

Spread the Word: Evangelical Mission of the Parish.



The answer to the Catechism question, “Why did God make us?” is “To know him, to love him and to serve him in this world and to be with him forever in the next”. Those of us who were brought up on the Penny Catechism will have memorised this question and answer, and it will roll easily off the tongue. The bigger question is, though, “Is this what we do?”

In recent years, we have become familiar with the term “missionary disciple” – a term that is used throughout *Evangelii Gaudium* (the “Joy of the Gospel”), the first of Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortations. This term is used boldly to emphasise the mutual importance of the need both for a relationship with our Lord and the need to serve him in this world by serving our brothers and sisters.

The vast majority of practising Catholics throughout the world come to church on Sunday to fulfil their obligation to keep the Sabbath holy. In the past, the work of evangelising was predominantly the work of the priest and Religious, either at home or overseas. They cannot carry out this work on their own. Their role is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry”, as St Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians (4:12-16). This is because every baptised member of the Catholic faith is called to evangelise and is called to be a missionary disciple (cf. Matthew 28:19).

Pope Francis spends a considerable amount of time raising awareness of how a missionary impulse would change parish life. He admits that his call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring us closer to people, to make us environments of living communion and participation, and to make us completely mission-oriented (EG28).

In some people, we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel can have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time (EG95).

Parishes are a fair cross section of dedicated people, who work hard to care and engage with their fellow parishioners and the wider community, and in doing this we take on the call of Pope Francis to care for ourselves, our common home and each other in whatever situation we may find ourselves. As a result, we undertake the work of evangelisation in lots of different ways.

Parishes are made up of a variety of groups, including, for example, young adults, young singles and married couples, elderly singles and married couples, children, teenagers, single parents, divorced/separated and remarried couples, the sick and housebound, the unemployed, ex-prisoners, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. God calls each and every one of us to be messengers of his holy word, to enable others to know Jesus and fulfil their own mission in the Church.

As they say, “actions speak louder than words”. In other words, the greatest form of evangelisation is “witness”. In our first book, *Welcome to Witness*, we tried to encourage and support those who want to advance the work of evangelisation within their parishes – by enabling people (lay and clergy) to devise new and imaginative ways of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As the Church engages increasingly with the demands of this new evangelisation, it became clear that one of the central challenges is that of finding ways to ensure that those who come to Christ are not left to continue their journey alone. Hence our second book, *To Know Him, To Love Him, To Serve Him* – designed as a resource for those seeking to form evangelisation teams at the parish level.

We felt that we could, in a simple way, give parishes the tools to form people to work within their parish in ensuring that each and every person, and each and every group, puts evangelisation at the forefront of everything they do.

The aim of the book is to form parish evangelisation teams – a team of people from the parish, who are called to reflect upon this central mission of the Church, to be formed through reflection on recent papal teaching, and to begin to engage the whole parish in the mission of witnessing to and proclaiming the Good News to people within and outside the parish community.

In the book, we explain the need to form teams of people of diverse natures – people who do not see themselves as the only people doing the evangelising – and hopefully we can discourage people from simply being the doers and encourage them to be the enablers. Throughout *To Know Him, To Love Him, To Serve Him* we stress that the parish evangelisation team are not the only ones to do the work of evangelisation, but that they are to be the evangelising conscience of the parish, asking the simple question of all activity in the parish, which is how we can see the work of evangelisation in it.

This book provides ideas for establishing and supporting the evangelisation team in their time of formation and in the early days of their work together. It helps the team to be formed through reflection on recent papal teaching and gives them initial guidance on how to engage the people of the parish community, and beyond, in the mission of proclaiming and witnessing to the Good News.

Over the years, our own parish has changed and grown both in its demographic and spiritually, and there could be many reasons for this. In the past, our congregations consisted mainly of the elderly, and a fair number of young to middle-aged families and young people, with a small minority of stalwarts helping out the priest.

Without doubt, this has formed the foundation on which our parish has thrived. We now have a very diverse multicultural congregation with a lot of young families who recognise that in order to have a future for their children in the Catholic Church they have a very firm foundation in Guardian Angels to build upon.

In every parish, each person is called to develop their own relationship with the person of Jesus Christ and each of us should be encouraged to do this in a way that strengthens our own life and situation in life, whatever that may be. Evangelisation does not exclude, it does not divide or restrict, and it is not the work of a select few, as Pope Francis affirms in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG82).

Paul Cannon is parish priest and Sharon Beech is pastoral assistant at Guardian Angels Parish, Bury. Their book, *To Know Him, To Love Him, To Serve Him*, is published by Redemptorist.

To Do:

1. Priests: equip your parishioners for the work of ministry.
2. Parishioners: consider setting up or joining an evangelisation team in your parish.
3. Together: build a future for yourselves and your children in the Church by building on the experience of longstanding parishioners and working with them.

Paul Cannon and Sharon Beech - The Tablet