

It Shouldn't Be This Easy...

I was on the telephone to my sister at the end of a long day.

It was the last day of what I had called “**30 Days in the Harvest**”, where I spent every day seeking to connect with people in my town that are far from God. We would offer prayer, share the gospel, and then invite them to follow Jesus or meet to find out more.

She asked me how it went, and the very first thing I said was “*It shouldn't be this easy to share the gospel with so many people.*” Simple as!

Background:

During May 2017 we had planned for a large team to be with us for 2 weeks for a ‘missions push’ in our town. I had allocated the whole month to prepare for this, work with the visiting team and then follow up after their departure. Unfortunately this had to be cancelled, leaving my diary very flexible for the month.

I sensed the opportunity to spend the whole month personally labouring in our town, with those from our local team that could join me during this time. We know that “*whoever sows generously will also reap generously*” (2 Cor 9:6) and wanted to begin to move to ‘generous’ or ‘extravagant seed-sowing’ in our town.

Context:

Corringham and Stanford-le-Hope, Essex, UK is a small town to the east of London on the Thames Estuary, with a population of approximately 30,000.

It's predominately a white working class area but with a growing diversity, particularly noticeable over the last 10 years. In the recent EU Referendum, our constituency had one of the largest votes to leave the EU.

The area is populated with 11 churches including all the main Christian denominations, plus a Charismatic / New Church, a 24-7 Prayer Community and a new church which began in one of the old Evangelical Church buildings recently; originally a ‘Fresh Expression’ of the local Parish Church. The churches faithfully serve as a witness in our town and there are many great projects and programmes being run by them.

The Christian population does not seem to be growing from new disciples in any significant way, and most church growth will be due to ‘transfer growth’ or new people moving into the area. I would generously suggest 2.5% of our town would be Christians, leaving 97.5% as ‘far from God’. Whether my suggestion is accurate or not, the size of the task is huge!

The Numbers:

A period of 30 days during the month of May 2017. 26 days labouring in the harvest with 4 ‘Sabbath rest’ days. We consistently spent 6-7 hours per day connecting with people, and usually with a team of 2 people (myself +1). On a few occasions there were 3 of us, and one day 4. There were regular times that I went alone, and that was hard.

We met each morning from 10am to pray and then headed out into the town from 10.30am -

12.30/1.00pm. Most mornings were spent going *'house to house'* on estates and residential areas. Each afternoon ran from 1.30/2pm - 5/6.00pm and often involved us heading into public areas such as the Town Centre, High Street, local parks etc. for *'walk up'* conversations. We were out for some of the evenings, again using these to go *'house to house'*. Some of my personal time was spent with people I knew (neighbours, friends, acquaintances), sharing with them.

- We **connected with a minimum of 507 people** (we've been conservative with this number). By that I mean that we met people and began to engage them in what you might term *'a spiritual conversation'*. This always began with an *'early offer of prayer'*.
- We **prayed with 300 people** (an accurate figure). There and then; on the street, in the park, at their door or in the supermarket. No religious or 'funny' stuff, just straightforward faith filled prayers for anything from peace on a family to miraculous healings. There were more than a few humorous requests to win the lottery, but generally people valued the offer of prayer, and many found this a highly emotional time.
- We **shared the Gospel with 177 people** (an accurate figure). We use something called *'the 3 Circles'*; easily repeatable & reproducible. This equipped us to consistently share the gospel with large numbers of people and meant we always knew *'what to say'*. And moving from prayer to gospel is simple. We ask 1 of 3 questions; *"Can we share more about Jesus with you?"* or *"Could I share how I came near to God?"* or *"Could we share the story of Jesus with you?"*.
- We then use a *'Traffic Light'* diagnostic to gauge 3 broad responses (Acts 17:32-34)
 - RED Light: no immediate response to the gospel or need for follow up - 130 people
 - YELLOW Light: interested to know more in some way - 37 people
 - GREEN Light: ready to turn & believe on Jesus - 10 people
 - Our aim is to follow up with everyone who is Yellow or Green - 47 people

What does 30 days in the harvest teach us?

1. People in the UK are open to the Gospel:

This has surprised me. I have never experienced such openness in the UK.

Maybe something has changed or maybe I simply fell for the *'lie'*. The lie that people don't want to listen, that our culture is anti-Christian, that we have moved too far from our Christian foundation or heritage, that you have to build long term relationships with people before they will listen, that we have to *'earn'* the right to share the gospel with people, that the need of our culture is for them to *'belong before believing'*. The lie that the kindest and most compassionate thing we could do for people is serve or meet their practical needs; not introduce them to Jesus - the one (and only) person who has actually transformed our lives with His love and compassion. The lie that the things we read of in Scripture or hear of in India and China can't happen in Britain and the ultimate *"you just don't realise how hard it is to reach people here"* lie!

2. You can meet someone, begin a conversation and share the gospel within minutes:

I never knew this. I thought it was only evangelists that had this *'gift'*. I have literally spent years of my life; too many years; seeking to *'be'* a witness amongst my neighbours and friends. We've had meals, drank coffee, had great parties and been on lovely holidays and weekends away and ultimately I still struggled to clearly share about Jesus and invite my friends to follow Him.

Don't get me wrong. Those people knew I was a Christian and there was something very clearly different about Janet and I. But very slowly the years went by and too many of my friends just never heard about the one person who has made the biggest difference in my life.

That's changed! I have learnt to ask a couple of questions and within a minute or two I am now praying and then sharing about Jesus in a kind, compassionate and authentic way.

And all the time people say *'yes you can share with us!'* Try it.

