Engaging Evangelism in the Congregation

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CHAPTER 9

Engaging Evangelism in the Congregation

Pat Taylor Ellison and Pat Keifert

Who We Are in Christ . . .

We are lifelong learners. From an early age we did a lot of our early learning in congregations in South Dakota and Minnesota. We continued our learning—Pat Keifert at Valparaiso, Christ Seminary-Seminex, and the University of Chicago and Pat Ellison at the Universities of St. Thomas and Minnesota. These days we learn from one another as we work in, with, under, and against congregations. It has taken time to put what we have learned into practical habits for church people everywhere.

We teach at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and work with congregations out of Church Innovations Institute. Here, we are called toward innovating our church's capacities to be renewed in mission. This mission and ministry are steeped in listening—listening to God by dwelling in the Word and listening intentionally to those who come to us for help. We believe that only by listening deeply can people be freed to speak with each other and to learn what God has in mind for them. Sometimes we don't hear very well. Sometimes we miss what's really going on. But we never stop listening, and what we hear teaches us about God's mission in the world and within congregations.
Engaging evangelism is in the Christian’s job description. Brand-new believers are practically jet-propelled to share the story, proclaiming the goodness of the Lord. Long-time believers and lifelong believers may not take God’s love for granted, but we don’t think very often of those who don’t know God’s love for them.

Our congregations are filled with lifelong believers. We are nurtured weekly by our congregation’s life and work and consider only rarely the lives of our neighbors who don’t join us for Christian worship and fellowship.

But suppose this book is a wild success. Suppose lifelong Christians are inspired to listen to their friends, neighbors, relatives, and coworkers to hear God’s story unfolding in their lives and to invite them into lives of new or deeper discipleship. Who will take these newcomers? Our congregations! But what will our congregations do with them?

• Currently, when energized newcomers come into congregational life, eight times out of 10 our first move is to put them on committees. However, only a small percentage of North Americans say that they get energized by committee work.

• Very few congregations have discipleship programs, educational opportunities, or small-group ministries designed for newcomers, although the number is growing.

• Rapidly growing congregations know how to welcome newcomers and invite them into discipleship experiences, but not many have as their goal to create both disciples and evangelists.

• Some congregations have deliberately and serendipitously created space for Christian disciple-making and faith deepening. They also have people in their congregation who can identify spiritual gifts and equip folks for evangelism.
God has a preferred future for every congregation, and the Holy Spirit has already placed the gifts it needs within it. Most of our congregations don’t spend much time thinking or praying about the following questions. Yet these are the questions of our future.

- How does a congregation discover its gifts to deepen discipleship and equip evangelists?
- What sort of shared vision for mission does such a congregation have?
- How does it tend and nurture that vision in ongoing ways?
- What is the role of pastors and lay leaders in such a congregation?

This chapter addresses these questions through the life and experiences of an imaginary congregation, Ancient and Future Lutheran Church. It is about to receive many newcomers because its people are evangelists who share the story every day and intentionally introduce their friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ. This chapter explores the components of that congregation’s capacity to do this intentionally and well.

**Plan for the X-Moment**

Sheryl is a middle manager at a relatively large corporation. A quiet but friendly person, she is trusted and admired by many. Over the years, she has gotten to know her coworker, Connie. Although they’re not best friends, they have shared life’s ups and downs with each other. Recently, Connie told Sheryl about a tremendous crisis that has rocked her family. Connie’s newly born son, Jason, died from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Several years earlier, Sheryl, too, lost a child, although the circumstances of her daughter’s death were different. She had never shared this very painful part of her life with anyone at this job.
"We lost a baby girl," Sheryl told Connie one day over coffee. "It was several years ago, but it still hurts." Surprised but deeply moved by this, Connie opened up to Sheryl about her own pain and loss. After a few weeks of short conversations, Connie finally asked Sheryl how she has survived.

"Big parts of my life did not survive," Sheryl said, "including my marriage. But God, a good counselor, and my Compassionate Friends support group helped me survive."

Sheryl's honesty rattled Connie, who grew up in a non-religious home. She avoided the topic for several weeks, but then, one day, she asked, "What difference has your faith made in helping you through this horrible experience?"

