

It Still Works:
Why Public Evangelism Remains Essential
to the Church's Witness

By Shane Anderson, M.Div., D.Min.

After presenting four public evangelistic series in my district in the last three years, I am weary (as is my congregation). But, by the grace of God and much hard work, 29 people have been added to our church, with the possibility of more in the coming months. Living in a little town of 1,900 people, this is ample cause for rejoicing—and for reflection on why our methods should not have worked as well as they did.

The Challenge of Public Evangelism

Throughout Christendom in the Western world, public evangelism of the classic kind seems nearly extinct. Most churches, regardless of denominational affiliation, simply no longer offer “full-message” meetings, the kind that take place over a period of weeks, covering a broad spectrum of Bible instruction, and intended to conclude with new members joining the local church through baptism or profession of faith.

Many reasons are given for avoiding this classic form of outreach. Some say that postmodern people no longer listen to presentations from the Bible. Others believe that people are too busy to come night after night to a series of meetings. Among Adventists, many members and pastors claim that unique Adventist beliefs are too offensive today to proclaim publicly. Still others assert that public evangelism has become too expensive for the number of baptisms gleaned, that converts from public meetings do not stay in the church, or that public evangelism unnecessarily exhausts existing church members.

I admit a measure of truth to each of these objections. Postmodernism is a challenge. Many people really do see themselves as busier than ever and thus are unable to attend series-type meetings. Some of our beliefs are, indeed, offensive to some people.

All of which raises the question: If I grant that those objections have some validity, why did we just finish our fourth successful evangelistic series in three years—in the same (and thus potentially “overfished”) locale, no less?

It Works

The answer is simple: it works. In my experience, nothing helps people commit fully to Christ as well as a full-message public evangelistic series. And though I think a case for public evangelism as an important part of any church's witness can be made (Jesus did public evangelism, the apostles all did public evangelism), I can best articulate my thoughts concerning public evangelism's necessity in the context of our own denomination. Here are three reasons why I believe public evangelism remains indispensable to the specific witness of the Adventist Church:

1. *The unique beliefs of the Adventist Church are immensely compelling to many people.* Adventism has an end-time role given by Christ that genuinely differs from any other religious entity. And while we are loved no more by Christ than is any other Christian group, we nonetheless have a unique message from Him to share with the world. If we do not present this unique message effectively, very few people will become members of our churches. But that having been said, effectively presenting these distinctive topics in short sound bites is very difficult. A Sabbath morning sermon or even a successive, yet chronologically disconnected (e.g., once a week or on weekends) series of presentations is not the best way to present these topics.

True, one can have a measure of success in using the Sabbath morning sermon for evangelism. But, in my experience, this once-a-week approach remains unwieldy. For instance, presenting uniquely Adventist doctrines generally takes more time than a 25-to-30-minute sermon will allow. Such time constraints require the speaker to break the topic being presented into smaller (and inevitably incomplete) chunks. But, unfortunately, listeners often forget at least some of what is preached from one week to the next, making it difficult for them to see these topical chunks as a connected and compelling whole. This disconnectedness can make it exceedingly difficult to build momentum and facilitate conviction in listeners' hearts.

In contrast, the public series of meetings greatly reduces these roadblocks. For instance, in our meetings here, we usually present 17 messages over 15 nights. These presentations cover the totality of the great themes of the Adventist message and build momentum from one night to the next. Because we give only 17 presentations, Christ is robustly central to each presentation. People are more interested in these topics now than they have been for years. In the series we just completed, opening night saw 150 attendees, evenly split between Adventists and guests. Through the remainder of the series, on average, about 42 guests attended each night—an excellent rate of retention for which we praise God.

To me, this proves a valuable point: Adventism today can present the Bible (particularly prophecy) and the gospel in such a way that people can see in Jesus a Savior who makes eternal sense of the chaos around them. And I know of no better way to draw and keep people's attention than a tightly knit, night-after-night, full-message, public evangelistic series.

2. *Public evangelistic series excel at reaping friends of the church.* I am astonished by the number of pastors who have abandoned public evangelistic series because, they said, "I tried public evangelism at my church, and it didn't work." Upon further probing, I often discover that little or no preparation was done prior to the meetings. These pastors forget that the most effective meetings are prefaced by many months (as many as 12–24 months) of "pre-work." We do not claim to have mastered pre-work in our church. But we do use some very basic pre-work methodology, and with reasonable effectiveness too. First, every member is regularly encouraged from the pulpit, and in person, to make friends with people who are not members of our church. Second, throughout any given year, we hold a number of events to help those friendships grow, such as cooking classes, depression recovery seminars, financial how-to seminars, a summer softball league (and other sports outreach events), a Christmas walk-through on our campus, and holiday music celebrations. In the last year even in our rural setting—more than 1,400 people had significant contact with our church through attendance at these events.

Some of the people we are baptizing now are the very ones who came through our church doors for the first time via these simple, friendship-growing events.

The number of pastors who leave out this crucial step and are subsequently dismayed by their public meetings' lack of success astonishes us. Despite the simplicity of pre-work events, *they largely pave the way for success in public meetings*. People are more likely to listen to our preaching if they become friends with us first.

