

Creating a culture of invitation

Report and notes on the conference held at Hampden Stadium, Wed 29th March 2017

In addition to the Mission Education and Discipleship Development Officer, Hamilton Presbytery was represented by Rev Gordon Palmer and a member of his congregation, Rev Anne Paton and her Session Clerk as well as the Session Clerk of Mossneuk Parish along with two others from the congregation.

Following opening worship, the **main speaker Michael Harvey**, originator of Back to Church Sunday, gave his first address.

Defining culture as “how we do things around here” he explored how we might understand better “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” (1 Cor 3/6) so as to count and value invitations and conversations not just increased numbers attending church i.e. we should only measure what we have control over – the planting & watering (invitations, conversations etc.) and not the growth, for which the Lord is responsible.

Congregations usually describe themselves as welcoming but are we inviting? If we are not inviting people to church then there will only be our members to welcome. We need to remember that it can be scary turning up at church on your own and/or if you haven't been before. According to research people are waiting to be invited but in Western Christianity 80-94% of people have no intention of inviting anyone – although we'd like to, apparently. So how do we move from the way things are (we are not inviting others) to where we would both like and need them to be?

In a table discussion we considered the reasons why Christians don't invite people to church and our reasons tallied with many other groups of people where Michael had asked the same question:

- **Fear**
- The time is never right
- People might ask why
- We consider our faith to be a private thing
- Church is here if people want to come

The reasons tended to cluster around two things:

a) lack of confidence in the product (church really is boring!?!)

b) fear of jeopardising relationships. So too much of the discussion is about us, how we feel, might feel and so on, and not enough about the (un)invited.

Michael called this “the burning bush syndrome” – God calling us to an uncomfortable place.

He wanted us to leave with 3 different ways of thinking and one thing to do. The three different ways of thinking are:

1. To see success is one person inviting one person – and God may be nudging us to do that, but we should leave the response to God. Some people walked away from Jesus' invitation. We have often concentrated more on other measures of success rather than our faithfulness in extending the invitation. We should lower our expectations! i.e. have a conversation, issue an invite, rather than get one person to come. As well as that, leaving what is God's work to the Lord, it also means with lower expectation we put less pressure on ourselves, and might find that the expectations are being met already.
2. We should be as interested in the inviter as the invited person – what might people need to become more invitational? We are fishing on the wrong side of the boat! Mission is as much about the people going out in mission as it is about those they are going to. It is wrong that all the focus is on the outcome and not focus and care etc. on those inviting. Invitation should be a formation process for the inviter.
3. God is calling us to invite! Too often we do the thinking/ making excuses for others. We won't ask because they are too busy/ would not like the music/ would be put off by.... Don't overthink – invite!

Interview with John and Dave Dickinson (Minister and Worship Associate respectively of Carnmoney Presbyterian church in Belfast. <http://www.carnmoney.org/>)

John and Dave explained a bit about their church and how they have used the Alpha course – beginning in the function room of a golf club. When they saw what worked there they brought some of the ideas over into the church services e.g. prayer ministry and people telling their stories. To begin with it was Alpha first and church later but this has now reversed as Alpha did as much for those in the church as it did for those invited to attend.

What they imported from Alpha into congregational life

- a) Prayer ministry
- b) Informal worship
- c) Telling stories – testimonies. This is the most influential factor for them.
- d) Identifying barriers which was used with Alpha but almost never with Sunday services
- e) Connecting the dots. e.g. invite to church services after BB display

In response to a question about managing change, they said that not only was it important to recognise when it is **the** time, but also that when there is evidence of fruitfulness it makes it difficult for people to object. They also highlighted that we often spend too much time fighting about all the wrong things e.g. the colour of the toilet paper, rather than “When did the last new person come to church?”

Testimonies from Lee and Lindsay

2 moving and powerful stories about the difference it had made to their lives when someone invited them to church.

Michael Harvey (2)

Given that fear was the biggest blocker to people inviting others to church, this was the focus of Michael's second session. He described fear of rejection as the "gulp moment" and yet the phrase "Don't be afraid" or "Fear not" appears more than one hundred times in the Bible, usually followed by the words "I am with you". In the words of Roosevelt "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself"

Fear develops into stress and whilst it can "be in the car, it shouldn't be in the driving seat". Michael highlighted that there are several words for fear in Hebrew including "pachad" which can be translated as "panic" and "yireh" which can be translated as "Hang about, I'm going to do something" Faith and fear both believe that something that hasn't happened yet is going to happen. Fear is when we believe the worst case scenario.