"Knowing Jesus made a difference for me," Sheryl said, "because I knew I wasn't alone." Sheryl talked a little bit more about her faith and about how joining a small group of fellow Christians who had also lost children had helped her see that she has the chance for a normal—even full—life again. Connie listened but said nothing more.

A couple of weeks later, over another cup of coffee, Connie asked if she might attend the small group with Sheryl. "Absolutely," Sheryl said, smiling.

After a few weeks of hearing other parents talk about their own pain and loss and the hope Jesus was giving them, Connie asked to explore the Christian faith further. The grief group leader connected her with a seekers' group in the congregation. Over the next few months, Connie decided to prepare for baptism and membership in the congregation. Several months later, Sheryl was a sponsor at Connie's baptism.

Conversation that leads to relationship and conversion is a fairly common experience, according to sociological experts in contemporary conversion. But who really facilitated this conversion? Certainly,
Sheryl’s relationship with Connie is important. But if we take another step back, we can begin to see that the main actors in this evangelism story is the congregation. Ancient and Future Lutheran Church has been organized with the purpose of supporting this moment in the lives of Sheryl and Connie—the evangelism X-moment.

X-moments are events for which an organization is organized. At a fast-food restaurant, the X-moment is the two-minute interaction between the server and the customer that is so good that the customer returns. If the restaurant prepares for these moments, they happen often and with excellence.

But often the sense of the X-moment is lost. Often churches see themselves as a family gathered around a pulpit (and sometimes table), with a seminary graduate as the parent or older sibling who is in charge of the X-moment. The pastor is the one who is sent into mission—not the members. The congregation doesn’t imagine or organize itself as the faithful who have been selected, shaped, and sent in the mission of God into the world of their everyday lives.

Let’s imagine that Ancient and Future Lutheran Church is a local church that balances the X-moment of the church gathered with the X-moment of the church dispersed and sent to particular places and relationships with the ability to offer an initial invitation and engagement to those friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers who already trust and respect the member of the congregation who has been sent, the apostle.

Our congregation knows its mission and the purpose of the X-moment. We know why we’re organized. Our members call folks in, center them in worship of the triune God while learning together, and send them back out into the wide world of work and play. We understand that without Ancient and Future’s deliberate attention and support, disciple-apostles like Sheryl would have a much harder time intentionally introducing people such as Connie to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus.
A Story Worth Sharing

Of course, Ancient and Future Lutheran Church was not always organized this way.

For many years, we received almost no new members and only a few visitors every year. Several years ago, Karen, a member, launched a small group to help folks handle their acute grief following a difficult death in the congregation. The group was a short-term success, not only for its participants but also for neighbors who were also touched by the death.

Through that experience, our congregation realized we were good at offering hospitality and comfort to the grieving. Before long, several small grief groups developed. The congregation agreed that we had discovered a mission to help people in their grief.

While this discovery was a little bit accidental, we reflected upon it by dwelling in the Word of God and asking if God was calling us to this particular focus in the mission of God. But how could our congregation nurture evangelists like Karen in this ministry? How could we equip ourselves for this mission? These questions led us to reflect on the working pieces of our capacities to intentionally introduce grieving persons to the kingdom of God in Jesus through our existing gifts.

**Build Capacity to Do Ministry**

To do any job, we need to have a capacity to do it. That capacity has components, just as a book has chapters or a recipe has ingredients. The ingredients of a capacity are:

1. Attitudes and beliefs
2. Knowledge base
3. Skills
4. Habits

If Paul is a woodcarver, he first has to have certain attitudes and beliefs about woodcarving. He has to want to do it and place some value in it.
Second, Paul needs some knowledge about wood and wood products. Next, Paul needs skills for finding, carving, and finishing wood. And he needs habits of work, health, and attention to detail that he can pass on to another person if she wants to learn his craft.

It's the same with evangelism. When we pay attention as a congregation to how we are introducing people to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ, we realize we would be wise to have certain attitudes and beliefs, minimum knowledge, skills, and pass-on-able habits.

