

Practical input

Our top ten tips for sharing God's love in creative ways

The Sanctuary's collective sometimes refer to ourselves as 'accidental evangelists' – pray-ers, worship leaders and creatives who set out to bring more of the world into the church's worship, who also found God leading us to bring more worship into the world in some very beautiful and life-giving ways...

As a result, for several years we've found ourselves conducting a kind of evangelism that feels very natural to us – it's simply been an overflow of who we are... and so it's come out through creating art installations in windows, poetry and allegories, singing on the streets, hand-crafting gifts, hand-writing letters and cards of encouragement and using social media to proactively bless and affirm.

(You can browse some of this work at <http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/creative-outreach>) For the most part, it's been really well received and so we felt it was time to try and distil and share some of the lessons we've learned. Please do visit <http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/contact.html> if you want to share your stories or ask us any questions about ours.)



1. Pray and listen for specific ideas, as well as for God's heart for those you want to reach out to

There's a slightly hackneyed phrase in Christian circles that compares "good ideas" to "God ideas". But like all hackneyed phrases, there's a reason it crops up a lot...

It's wonderful that we all have so much access to ideas and resources that tell us about what other people have done – including this one! But sometimes it makes us simply imitate things from other contexts, without exploring first whether they really are the best fit, or whether God had something even better for us to use. There are some sound principles behind not always re-inventing the wheel; the church is a global team with two thousand years of learning at our disposal! Sharing tried and tested ideas, or things that the Spirit is breathing into life for now that are resonating powerfully in areas of shared culture can only be good.

But often the very reason that things are so successful is because they were born as a specific ideas, received in specific prayer, for specific places, by hearts that were hungry to find God's specific strategy to love those around them, and to use the specific gifts and resources God had given to them to do so. Often they were so effective because they were delivered with an authenticity and love hard to replicate by those who are simply using the idea without going on the journey, or paying the cost, that led to its discovery – or being in the context it was given for.

By contrast, often there is something similarly specific – tailor-made for the people in our context to receive, and authentic to us as people to give – waiting for us to hear from God, if we will only take the time to stop, and ask and listen for it... and then perhaps ask again, to ask him for even more detail in how, when or where.

We've found specific outreach ideas, gift concepts, images, colour schemes and even lines of beautifully written lead copy will often come as we pray about reaching out to a particular group of people, or tying in with a particular initiative. As we take the time to catch, and join in with, what God might want to do, rather than asking for his blessing on our own – or other people's – great ideas, we find we are creating *with* him, and amazing things happen.

And it is almost always following these pointers that are given in simple, loving obedience – rather than thorough research, brilliant ideas or stunning delivery – that seems to bear the most fruit.

But we have found we need to be patient – often God will want to grow our hearts for the people we want to reach quite substantially, before he will give us his best ideas; if we don't have love, we may well not be the best vessel to receive and deliver his plans¹.

2. Be yourself, and be real

Too many of us have tried, for too long, to 'evangelise' in ways that follow text book formulas, treating both ourselves – and the people we're reaching out to – as a one size fits all formula. No wonder it has so often been terrifying, cheesy or ineffective for so many of us... After all, Jesus reached out to different people differently.

What is our gifting? What is our personality type? How is it most natural for us to communicate about *anything*? Now, let's ask ourselves, how can we communicate the gospel in this way? The gospel can be related and spoken and served, but it can also be sung, painted, danced, written and represented in a thousand different ways.

Rehearsing hard so you can tell your testimony off pat, and any of the other techniques we've been schooled in, might be helpful. But they've left lots of us paralysed... so desperate to make sure we communicate the gospel

correctly or relevantly that we end up robotic or flustered, or just praying for opportunities to come up where we can crank the gospel into conversation. But we've discovered using our giftings to communicate in innovative ways can feel much more natural, and lead to us being much more empowered and proactive. Honestly, it's been a bit of a shock, but we've discovered creative outreach to be addictively fun!

Each of us have different experiences of God, different giftings, different struggles and different ways in which we can share. Each of us will communicate in ways that resonate with different people and groups. So let's each ask God to show us the best ways for us to overflow him naturally.