3. People are very open to prayer:

What we call the *'early offer of prayer'* is a revelation. It's so simple any one of us could do it. Every one of the 507 people we engaged with were offered prayer. 300 of those said yes. This was a daily reality. We've tested it and it works!

If you want to have a *'spiritual conversation'* with someone and then share the gospel with them start here - with an offer of prayer!

4. The under 40's are more open than the over 40's:

We've taken teams out house to house or in town centres and many of our team members would instinctively rather approach an older person as they expect them to be more open and willing to engage in a *'spiritual conversation'*. Our experience is this could not be further from the truth.

The older a person was the more we tended to find a mildly aggressive, atheistic response to our offer to pray and share the gospel. Alternatively, we found 15-25 year olds particularly open to prayer and hearing the gospel.

This was super encouraging and deeply saddening all at the same time.

5. Finding *'People of Peace'* takes time:

We have noticed that some of the teams we send out on *'house to house'* searches have a tendency to return after 40-50 minutes. It's not uncommon to go along a whole street and get no response from people whatsoever, and therefore easy to give up within the first hour.

We consistently found that moving beyond that first hour made all the difference, and we would then begin to quite quickly and more easily find people that were open.

I don't understand or feel able to explain why that is, just that we consistently noticed it.

At the same time there are a few examples of teams heading out and the very first house they go to they receive an amazing response from people, and of course they are the stories everyone will remember.

We talk about being labourers in the harvest, and it can be very laborious at times. So be prepared for this.

6. The 'Dominoes Effect':

I did not anticipate this would happen within 30 days, but it did. I consistently received reports of people far from God that I prayed for and shared the gospel with, then going and sharing with others who were far from God in their families or networks.

I met a young girl who volunteers at our local cafe. I prayed and shared the gospel with her leaving her with the '3 Circles' on a piece of paper. A few days later I saw her with a friend, we talked more and I prayed with them. I then offered to share with her friend, who put her hand in her handbag and pulled out a piece of paper with the '3 Circles' on it. She said her friend had already explained it to her!

We met people in town, shared with them and they then told us that their partner or their daughter had already explained this to them as we had knocked on their house door earlier in the week.

A Christian friend who runs an alternative education programme in town called me one afternoon. That lunchtime he'd gone back into the classroom to find all the students sitting around talking about Jesus. Apparently two of the students had each independently met me. The 2 students went on to explain the '3 Circles' to the rest of the group.

There were at least 4-5 reports of this happening within 2-3 weeks.

This reminded me of the words that occur regularly in Acts where we read of the Word of God spreading and filling a town or region. I can now see that it wouldn't take much for that to happen in our time.

8. Multiple opportunities occurring with the same people and families:

Again, I didn't anticipate or plan for this but it just seemed strangely exciting that we met and got to share with some people or families quite a lot.

I met a young man; a local small time villain. He wouldn't allow us to pray or share with him, yet every time we saw him he wanted us to pray for his friends and share with them. I think I saw this young man 5-6 times, and each time we prayed and shared with his friends whilst he looked on. Then completely unbeknown to me, I met his father who invited us in and allowed us to share the gospel with him and invited us back to share more!

There were 5-6 other examples of this happening with other people.

9. We consistently found traditional church folk resistant:

I don't mean people of other religions. That would be mis-representative of what we found. These were people who self identified as Christians and were churchgoing, praying people

who were part of the mainstream historical UK denominations. Consistently they did not want us to pray, and certainly did not want to hear about how we had learnt to share the gospel with people in their town or neighbourhood.

These were the most consistently resistant group of people we met.

10. Our simple, repetitive pattern and processes helped the work:

The pattern we use is simple and repetitive.

If new people come and join our team we take them out and show them what to do and say.

We then ask them to go and do and say the things we showed them.

We then ask them to train the next new person to do and say the things we have shown them.

That's the way discipleship works.

This gives new people, and especially those who are less confident or experienced, the confidence to go and do this work. So the work grows and the Word of God spreads easily and quickly to more people.

I took one 19 year old guy out with me for an hour one evening. He had never shared the gospel with anyone in his life. He shared the gospel with two people. His life changed that night!

11. The people we shared with said they understood the message we were sharing with them:

This was very encouraging. When we share the gospel we always finish by inviting the person to turn their life over to Jesus. We don't dumb it down or make it an easy sell. We talk about turning their life around, trusting Jesus, taking him as the King of their life and learning to follow Him in obedience, beginning with baptism.

Many, many people responded with something along the lines of *"I understand exactly what you are saying, but that's a serious step and I'm not sure I am ready for that right now"*.

We were encouraged that the message is getting through and people are counting the cost.

Let's pray that these seeds will begin to grow and produce a harvest.

12. We are still finding it difficult to move to returning to people's homes to share more:

People are clearly open. They are receiving us and the message. Many are interested to know more. Some are turning and believing. This is happening consistently and is very encouraging.

But the move to discipling new believers or returning to people's homes still seems to be a big jump.

Maybe that's partly to do with us; our confidence and competence in making new disciples. We are all quite new at this.

But it also seems to be a big jump for the people we are sharing with. So we will return to meet with people and they won't be home, or they will be very busy and not have time this week. Some even call us off before those meetings saying they've changed their minds and aren't quite ready right now.

I'm just being honest here. It's encouraging that we are following up with nearly 50 people, but realistic that there is still a long way to go to get to a multiplication of new disciples and *'fruit that will last'*.

What we do know is this. In order to multiply new disciples and plant new churches you have to engage with people that are far from God and share the Gospel generously. *"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously!" (2 Cor 9:6)*

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Friday 16th June 2017

Multiplying new disciples and churches everywhere, until there is no place left!