And we must have these things, not just as individuals but as a whole community of faith. The gift Sheryl brought to Connie was given at first through one-on-one, day-to-day conversations at work. But eventually that gift was nourished and Connie was brought into an even deeper relationship with the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus because there was an entire community of believers there to receive her—our congregation.

This chapter looks at the components of capacity desirable for a congregation that is going to receive many newcomers because it has prepared its members for their X-moments—relationships and conversations through which believers introduce their friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ. How does a congregation like Ancient and Future Lutheran Church do that? By developing capacities in these five areas:

1. Deepening discipleship through discerning our call to God's mission both as individuals and as a congregation.

2. Equipping people to introduce others to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus.

3. Sharing a vision for mission in our congregation.

4. Tending and nurturing that vision for mission.

5. Understanding the roles of pastors and lay leaders in our congregation.
Components of Deepening Discernment

Attitudes and Beliefs

• We care about our relationship with God.
• We desire, even when we’re tired, to attend to God’s presence.

Minimum Knowledge Base

• We know what disciples do.
• We know what disciples think and feel.

Skills

• We are able to make time for God and God’s word.
• We are able to raise questions and wrestle with issues.

Pass-on-able Habits

• We practice daily contact with God in many times and places.
• We practice taking time to dwell in God’s word and in prayer.

Deepen a Discernment of God’s Call to God’s Mission

The first questions Ancient and Future Lutheran Church asked were, “Do we want to deepen our discipleship? What does that look like? What do we look and sound like when we’re doing it?” And as we voiced these questions, members became increasingly aware that God was sending them, both individually and as a community, into relationships with others in their community.

It’s not enough to have these attitudes and beliefs. What do we know about being a disciple? Our congregation studied the biblical stories about Jesus’ disciples—their strengths and their very human failings.
We also got to know more recent disciples, people in our congregation who worship, teach, minister, and trust in the Lord to lead them through the sorrows and joys of life.

Even though it is difficult to make time for God in the midst of our busy lives, learning to do that is an important skill. We learned how to sit at God’s feet and listen—or question—or cry.

We learned that we could set aside time with God, but that doing it daily took more than skill. It had to become our habit.

Components of Equipping People to Introduce Others to Jesus

Attitudes and Beliefs

- We care about the suffering and loneliness of others.
- We desire God’s energy and peace for those we love.

Minimum Knowledge Base

- We know our own story of faith.

Skills

- We are able to listen deeply to the hopes, fears, pain, and joy of others.
- We are able to hear God’s story in their lives and speak about that in helpful words.

Pass-on-able Habits

- We daily listen deeply to one person.
- We daily reserve time to find that person and to talk with God about the experience.
Equip People to Introduce Others to the Kingdom of God in the Person of Jesus

Congregations talk about sending people into the world, but do we really build their capacity to intentionally introduce others to God’s kingdom?

At Ancient and Future Lutheran Church, we knew that we cared about people and were good at celebrating joys and honoring sorrows. But that initial group of grief supporters taught us that griever have long-term suffering. People also began to learn that Karen and this small group believed that God was calling them to minister to and with grieving people and to bring God’s peace and energy to them.

Their sense of call spilled out into our congregation. Others became interested in the mission. However, our congregation realized that even though we knew the basics of God’s story, we needed other knowledge to connect with people. So, we learned how to listen well and how to talk gently about our own faith stories.

How many of us have not always listened deeply to others before we opened our mouths? How many of us, even when we did learn to listen deeply, didn’t speak for fear of intruding or imposing? We have not always had these skills. As a result, we never shared our faith.

After developing these skills, many of us found that we needed to practice, to get in the habit of making time to listen to a person and then talking with God about the experience. Not all have the habit yet, but our whole congregation is working on it together. We talk about it, pray about it, and offer training for the attitudes and beliefs, knowledge base, skills, and habits that support the capacity of equipping people to introduce others to the kingdom of God in Christ Jesus.
Engaging Evangelism in the Congregation

Components of Sharing a Vision for Mission

Attitudes and Beliefs

• We believe that God has a job for us.
• We believe that each of us is called to be a disciple.
• We believe that we are called as a congregation to act together for our neighbors.

