

THE Elephant in the Room

by Dave Mann



Missing links that are stopping our churches
achieving their mission.

A path to new hope

3.

The missing links of 1993

I believe there have been numerous ‘missing links’ in the evangelistic mobilisation efforts of our churches. Piston #4 in the previous chapter would be an example. In this chapter we will look at two of the most significant missing links.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, ‘Vision New Zealand, Volume I’ (published in 1993) provided our nation’s churches with an outstanding articulation of current (and continuing) cultural challenges with regard to evangelism. However, while the problems were well defined, I believe that some missing links have remained in our nation’s corporate Church knowledge. I believe these have kept us from a holistic application of

our mission in our new cultural context. We seem to have understood that a more relational approach to outreach is more winsome in our culture, and that through community ministry we can potentially build bridges to our communities. However, it sometimes seems like this is all that we learnt!

Some lessons take time to be discovered and articulated. Over the past 20 years I have identified two significant links missing in our efforts, resulting in a disconnect between our understanding of our culture and our ability to connect the gospel meaningfully with people in it. These are summarised in this chapter. They are exciting things to discover — because they are like keys that can unlock doors we have been otherwise ‘stuck’ behind!

1. A strategic missing link for members: An updated and clearly defined *content* for evangelism training for our current cultural environment.

In particular we are talking here about a content that the average church member would vote ‘yes’ to with their feet and mouth, after hearing it.

Most church people are scared of evangelism training seminars. The stereo-type of those who run the seminars has been that they place guilt trips on us for all that we are not doing, while expecting us to change personality to become something we are not. The end goal is believed to be that we then go out on the street and ‘confront’ people with the gospel. While not all evangelism equippers are like this, there is a sad truth to it — which is why we avoid those seminars like we do!

We have been left with a prejudice against this thing called ‘evangelism’.

Of note, if you run an evangelism seminar in an average NZ church, it’s not only the members who are scared of going along, it’s the pastors!

A significant ‘disconnect’ exists between our mission and what it looks like when practically applied.

Soon after we arrived back in New Zealand I heard of an evangelism seminar run in a rural New Zealand town. A reputable evangelism-equipper had been invited, and promotions were distributed to at least ten, if not thirty churches in the region. How many attended? Five people! If even just the pastors of the local town had gone along the attendance would have doubled. What was going on? Had the New Zealand Church lost its heart for the gospel?

I knew this church well, and had the privilege of having lunch with a number of their members a month or so later. They are my friends. I asked various ones if they had gone along, and asked why not if they hadn’t. Their responses helped me to articulate something I’d not put in words before. They loved all those they knew who are without Christ, and were totally convinced of the need for evangelism. However, they’d been to a seminar like this 20 years ago — and it ‘hadn’t worked’! They had shared the gospel with their friends and family members, and they had responded, “Good for you, I’m glad you’ve found what works for you.” And the conversation had ended there.

It wasn’t that these Christians lacked love for the ‘lost’. Instead, their lack of immediate enthusiasm to attend the evangelism training was their cultural intuition telling them that learning — yet again — how to share the gospel wasn’t going to fix the problem they faced. We could probably still get them to attend the traditional evangelism seminar if we motivated them well with the many good reasons there are to still attend — but

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what about the fact that their intuition might have something to teach us too?

While it is true that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who will believe (Romans 1:16) it can also be true that the 'god of this age blinds the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel' (2 Corinthians 4:4). Sometimes cultural viewpoints blind people from understanding things immediately — so their journey takes longer.

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Additionally, for most people, their greatest concern isn't how to share the gospel with someone they don't know on a street. It's how to share the gospel with those they see every week. It's how to win friends, family and colleagues over to faith in Christ Jesus!

The lessons are simple: We need to meet Western Christians at their point of need. Beneficially, if we do, they will be interested to learn more, because they will begin to see possibilities instead of impossibilities.

It is ironic that most New Zealanders consider themselves to be spiritual people, while we in the churches sometimes feel people are disinterested in spiritual things. There is a cultural disconnect between our churches and our society. It can be overcome if we are willing to learn how!

Conversational skills are a first key area to add to our curriculum. Once learnt, our members will find that their friends really do have spiritual thoughts and questions. Not long after, they will find themselves presented with easy opportunities to share about their own faith. If they get stuck for words they will be ready to learn how to share the gospel! As their friends begin to explain the very good reasons why they don't

consider Christian faith (for example, with all the evil and suffering we see it really is more logical to believe that God is morally indifferent — or alternatively limited in his power or foresight) the Christian will be more interested to understand why they believe what they believe.