There was then an exploration of rejection, why we are afraid of the word "No" and to consider how the disciples might have felt on Holy Saturday.

There is to be a National weekend of invitation on 15-17 June, 2018. Michael encouraged us to redefine success so that we can celebrate faithfulness. He used the image of a clock to describe where people are at in their relationship with god and how our invitation can help them to move round – although ours might not be the one to push the hands to 12 o'clock. Yes is the destination but No is how we get there – how can we both see and seek God in the Nos. We cannot complain about the lack of a harvest if we have not planted in the spring.

Michael concluded by sharing with us the ACORN model:

ASK God to nudge us

CALL think of people and put names or initials on post it notes

OBEY by sharing with neighbours and/or sticking names on a cross/heart

REPORT back on what happened, share inviter stories (2/month as part of worship?)

NUMINOUS activity of God – Did you hear the call of God/feel the presence of God

We can't get an oak tree without the acorn being buried first. Our fear has to be buried before there is the possibility of new life.

One of the questions asked at the end was about the value of leaflet drops. John reported that from 10,000 leaflets distributed to advertise an Alpha course, of the 30+ participants only 2 had come as a result of a leaflet.

Resources by Michael Harvey

Unlocking the growth: you'll be amazed at your church's potential

This book teaches the power of invitation. It may sound simple, but we are so caught up in our busy church lives that we have missed it. In 2004 Michael Harvey gave up a high-flying job in the City of London to teach church leaders to see new possibilities, using an approach that has quickly become established as Back to Church Sunday. Michael likes to challenge churches of all sizes to double their congregation in a day. In 2009 at least 80,000 new people came to church in Britain through this approach, with around 10,000 becoming new believers. The basics are simple: Invite your friends, and become an inviting church. Develop a mind-set open to what God might do; work on creating a welcoming environment; learn from mistakes; help people to know God. "It takes a very brave person to walk into a church on their own nowadays," says Michael, "but God is still speaking to them and all they need is a gentle invitation."

This book could be used as small group study material in congregations

Creating a culture of invitation in your church

We like to think of our churches as welcoming. Michael Harvey, an expert on church growth, asks, "How welcoming can we be if we don't take our welcome outside with the gift of an invitation?" God sent his son to invite us all into a relationship, and so to be like God is to be a person who invites.

During the decade that he has been developing Back to Church Sunday, Michael Harvey has conducted an extensive study on the seemingly simple subject of "invitation". Over 650 times in 12 countries he has asked: "Why don't we invite our friends to take a closer look at Christ?" Exploring the subjects of rejection and acceptance he examines where we have gone wrong.

Videos

Why we are afraid to invite: <https://vimeo.com/61114128> (17 mins)

Put Michael Harvey's name into "search" on YouTube and there is a large number of clips and talks, including five minute clips on each of his 12 steps to becoming an inviting church:

1. **Vision.** If we all invited one other person and they came..... the "and they came" bit is God's work, not ours. Let us do our bit
2. **Modelling.** Vision caster has to be able to say "I am doing this...."
3. **Cascading** Inviting someone seems daunting, so break it down to simple steps, one to one asking
4. **Gift of friendship.** It is precious. It is a sign of God being at work. Cultivate friendships
5. **The power of story.** Tell your testimony focussing not on yourself, but on the folks who invited you/ brought you/ influenced you.
6. **Who has God been preparing for you to invite?** Ask him!
7. **Practice the question** – the question is "Would you like to come to church with me?"
8. **Pray.** For courage to invite; for the folk you will be inviting etc.

9. **Make the invitation.** We often do all the preparation, but hold back from actually asking!!
10. **Walk or drive with them to church.** Rather than meeting them at the door.
11. **Introduce them to others after the service.** Folk more likely to stay, return etc. if they make new friends
12. **Assume they are coming the following week!**

Websites

<http://www.mjhassociates.org.uk/>

<http://seasonofinvitation.co.uk/> - includes training videos

<https://greatcommission.co.uk/invitation>