Minimum Knowledge Base

• We know focus is important.
• We know naming the work gives us focus.
• We know the needs of our friends, neighbors, relatives, and coworkers.

Skills

• We are able to imagine a future in which we do this focused work.
• We are able to name our focus and still listen to others’ ideas.
• We are able to discern together God’s preferred future for us and follow through.

Pass-on-able Habits

• We regularly compare what we’re doing with our vision.
• We regularly pray for God’s help to keep our focus and not be distracted.
• We use our vision for mission focus each time we make decisions.
• We regularly pray for the Spirit’s help to make clear God’s preferred future for us.
Share a Vision for Mission in Our Congregation

Like many congregations, Ancient and Future Lutheran Church has a written vision statement. But it took this experience with Karen and the grief group for a vision no one knew about to become one that members could connect with God’s mission in our lives. This shift didn’t happen overnight. It took several deaths, several group actions, some mistakes, and quite a bit of soul searching.

As this calling became clearer, our congregation learned that it wasn’t set up to support this kind of mission. With 16 standing committees, we found that time, money, and resources were often stretched. But having a clear vision helped us change and focus our resources.

This change was painful, so we developed skills to help ourselves prioritize. Many things still compete for attention. When excellent ideas appear to be outside the congregation’s vision, we pray and listen and filter them through the vision. Our leaders share a commitment to being accountable for getting done what they have promised to do.

Over time, these skills turned into habits that became our way of listening to God in our ministry team and council meetings to help us sort through suggestions and make decisions. Sometimes our path is clear, sometimes it’s cluttered, but these habits help us get the work done.

Tend and Nurture a Vision for Mission

Our vision for mission is that focus for ministry that we believe God gives us and promises to help us in—not just as individual ministers but through our lives together in worshiping congregations.

At Ancient and Future Lutheran Church, part of that vision is a call to help people in the tough times of their lives, especially when they’re dealing with death. Another part is a call to introduce people to God and connect them with a community of believers. An important piece of this vision has been to treat worship as an opportunity for everyone to experience the kingdom of God in the person of Christ.
Components of Tending and Nurturing a Vision for Mission

Attitudes and Beliefs

- We believe that God promises to be present and active in worship.
- We want to focus our congregation’s talent and energy.

Minimum Knowledge Base

- We know what newcomers think and feel when they enter our space.
- We know what gives people a welcoming space.
- We know that when people aren’t self-conscious, they can be God-conscious.

Skills

- We are able to invite friends, neighbors, relatives, and coworkers to worship and other activities.
- We are able to connect people into worship in a way that they notice God there.
- We are able to connect people to others who dwell in the Word of God and pay attention to what God is doing.

Pass-on-able Habits

- We regularly invite friends, neighbors, relatives, and coworkers to worship and small groups.
- We regularly check with our guests to see that they have a place to sit, something to eat, and someone to talk to.
- We regularly pray for the Spirit’s help to serve those we’ve invited and those we haven’t found yet.
But our congregation learned that people who come to worship have different expectations and needs, depending on whether they are regulars or newcomers. Although God promises to be in worship, congregational members realized that we humans can actually prevent someone’s introduction to God by distracting them and making them self-conscious.

So we considered what skills we might need to welcome all who come to worship. Hospitality is a skill, and not all members of Ancient and Future Lutheran Church are gifted with it. But some people, often quiet people, have very big gifts for paying attention—for seeing when a hymnal is missing, for smiling at children, for knowing where the bathrooms are, and for being good hosts. These welcoming people are often the best at helping newcomers become more comfortable.

After some time, the congregation realized that these skills needed to become habits in order to be meaningful and effective. Those who have developed these habits really enjoy finding and inviting new people to worship. They find it wonderful to introduce suffering people they know to the ministries at Ancient and Future Lutheran Church. Some of those new people return and some even invite others, connecting them to worship and small groups. The X-moments multiply and God blesses this ministry.

**Understand the Roles of Pastors and Lay Leaders in Our Congregation**

Ancient and Future Lutheran Church used to have a different idea about the role of pastors and lay leaders. Many saw the pastor as the boss—responsible for all ministry. Others believed the congregation could go as far as the pastor could take it and the laity would allow it.

