

EGGS briefing – February 2019 Group of Sessions – Evangelism Debates

Perhaps a church historian amongst us can inform us when Synod last had four different debates on evangelism in one Group of Sessions! Indeed, this focus is not new, during the lifetime of this Synod, a number of debates and presentations have focused on evangelism as the core focus and many more on sharing faith as a key part of another area of our life together. The forthcoming Group of Sessions contains four with evangelism as the main focus:

- **Friday morning (around 11:30am start) – Evangelism and Discipleship (GS 2118 & Annex A)**
 - Moved from the last Group of Sessions due to over running business this is the final report of the Archbishops' Evangelism Taskgroup and the opening report of the new Evangelism and Discipleship Department. It charts the work of the Archbishops' Evangelism Taskgroup, discusses how the new Department, under the leadership of Dave Male, is taking it forward and will report back to Synod, invites each worshipping community to recommit to making evangelism a planned priority for the coming year and specifically affirms the importance of prayer for evangelism as seen in 'Thy Kingdom Come' (members may have seen the letter sent in January from the Presidents of Churches Together in England and other denominational heads calling each Christian to be praying for five particular people to come to know Jesus Christ). Barry Hill is moving this debate.

- **Friday afternoon – Growing Faith: Ministry Amongst Children & Young People (GS 2121)**
 - Moved by the Bishop of Ely on behalf of the House of Bishops, this paper helps to highlight the critical triangle of school, home and church in seeing the faith of children and young people grow. The vision aims to see every aspect of mission and ministry through the lens of what it means for ministry *with* children, young people and households. It is further example of multiple national departments working collaboratively to a common vision (in this case five in particular: Education, Evangelism & Discipleship, Ministry, Renewal and Reform, and Setting God's People Free). The ComRes statistics quoted amplify the need and the vision (56% of practicing Christians came to faith under the age of 10 and a further 20% as teenagers; whilst of those who used to be a member of a religious group – not just Christian – but have now stopped, 38% of them stopped before they reached 18 years old and a further 21% between 19 and 24). The paper outlines a desire for every congregation and every Christian parent to actively engage in this responsibility.

- **Friday afternoon (no later than 5:45pm start) – Estates Evangelism (GS 2122)**
 - Initially part of the Archbishops' Evangelism Taskgroup, a new group, chaired by the Bishop of Burnley (who has just been re-elected to Synod from this Group of Sessions and will be moving the motion) formed to take this particular strand of work forward in recognition of God's preference for those most in need. Both rooted in theology, a prophetic voice and practically grounded, the paper offers a vision to have a loving, worshipping, service Christian community on every significant social housing estate in England. The paper outlines how the group are working towards this and details three particular areas to further develop (engagement with Dioceses; building the voice of Estates residents; and growing stronger partners nationally and locally as the group itself has now dedicated staff and a relatively small budget).

- **Saturday morning – Encouraging Youth Evangelism, Private Members Motion (GS 2124 & GS 2124B)**
 - Mark Russell (Head of Church Army) brings forward this motion to both raise awareness and, as he concludes, to move Synod from merely saying good things to acting more. It highlights how the Archbishops' Evangelism Taskgroup made work with young people one of its six priorities, leading to the creation of a new role as National Youth Evangelism Officer (Jimmy Dale) and the Bishop of Southwell and Notts being asked to serve as Bishop for Evangelism To and With Younger People (with associated advisory group). The reports highlight both the size of the task ahead of us and also 8 practical ways the work is being taken forward nationally.

In addition to these four a number of other debates and presentations, e.g. that from the wider Anglican Communion have significant proportions focused on the same.

Whilst there may be some who wish to paint this as a self-obsessed and anxious church looking to manage an uncertain future, we know instead this is (mostly!) motivated by a desire to see people have the same opportunities which we have had to know life, purpose, meaning, hope and salvation in Jesus Christ.

I suspect those in the wider Church and society who follow the debates or their coverage will remember more of the tone than their exact content. The following four suggestions will, I'm sure, be self-evident to readers, but maybe helpful to remind one another of:

For all

The baptismal call to all Christians to be witnesses to the risen Christ, and the specific call for some to be evangelists, although of prime importance to evangelicalism is in no way limited to just one part of our Church. There may sadly be a few voices from the edges of Synod, either seeing this as an evangelical takeover or evangelicals reacting to the way those from other traditions are engaging in evangelism. Whilst the detail of these discussions is important, to have opportunity to celebrate evangelistic renewal across the breadth of the Church of England in the importance of sharing faith and hope in Jesus, it would seem a missed opportunity if it is remembered for turning into a partisan affair which failed to embody the grace of which we speak. Speakers may wish to reflect on how best to avoid even the appearance of this. One example might be the conscious habit of sharing good practice and stories in evangelism and witness from traditions different from our own. The story of Thy Kingdom Come maybe instructive here (e.g. the recent key letter from the heads of all main denominations in England calling on all Christians to join in Thy Kingdom Come and specifically to pray for five particular people to come to know Christ). Similarly, the strong strand focused on children, young people and families is an area on which Members may find it helpful to speak into (at the moment, when looking at the hours young people who are Christians spend in church, school and home and then where local churches put resources, they are arguably in almost exactly inverse proportion to the hours spent in each place (how do we encourage parents to confidently share faith in their homes?).

Bigger

Whilst the technicalities are important, the debates are an opportunity to focus on the tone and the bigger picture rather than get caught in smaller points of detail. It would be a shame if detailed amendments looking to co-opt these debates into other issues, took up the core of Synod's time and forced our eyes from the bigger story of God calling us to share His good gifts with a world in need. Members may wish to encourage one another in avoiding any temptation down the amendment rabbit hole unless absolutely necessary.

Evangelistic in itself

Whilst the proportion of people who come to faith whilst reading or watching coverage of General Synod maybe smaller than those invited on a short course by a friend, the sheer amount of time being dedicated to evangelism and witness these Group of Sessions will likely mean that there will be coverage in wider media. It may be a pipedream to hope that through it people may start on a journey towards discovering life in Jesus Christ in their local church, but stranger things have happened (e.g. Balaam's donkey!). Let's both pray for this and also be mindful of our dual audiences in what we say and how we say it.

...to make a bigger difference

Michael Green wrote "If faith doesn't start with the individual, it doesn't start but if it ends with the individual it ends." Over the last two decades, there appears to be a greater enjoining of word and deed in evangelism (embodied by such movements as Hope). The debates are a good opportunity to assuage any hearers of the roots of this either being in ecclesiological narcissism (this is about the survival of an institution) or a reworked gnosticism (that it is all about souls and not people). Of course salvation with and by God forever through Jesus Christ is central and key to our faith, but the same love also shows forth in how we serve others and the very real needs they faced.

Barry Hill, Leicester, 141