

How do we invite?



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This short paper explores how we set about inviting those who have not yet begun their journey of faith. The goal is to persistently ask:

- 'What can I do?' and
- 'What can we do together?'

Three strands inform this Workbook. First, my own personal and professional exploration at church and work over the past fifteen years on the question of how we build a community that is worth joining, and where everyone is welcome. Second has been some insightful preaching I have heard at St Nic's, Nottingham. delivered by Steve Silvester and Chris Neal. Third is the many hours of challenging and constructive discussion I have enjoyed on this topic with others. The remaining weaknesses in this Workbook are my responsibility!

Supporting Personal Witness

Some Christians keep silent about the gospel with their friends. It is helpful to think of our task as spread across two axes. The Engel Scale (see the table) forms one axis and reminds us that we are called to make disciples (i.e. support the whole journey from -10 to +5, rather than just making converts at -1 to 0).

The second axis is the range of actions that encompass good works, acts of kindness and mercy, campaigning for social justice and speaking the words of the good news. All these things help to bring in the Kingdom of God.

simplified Engel Scale	
-10	No God framework
-9	Experience of emptiness
-8	Vague awareness of Christianity
-7	Interest in Christianity
-6	Awareness of the Gospel
-5	Positive attitudes to the Gospel
-4	Experience of Christian love
-3	Aware of personal need
-2	Grasp of implications of the Gospel
-1	Challenge to respond personally
0	Repentance and faith
+1	Evaluation of the decision
+2	Learning the basics of the Christian life
+3	Functioning member of local Church
+4	Continuing growth in character, lifestyle and service
+5	Effective sharing of faith and life

So before we think about talking and friendships, there is a need to check that we are paying enough attention to doing the work of the kingdom. Without this, our faith is viewed as just talk.

Task #1: Work for justice and peace in the world beyond the church.

- Engage in Matthew 25 tasks like visiting prisoners, feeding and clothing those who need it,
- Join hands with other people of goodwill who are working for justice.
- Check that these things are talked about in church, so that newcomers understand that this is part of the role of the church.

Then we can move on to the matter of talking about our faith.

Task #2: Build a culture where people take opportunities to tell others about their faith rather than keeping silent. We can do this by:

- Telling more stories about following Jesus – informally and in all kinds of church meetings
- Raising the faith level so we actively expect God to use us
- Debunking false ideas - that witnessing requires people to behave in an extrovert way or to claim that all their doubts and problems are solved.
- Continue to focus on authentic relationships where we genuinely meet people and listen as well as speak – the so-called ‘thick’ relationships where all of me meets with all of you.

We may have friends who would attend a Christian gathering if an appropriate activity was offered.

Task #3: Arrange our events at church and in small groups so that they are successful in engaging people from outside the church.

- Retain the primary emphasis on relationships, rather than becoming preoccupied with event planning, as the gospel is more likely to travel via informal relationships rather than formal programmes.
- Correct the over-emphasis on leadership and *starting* new programmes of activity by reminding people that it is good to get on board with someone else’s vision. We need to counter our society’s approach to leadership (an emphasis on human talent and celebrity) by ensuring that our approach to leadership is shared, diverse and emergent.

With some friends, we may have created an open relationship where we often talk about our faith, but this seems to evoke no interest.

Task #4: Build perseverance in prayer and listen to the stories of people who have finally chosen to follow Jesus after many years of hearing about him. Find out what made the difference and do more of that.

How have we become isolated from the world?

Some of us need to take definite action and find new people with whom we can share our faith. Before we settle on how to do this, we need an understanding of how as a church we have become isolated from the wider community.

There are three strands to our life as a church, as follows:

- The activities and relationships that occur in the **church building**
- The **groups** of Christians that meet in ordinary buildings, whether in homes, at work, or in a leisure environment, such as a pub.
- **Individuals** engaged in life alongside others.

The first two options have a natural tendency to strengthen the bonds within the Christian group and weaken the bridging connections with people outside the church – simply because we increasingly relate to the people we spend most time with, especially those with whom we choose to associate. So the local church can become rather like a private club seeking a chaplain. We therefore need to introduce elements into our building-based activities and our groups to reduce this tendency to consolidate into an isolated community.

Task #5: Think of ways to make the church building welcoming and how to reverse the drift into closed community living. For example:

- Establish a regular pattern of press releases for the local media
- Create marketing materials that build on our role as a historical and tourist venue for the city and seek out more events where we can connect our activities to Citywide secular celebrations.
- Clarify the role of the welcome team and ensure they are consistent
- Widen the brief of the welcome team so that it is on duty 24/7 and move some activities into the church building, so that it is used 24/7.
- Talk from the front about life outside our own community and encourage people to live it rather than spend all their time in church meetings.

Task #6: Take time to think through ways to make our small groups welcoming. For example:

- Obtain permission to meet in the host parish or find ways to collaborate with them
- Share detailed descriptions of events that have effectively welcomed newcomers. This will help our people who need to understand practical details as well as principles if they are to successfully adapt the practice
- Create a culture where we speak in a way that is OK for outsiders – free of jargon and talking about God some of the time but not all of the time.

Superficial contacts

We need an understanding of how relationships operate in 21st century culture. In our society, superficial contacts with other people mainly occur through our use of community amenities. These are settings where people tend to go to buy things or use a facility – places like cafes and shops, museums and galleries, parks and gyms, cinemas and theatres. We tend to visit these places alone or we go *with a friend* rather than going there to *make a friend*, and when we get there, we tend to encounter different people each time. Contacts in these places can also be described as ‘thin’ as each person knows very little of the others, rather than having a ‘thick’ or ‘wide waveband’ experience of the whole person.