But our church ran into problems. One pastor burned out. Another was on the verge of burning out. Finally, our congregation realized how to do ministry by and for one another, using our pastors for training, support, and encouragement. But it took an attitude shift, prompted by Karen and her small group, to make us realize that lay people who have
Components of understanding the roles of pastors and lay leaders

Attitudes and Beliefs

• We believe pastors and staff members should equip and encourage lay people.
• We believe laity must lead ministry, with coaching and support from the leaders.

Minimum Knowledge Base

• We know our leaders’ gifts and talents and are good stewards of these blessings.
• We know that we are the priesthood of all believers—all believers do the work.

Skills

• We are able to name and clearly describe the work we do and the leader who is necessary to support and organize that work.
• We are able to give our leaders the authority to get things done.
• We are able to hold our leaders accountable for their work.
• We are able to celebrate and thank our leaders for work well done.

Pass-on-able Habits

• We regularly make careful plans, listing resources and time lines.
• We regularly check our plans with our vision.
• We regularly give real authority to make decisions and take action.
• We regularly hold one another accountable for the result, learning from every experience.
• We regularly pray for the Spirit’s help to serve those who lead us.
passion and skills for ministry can be great leaders. Although small-group leaders are coached by the pastor, the grief ministry at Ancient and Future Lutheran Church has become an evangelism ministry by laity for laity.

Our congregation found that it helps to know people’s gifts and talents. It’s better for paid and volunteer leaders, whether clergy or lay, to do the work they do best as often as possible. When labor is needed that they don’t do well, others with the gifts to do that work come forward. We know that God calls all of us to work toward God’s mission. Martin Luther may have said that we are the priesthood of all believers, but it’s quite another thing to know it from experience.

The congregation developed new skills to make this shift. One skill has been to clearly define and focus the work. Then the appropriate leader is almost always easier to find. Sometimes the appropriate leader isn’t a member but is a neighbor or friend or a staff member at another church. Another skill has been to be clear about expectations, accountability, and authority. Having authority doesn’t mean the leaders do all the work. But it does mean they have the authority to ask for help and expect to receive it. When a task is over, our congregation asks what we learned. Whether it was a smashing success or not, we celebrate, thank, learn, and grow.

By turning skills into habits, our ministry has flourished. We’ve invented forms that help us do the job, and rituals for accountability and celebration. We even have worship services that celebrate the beginning and end of projects, services that involve song, stories, and prayer.

This looks overwhelming! Does my congregation have to be able to do ALL of these things well? Well, no. Not all of these tasks and skills are necessary for every congregation. Indeed, a key ingredient to engaging evangelism is getting short lists, very short lists, of the minimal attitudes and beliefs, minimum knowledge base, skills, and pass-on-able habits that fit your congregation’s call within God’s mission.
Summary

Sheryl had just moved to town a couple of years after Karen helped the congregation at Ancient and Future Lutheran Church discover its gifts for inviting persons in deep grief into a caring community. She was looking for a group to help her continue to grieve the death of her daughter and, after her divorce, her sense of family. In a local grocery store she saw a notice for a group that fit the description, sponsored by Ancient and Future Lutheran Church. Even though Sheryl had not considered tying her grief to a church, she felt a deep spiritual need and decided to take a chance on at least one visit to the church’s grief group. One visit and she was hooked. With time, Sheryl decided to join the seekers’ small group. Eventually, she sought to be baptized and became a member. Some years later, she met Connie . . .

Engaging evangelism meant that someone had to share the story. But it was a congregation—engaging evangelism—that provided the encouragement, training, support, inspiration, and context within which that story could be told.

For Reflection and Discussion

This chapter describes five components of the capacity to invite and receive newcomers:

1. Deepening discipleship through discerning our call to God’s mission both as individuals and as a congregation.

2. Equipping people to introduce others to the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus.

3. Sharing a vision for mission in our congregation.

4. Tending and nurturing that vision for mission.

5. Understanding the roles of pastors and lay leaders in our congregation.
For each of the five components of capacity, reflect on the following questions or discuss them as a group:

- What does your congregation believe?
- What does your congregation know?
- What skills does your congregation have?
- What habits does your congregation practice?