THE CONCLUDING SCOPE OF OUR EQUIPPING CURRICULUM

My experiences in discipling others have led me to conclude upon four key areas in which we will need to equip our church members if we are to see them become sustainably mobilised as witnesses to those they know and meet. These are knowledge, perspectives and skills related to

- (1) The gospel
- (2) Conversational skills
- (3) Prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit
- (4) Teamwork.

There are certainly other areas that could be added. However, in my view, these four areas are the foundational ones. Conversational skills are the first area to teach — because the experiences of many Christians have already proven to them that a direct approach doesn't work.

Rather than aiming only to share the gospel with people, our principle goal is to help people every day and in every way to take steps toward Jesus.

A notable value behind this new and clearly defined equipping curriculum is a redefining of our goal in personal witness. Rather than aiming only to share the gospel with people, our principle goal is to help people every day and in every way to take steps toward Jesus (these words are borrowed from Dr David Geisler). This approach takes into account that most of us are talking with people we see every day or week. While it is great if we can share the gospel with them, we can

only do that once. What our friends need is half a dozen or more free and open conversations. It is in conversations like these that we will be able to identify and discuss the very real thoughts and feelings that are behind their rejection of our beliefs (which to them may seem exclusive and arrogant, believing that there is only one path to God — and that this God is a good and knowable even though the world around us includes evil and suffering that a good and powerful God logically could and would stop).

When members hear this stuff articulated, and are shown the kinds of conversational perspectives and skills that can help them open ‘normal’ conversations about spiritual things with Westerners, they begin to see their mission as ‘mission possible’ again. They begin to vote with their feet in a positive way. They begin to see how they could connect their belief with their culture. One by one, they try conversational ideas out. The number of stories coming back to you about these conversations begins to increase. In time, as more and more people are encouraged to take steps toward Jesus, more people choose to follow Jesus.

The clear defining of a content for evangelism training that can produce results in our current culture is a significant and powerful missing link!

FURTHER RESOURCES TO HELP YOU PUT IT INTO PRACTISE:

- **‘Because we care’** by Dave Mann (BigBookPublishing.co.nz) articulates the possible scope of our equipping content and the reasons for this.
- The **‘Because we care’** concise video teaching series (free online via the ‘resources’ page at AllTogether.co.nz) simplifies this for members. Each of the brief 14 teachings also comes with a concise study. Key application points are taught which can empower a person to start a new approach.
- **‘Conversational Evangelism’** by Norman and David Geisler is a book that was influential in my thinking on this topic. Some of my own content draws on (and summarises) this book, with the permission of its authors.

2. A strategic missing link for pastors: The articulation of a *leadership strategy* that would be realistic for the average pastor (who does not consider himself/herself an ‘evangelist’) to apply, to create a sustained culture of culturally-appropriate witnessing activity from their local church.

While the first missing link is a realistic *content* for members to apply, the second is a realistic *leadership strategy* for pastors to apply. In both cases, these are about finding solutions that suit (a) our current multi-religious cultural environment, and (b) our evangelistically discouraged church environment.

When I returned to New Zealand from Asia, I felt particularly saddened that so many had become acclimatised to a culture of non-

evangelism in our churches. In my view, we have become very accepting of things that we should not be accepting of.

I am convinced there is a need for a new paradigm (a nexus of perspectives and ideas that make up a singular approach) — so I'm going to show you one. It is ridiculously simple — and works!

SIX PRINCIPLES AND HABITS FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF OUR MISSION

To successfully lead church members to embrace their God-given mission the leaders will need to

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|--------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Motivate | 2. Equip |
| 3. Reinforce | 4. Remind |
| 5. Model | 6. Do this with consistency |

The logic of this is very simple.

1. Motivate — The key stated reason why many people do not tell others about Christ is because of a fear of rejection. Yet love can overcome fear! The solution to the problem is to get a revelation of God's love (to grow in love). We need to see as Jesus sees — and it is our role as preachers of God's Word to help people see as Jesus sees! Let it be said again, the key hindrance to the spread of the gospel is a lack of love in our hearts. With gentleness and truth — and God's help, this can be addressed.