And that is the point: Once friendship has begun, the brief yet sustained momentum of a public evangelistic series provides a unique witnessing opportunity. This offers an environment that I believe the Spirit has specifically given for pre-work-generated *friends of the church* to become *members of* and *missionaries for* the church. The public series allows you to make respectful and repeated appeals to accept Christ and His message for this time. The public series allows you to reveal end-time deception after end-time deception in tight-knit order, helping friends of church members to see just why their Adventist acquaintances do the unique things they do (keep the seventh-day Sabbath, focus on Bible prophecy, etc.). The public series is thus a friend-of-the-church reaping method that simply works—not for everyone, not all the time, but nonetheless I know of no better general alternative.

3. A public evangelistic series reaches people that friendship evangelism never will. In my opinion, friendship evangelism, as essential as this is, will never finish the work of spreading the gospel by itself. To develop meaningful relationships on a scale sufficient to reach everyone Christ intends us to reach is simply a physical impossibility. And if we confine ourselves only to friendship evangelism, we may be keeping people from Christ who would otherwise be reached through the sometimes anonymous methods of public evangelism.

How, you might wonder, can a “public” method of evangelism be anonymous? The answer comes in its advertising, particularly with regard to the evangelistic handbill/brochure. For decades, the evangelistic handbill has been a magnet for criticism. The beasts of Daniel 7 or Revelation 13 are often portrayed on the handbill's cover, and many of my pastoral colleagues cringe when they think of them. But for all their faults, evangelistic handbills work. In fact, by far the biggest detractors regarding handbills (particularly ones with the aforementioned beasts on them) are multigenerational Adventists. They, indeed, can be offended by them. But in my experience, usually the average non-Adventist is *not*. Instead, the latter is perhaps apathetic, maybe mildly amused, or quite often intrigued and compelled to know more.

This does not say that some of the brochures used to advertise public series of meetings do not, on rare occasions, attract some extremist and “undesirable” guests. But the vast majority of the time, the beast-portraying brochures I have used instead attract intelligent, sincere, and even highly educated people who are weary of the banality of so much of religion today and want something different, new, and most of all, real. I believe that is why in the four series we have held here, we have seen (and subsequently baptized) a variety of regularly attending guests representing a wide spectrum of educational and vocational backgrounds.

But the strength of handbill advertising goes deeper still; unlike friendship evangelism, handbills can go places that even our most lovable church members cannot. Handbills get into homes that

would never even remotely consider giving us an opportunity to share Christ. And experience has shown that when we send out thousands of brochures, inviting anyone and everyone to come to our meetings, we are often working with the Holy Spirit. After all, it is the Spirit who has been working with the residents of particular homes for months or years on end in full knowledge that one day, “out of the blue,” brochures would show up in their mailboxes that would eventually help lead them to Christ.

Evangelistic handbills have helped thousands of people who have no connection to a local church find their way to public evangelistic meetings, be baptized, and join the Advent movement. The public evangelism approach thus excels at reaching people that may otherwise never be reached.

What about you?

I am by no means against evangelistic innovation. Nor do I believe that public evangelism is the one-size-fits-all answer to our evangelistic challenges. But I nonetheless hope we never leave behind tools of the past that continue to prove effective for Christ. So, may I encourage you to consider doing something like the following?

- *Pray without ceasing about reaching people for Christ.* People come to Christ when we pray.
- *Hold an evangelistic series as often as is appropriate,¹ with you as the preacher.* Many of you can and should do this, and doing so will dramatically cut down costs as well as help your new members integrate more easily into your church.
- *Do not be dismayed by the rumors that postmodern people are not interested in truth.* This was driven home to me when I pastored in the Seattle region of Washington State, a thoroughly postmodern area. It may surprise some to learn that public evangelism was much easier there; my churches easily baptized more people for the same amount of effort we put out here. Why? Because many people there knew almost nothing about Christ and were thus hungry for the gospel after years of empty, postmodern living.
- *Do as much pre-work as you can, seeing the public series as the culmination of (rather than a replacement for) the evangelistic process.*
- *Find evangelists you appreciate and contact them for help, using their materials as a starting point.²* Eventually, you will want (and need) to make your evangelistic preaching your own, but there is nothing wrong with using a series that has already been produced.
- *Hold a follow-up class for about eight weeks after the conclusion of your meetings.* I do one called “How to Interpret Bible Prophecy.” Choose a topic that works for you. The class will help those who are on the verge of making a decision crossing the line of faith. (Holding other events like cooking schools, for example, right after the end of your meetings can also help interested people continue to grow closer to committing to Christ.)
- *Match your new converts with new friends in the church as well as with meaningful ministry.* Do this for many months after their baptism, and if your experience is like ours, you will retain nearly all of them.

In the minds of many, classic public evangelism is no longer a viable way to reach people for Christ. But in my approximately 20 years of pastoral ministry, I have yet to find a more effective outreach method. When conducted properly and combined with appropriate pre- and post-work, public evangelism can reach a broad range of people. This method certainly may not be the easiest form of outreach. But it remains essential to the witness of the church, for it still works well in bringing people to Christ.

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