share with you a few statistics from the Bible Belt:

Only 1 in 5 professing Christians attend church regularly

50% of all children get no Christian training

19% of Christians are truly “active”

62% of churches have no actual plan for evangelism (MAP:ministry action plan)

From these statistics, we have to conclude that our churches have not made evangelism a priority or embraced it as a lifestyle, whether in our conference, our local churches, or in our daily lives. Part of the work of the Evangelism taskforce will be to develop

theological, biblical, and cultural resources to guide us toward a holistic understanding of evangelism, in order to reach people where they are in their lives, and respect them for who they are, and help them to discover who and what they can be when the love of God is shed abroad in their hearts.

I have read some books that call our culture “post-modern.” Other books have referred to our culture as “Pre-Christian.” This speaker said that we are, in our world, exactly where the early apostles were in the first century. After Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit empowering them for the work of ministry, they struck out, to turn the world upside down for Christ. That was a charge against the early Christians, you know. They were reported to be “turning the world upside down!”

Where is that fervor of Spirit today?

Dr. Pereira taught a seminar I attended last year and he said that the local church needs to find the barriers that hinder evangelistic work. Every local church has a self image and are in one of 3 stages:

Stage 1: The local church is a newly planted church and is from 1 to 15 years old. This is the New Kid on the Block church. They have to win people to survive and continue growing. These are busy building up the church. But, about 15 years later, they begin to slack off, slumber and sleep.

Stage 2: This is the Care-Taker stage: “come will, come woe, our status is quo!” I think that when we heard the Bishop’s report on the Healthy Church Assessments, that this stage 2 is where most of our churches are. This church is nostalgic, and always looking back. The people pool is shrinking. If the church stays in this stage and doesn’t do some revisioning, retooling, upgrading, she finds herself in stage 3.

Stage 3: The “Under-Taker” stage. These are in the process of dying. These are writing their last will and testament. Oh, they say they want to go forward, but are still looking in the rear-view mirror.

The local church that desires to remain a lively, vibrant, spirit-filled church will utilize every means and method possible to invite and welcome the unchurched into the community of faith.

What are then means of winning persons to Jesus Christ. Listen to these statistics:

2% of people are won to Christ through advertising

6% are won through pastoral visitation

6% are won through organized outreach programs

86% are won through friendships and established fellowship networks.

The greatest method and means is still what has always worked: when the church is being the church, she will love all people, reach out in caring ministries, and befriend the poor, powerless, lonely, hungry, thirsty, hopeless, and the dying, sharing with them the wonderful Savior we have found in Jesus Christ, and inviting them personally to sit at the Table of the Lord with us.

Has the love of God been shed abroad in our hearts or not? Have we forgotten to so love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves that nothing can compel us not to speak about the wonderful things we have seen and heard of Jesus Christ.

You and I have a testimony of God’s love? When was the last time you shared it?

When was the last time you personally tried to rescue someone who did not know the love of God and God's plan of salvation?

Yesterday, as I was driving in town here, I drove past the Buckhannon Volunteer Fire Department. I never noticed it before, but yesterday, I did. There was a sign over the side door that said, "First in, Last out!"

I talked to a firefighter and asked him how he liked being a firefighter? He loved it! He said, "Now don't get me wrong, it's not that I like it when that siren goes off, because I know people's lives are at stake, and I don't want anything to happen to one of those people on my watch. So, when that siren goes off, we take off, and we do everything within our power to rescue everyone who needs saving. First In: Last Out! That's us."

Can you hear the sirens going off church? Peoples' cries are those sirens. Now get this: nobody ever gets rescued at the fire station. The people at the fire station have to go out to where the fire or accidents are; they have to initiate the rescue mission. What kind of fire department would sit and wait for people in a burning building to rescue themselves and then come to the fire department to make the announcement that they have just saved themselves?

Well, people can't save themselves. That's solid Wesleyan theology and doctrine. Only God can save, and God has called us to be co-laborers. As someone told us the Good News of Salvation, so now we are to tell others, teach others, walk along beside of others in their pain and life's struggles.

Sirens going off today in peoples lives are:

1. The meaningless of life
2. Loneliness
3. Pain of the past
4. Stress
5. Guilt over mistakes
6. Powerlessness
7. Anxiety

These sirens are signs to you and me, to the church community, that someone is reaching out for help and rescue. And God is trusting us, the Church, to be First Responders, not last-ditch efforts! Did you know that 9 out of 10 believers never tell anyone what they know about Jesus Christ. Folks, the problem is not with non-believing people, the problem is with God's people not going, not seeking, not telling. These statistics are the sirens going off in the church.

Well, all is not lost. The very fact that we are here today is a sign that the church is yet alive, and God is calling us to do the work of an evangelist.

What can an evangelistically minded church do. Well, there are also 7 basic needs that all people have. I believe the UMC is able to be those first responders because the church can offer the people in our communities and in our world:

1. Acceptance
2. Security
3. Love
4. Discipline
5. Praise

6. Significance
7. God!

I believe all these 7 basic needs being met will provide the foundation for anyone's salvation. This is lifestyle evangelism; no quick and easy fix, but the real thing! Our prayer as an Evangelism Task Force is that we will work together as the WV Annual Conference, with every local church actively involved in reaching out intentionally to bring people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Please be in prayer for this Task Force on Evangelism. And let us begin now to pray daily for people who need Jesus, and that all our churches become like that motto over the fire station's door: First In: Last Out.