2. Equip — Many times I have met devout Christians who sincerely want to be witnesses for Jesus, but who simply do not know how to get conversations about spiritual things happening. I understand this point very well, because for most of my life I saw such a person every time I looked in the mirror. Then I learnt some things, and this changed for me. Many times since I have had the joy of also seeing this change for others as a result of showing them how to engage those they know in non-

threatening two-way conversations. There are cultural perspectives, people skills, gospel communication skills, and more that we can teach — and it produces results! Otherwise ‘immobilised’ people will begin to talk with those around them in natural ways about spiritual things. The key content that needs teaching can be summarised and reduced to a reasonably short list of points and applications. A good grounding in the basics is all that many people need to become effective. Unless we show them how, most people will not naturally work it out for themselves!

3. Reinforce — It is important that we include the small group dynamic in this picture (piston #2). People are said to remember 10% of what they hear, but 40% of what they say (and 60-70% of what they do, depending which study you look at). If we can get people talking together about the outreach equipping we give through our pulpit, and practicing the applications on one another, our chances of leading a change in this area are greatly increased.

4. Remind — Educational theory says that repetition is necessary for learning. While many churches pride themselves in having a ‘fresh’ pulpit in which there is no noticeable repetition, I suggest we have got this wrong! The spiral curriculum is a well-proven educational theory. It suggests that the most effective learning will take place when we intentionally remind people of previous knowledge, and then build upon it with new knowledge. For our members to remember and apply a particular skill we teach in our churches we might need to remind them of it a week later, two weeks later, a month later, three months later, six months later, and then a couple of times a year from that point in time onwards. If we do this, it could become a part of our church’s corporate knowledge and culture, and will be more likely to be applied!

5. Model — We must not only tell people how, but show them how.

This can be done in person by taking others with us when we go to engage people in spiritual conversations — but also by sharing stories about how we came to faith, and have sought to share faith with

others. Stories are powerful! Additionally, if pastors will preach the gospel message clearly and concisely occasionally, this gives the members wording that they could copy and use later on in their own conversations.

6. Consistency — A pastor told me recently how he had just announced, at the start of the New Year, that they were going to continue the focus on outreach activity and equipping that they had last year. He said that it was as if something changed (for the better) in the environment of his church when he did this.

When we keep running new programs, and using different resources with different applications, we are sometimes unknowingly training our members to NOT listen to us.

To illustrate: when starting in a new pastoral role with 35 members, the average number of new friends who attended an outreach event or service was 2 to 4. We set to work on the quality of the outreaches, and in the second year were disappointed to have only a slight increase. What was happening? Do better quality programs not work? Does the invitational evangelism approach have no place? Of course it does — so we persevered. From the third year onwards we regularly had 40 to 60 new friends at an outreach, and had times when we had more new friends than we had members (and we had grown in number by then also). What was happening? When we led a new way for the first year, they saw a valiant effort in the programs, but didn't yet trust that we

would be consistent in what we were doing. With time they saw that we were going to be consistent — so they trusted our programs and invited their friends.

Too often we become discouraged in our outreach efforts, and stop just short of where the result would begin. Our efforts at outreach equipping are exactly like this. Teaching something for a year will have little effect. Teaching the same thing for five years will change the culture!

HOW THE SIX HABITS CAN BE EXPRESSED

1. MOTIVATE

Why not motivate through the pulpit? This way all your members are encouraged.

2. EQUIP

Why not equip through the pulpit? Remember, seminars are for topics that apply only to some people — for example, marriage seminars, singles seminars, financial management seminars, and the like. Sermons are for things that apply to everyone — like how to share your faith with a multi-religious Westerner. The best place to discuss the mission of the Church is the pulpit!

3. REINFORCE

Why not reinforce through your small groups? Members can state things for themselves (making your teaching 4 times more memorable), and might even practice certain skills on each other (making your teaching 6 to 7 times more memorable).