In our culture, people do not expect to start new friendships in community amenities (although this may happen from time to time – more of this later) but rather they expect to build up their existing friendships through using these places together.

However, there may be some merit in spreading the rumour of Christ through such superficial contacts. Christians may give out invitation cards to shoppers or on the bus, offer healing on the streets or go out treasure hunting and rely on the work of the Holy Spirit through the single contact that they make with that individual.

Task #7: While some urban parishes have few homes, it is packed with community amenities that offer many opportunities for single contact outreach. Perhaps we could:

- Make a list of all the advertising boards in the parish where our marketing materials can be placed – newsagents windows, shop windows and so on
- Put an invitation card in every hotel room in the parish
- Hand out invitations to people queuing to enter night clubs or waiting at bus

stops.

- Join in with public events, such as flashmobs or street mime in the town square.
- Strengthen our 'Jubilee' work by responding to the needs of the least and the lost - people who spend time in the parish because they are homeless, addicted or have other social problems.

Deeper friendships

On our crowded planet, surrounded by impersonal media, we have learnt to ignore most superficial contacts. It is the longstanding connections that matter most – the people we see frequently, get to know and with whom we build a shared understanding over time.

Some of these longstanding connections arise in the community amenities that have just been described. So, for example, taking tea and toast to people queuing to access the local night club is mainly focused on single encounters, but a few people will start to visit the church on a regular basis – if there is a link made.

However, most longstanding connections in our society start in one of the main 'life domains' – education, employment, sports, arts, purpose-based activities (including political and religious groups), some online activities, volunteering or the links we make with our neighbours. This is not a closed list, and other specific subcultures may form in particular places. Our friendships arise in the context of learning together, working together or playing together and so each of these areas of community life is a powerful engine for friendship development.

Each life domain has its own culture and language, its own funding streams and key opinion formers, its own challenges and opportunities for mission. Each life domain can be traced onto the parish to form a multilayer map; each one prayed for and focused upon by church members with a passion for that aspect of the city's life.

Most importantly, each life domain contains both amenities (as discussed above) and long-term groups that are often hidden inside them. For example, most visitors to the local museum will use it as a community amenity, going there on their own or with friends, meeting nobody at all or experiencing casual one-time social encounters with the gallery staff and other visitors. But tucked inside the museum are some long-term groups where friendships are starting and becoming stronger each day – in the public advisory panel, amongst the volunteers or the Women's History Group.

When adults move house and start a new life in a new city, they seek out new friends by joining just such a group that is hidden within the gym, the church, the workplace or the pub. They join a group that offers the opportunity for friendship

formation through repeated contact, a chance to discover one another's talents, and a common interest. This enables people to develop what has been dubbed oikos – personal community.

Task #8: Map the parish and the church membership to find out whether we are reaching each of these distinct 'life domains' or mission fields. In particular, seek out places where long-term friendships are forming.

- Develop a missional community based on a home in the parish or an individual life domain, perhaps living under one roof.
- Acknowledge that some of these deeper friendships can take months or years to build, while others spark up in no time at all.

Working in Partnership

The city does not have everything covered but is instead a patchwork of rich opportunities and yawning gaps. If we are to serve the city by meeting need, building community and sharing the Good News, then it makes sense to identify gaps and work in partnership rather than unnecessarily duplicating provision.

Task #9: Launch new activities only where there is a definite gap, and whenever possible in friendly connection with similar or neighbouring activities, rather than in unhelpful competition.

- ...or in response to a definite prompt from the Holy Spirit

This also provokes a deeper question. Each time we identify an activity, we have a choice of either launching a new group ourselves or joining an existing group. The advantages of starting a group include the ability to:

- badge it as an expression of our own church life and control the activities
- recruit members who may be seeking a new place to belong.
- Serve the group by offering administration and coordination skills

Such groups also risk reinforcing the isolation of our own church. In contrast, the advantages of joining an established secular group include:

- a reduced demand for leadership and administration skills that frees the Christians from running the group so they can focus on spotting the 'person of peace' (who offers welcome, hospitality and service) and sharing their faith
- a chance to connect with people who would not attend an explicitly Christian event

Participation in this way risks diverting commitment away from our own church and meeting people who are already fully committed to their own friendship groups and priorities.

In summary, members of our congregation who are interested in art could form their own Artists Community¹, or alternatively, one or more members of our church could join in with the community programme at the local Arts Centre. Some people might view this as an *underground* missional network.

Task #10: Church members seeking to make new connections may like to consider whether to start a new group or join an existing one.

- Whether starting a new group or engaging in an existing one, such intentional activities could be undertaken in partnership with others.
- We can link with other churches in our shared commitment to serve the city through collaborative projects that draw on volunteers from several churches of other organisations. These projects might be termed *City Communities* as they are not owned and managed by our church.
- We can link with other people of goodwill, whatever their faith, through the local branch of Citizens UK or a similar organisation.
- We can link with the Council and other secular organisations through collaborative projects.

A long reach

Exploring these questions may help us to connect with the whole city. We aim to:

- Make contact with every part of the life in the city, bless what is good and use our limited resources to meet real need
- React to our distinctive profile as a parish that is mainly composed of community amenities by offering both single-event contacts and seeking out those settings where longer term relationships are formed
- Touch the lives of people who have no Christian friends and would not attend a church or explicit Christian meeting, as well as those who are closer to faith
- Offer a planned sequence of steps by which people are invited to draw near to the church should they wish to do so.

¹ Find such groups through [Meetup](#), [Nottlog](#) or a [Directory](#) – or advertise your new group there!