4. REMIND

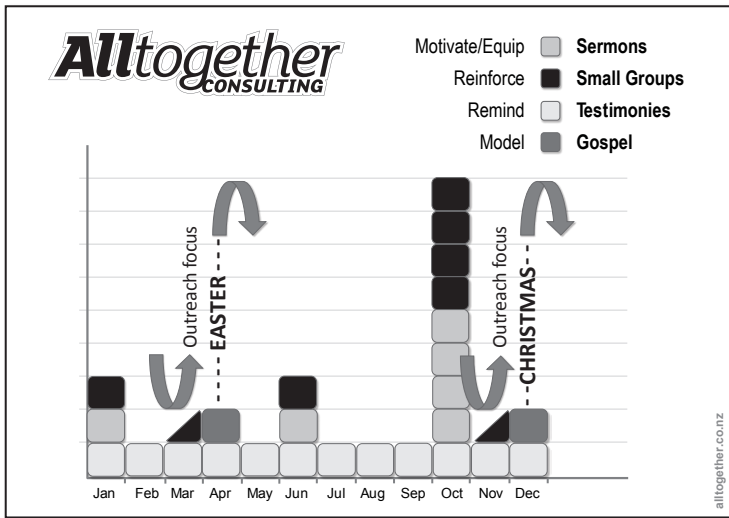
Why not remind by creating a habit of having testimonies in your weekend church services that are specifically about how people came to faith, or how they engaged people they know in conversations about spiritual things to encourage faith in Jesus? In leadership we get what we promote! Testimonies are success stories, and they can provide you with a platform to stand up afterwards, thanking the person who shared, and then reiterating relevant application points that you are trying to establish in the culture of your congregation.

5. MODEL

Why not model through both the sharing of testimony (including your own experiences) and through clear gospel preaching at least twice a year? Christmas and Easter are the most obvious times for this — though anytime can be fine. Also, if you tell your members you are going to commit to a habit of this, you will provide them with an opportunity to invite those they love to come along on those occasions. As mentioned earlier, many timid people still have a gospel passion. They are waiting for suitable services and events to which they could invite friends, so they can hear and understand the Christian hope.

6. CONSISTENCY

Why not find some others who are on the same journey as you to help enable consistency in your leadership? This could include discussing this with your church leadership team, so you can keep yourselves accountable to apply whatever plans you put in place to fulfill the above five principles. 'All Together Consulting', explained below, exists to help you bring these changes through a consistent application of these leadership habits.

EXAMPLE, ONE VISUAL APPLICATION OF THE HABITS.

A resource to help at AllTogether.co.nz

'All Together Consulting' exists to help pastors get results in the area of outreach and outreach mobilisation. Online there is explanation of a strategic approach to bringing change. A basic supply of resources to help you do this is available. If desired, through monthly subscription there is additionally the option of monthly encouragements to help maintain focus, along with awareness and access to a growing pool of resources including additional sermon outlines with studies, videos and free attendance at leaders' gatherings connected to this. Beyond this, a church could also engage with one of our consultants for personal encouragement, input on strategy, help with rallying leaders to share the vision, and to serve as a guest speaker to add strength to the changes you are implementing.

See AllTogether.co.nz for more information.

I believe that two highly significant keys have been offered to you. The question is, what will you do with them?

If we keep doing what we've already done, we will get more of what we already have. Most churches recognise that a change in their outreach culture is needed.

With the approach described above you could succeed in bringing that change!

However, there is another possible hindrance to acceptance of these simple solutions that deserves mention. Some people have an aversion to strategy because they are convinced that the Church will only grow by God's power. Let's discuss this next.

If we keep doing what we've already done, we will get more of what we already have.

'The Elephant in the Room' is a book for church leaders. It seeks to address an area of neglect that many seem disinterested in discussing: Evangelism is often in the 'too hard basket' in our churches, yet is integral to our mission. It's the elephant in the room! However, this book is only written because Dave believes there is hope. There is a way forward! Specifically, there are now solutions on the table that could remedy the current situation. They are profound — yet simple. The question is, are we ready to read, consider and apply them?

I believe pastors and churches throughout the country will one day thank God for the day this book came into their hands.

— Tony Collis | Pastor (Hope Centre, Levin)

I believe Dave Mann to be one of the clearest thinkers concerning evangelism in New Zealand today.

— Keith Harrington | Senior Pastor (Taupo Baptist Church)

"...we face a crisis of confidence in the gospel in New Zealand... Dave understands our context, and in a thoughtful and insightful way he addresses these challenges."

— Alan Vink | Executive Director, Willow Creek Association

Our behaviour comes from our thinking. To get different results might we need to think differently?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave is a gifted communicator and strategist, with a passion for the gospel. With more than 20 years experience behind him in outreach and pastoral ministry, he has felt led to focus on helping churches become more effective in their outreach, with a special focus on helping them mobilise their members as witnesses. In 2014, with his wife Heather, he initiated the 'Hope Project' — a national gospel project in New Zealand, which saw the gospel communicated with nearly every home in that nation and many churches encouraged. They have four young boys and reside in Tauranga, New Zealand.



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