And let's be real about the unresolved questions and pain we face as followers of Jesus too. Often, voicing these opens up the ground for others to ask their questions too. We've found allegories or art installations that gently approach suffering or voice powerful apologies for the times we as Christians have got in the way of others seeing Jesus, have intrigued many people deeply, and it's important that not everything we communicate is sunshine and flowers. There is much truth in what Simone Weil said: "There are only two things pierce the human soul. One is beauty. The other affliction."

3. Look at what's going on beyond church and build on shared experiences/ treasures that are common to those outside the church as a way in

Often as Christians, we want to reach out at times which are key to *our* calendar – Christmas and Easter for example. They seem like the most natural times and ways to communicate the Christian message; we think that it is a time when perhaps people will be more open to hearing from us, or we (understandably) want to fight against the growing tide of commercialism and secularism present in these seasons. We want to recapture the message that Christmas is about Christ being with us; to make sure that un-churched children and parents still learn that Easter is not about Spring, but about the new life Jesus won for us through his death and resurrection.

But Jesus – and the early Christian missionaries and leaders in both the early churchⁱⁱ and the UK – often linked their messaging to what was going on in the world of those they were reaching out to. Images from the landscape or farming culture that meant something to the people he was talking to then and there were Jesus' usual starting point for metaphors and parables; and we probably all know that the timing of Christmas as a festival is not accidentally placed near the winter solstice and traditional yuletide celebrations...

Our God and his love for people doesn't need to be confined to 'religious' times of year – he is relevant at all times and in every context, and often, fresher links, which people aren't expecting, can be very powerful times. By asking, what question are people seeking answers to today, or what message are they hoping to receive, or be part of, we can use common, shared (and therefore non-threatening) times to bring in our message.

We have, for example, found Valentine's Day to be an incredibly effective day to talk about God's love, because it is a day where most people are asking 'who loves me?', 'does anyone love me?' or 'am I being loved well?' Similarly – its lead symbol of a heart is owned by everyone – it doesn't feel 'religious', 'churchy' or traditional, but stands for the most central message of our faith – God's love for us and the world. And it's simple enough to be adapted and used in lots of different ways, whether in visuals or objects.

We've also discovered 14 February provides a brilliant opportunity to tell organisations, institutions, public figures and businesses how loved and appreciated they are and why... as well as being a perfect occasion to craft gifts for individuals. And on Yorkshire Day (1 August), we've found there are lots of connections to be found that lead to beautiful and joy-filled ways to catch hundreds of people up into praise for the landscape around us, or blessing on the strength of hospitality in the region, through giving out gifts which pick up on these themes.

And – when given on a day, or a time of year, that is any kind of shared occasion or celebration, by smiley, friendly people armed with abundant baskets full, most people's reticence to receive, or suspicion of there being no such thing as a free gift, is overcome.

Equally, we've discovered that joining in with local literature or art festivals with allegories or paintings that intrigue people – or sending out experienced musicians to busk or take bookings at bandstands in their Summer programme to sing approachable, gospel songs – are brilliant ways of engaging with people through things that they enjoy and are gently invited to explore more of God through.

Engaging with opportunities that aren't *just ours* in a way that gently shares the presence and person of God requires prayer, listening to God, humility, love and creative ingenuity. It's not about showing up with our message and imposing it in place of what others are focusing on, or seeking to 'correct' what they're celebrating; it's about entering into the cultural celebration with God, finding what about it is (or echoes) one of his good and perfect giftsⁱⁱⁱ, and prayerfully exploring how to voice this with him in a gently provocative way.

We've discovered it's about being subversively countercultural – for example, we've found carving pumpkins differently – with hearts again – much more effective than not having pumpkins when everyone else is enjoying those so much; and talking positively about light, whilst giving out glow in the dark stars, much more joyously intriguing than talking about why darkness is bad, or why celebrating Halloween could be a less than great idea.

4. Be truly generous

Love and giving are closely related. And giving of your best speaks huge value to the recipient. By giving something precious – which you have invested resources, time and gifting into – you give credibility to the message you want to convey. This is why, we think, we have found that the thousands of small but beautiful, specially designed gifts we've crafted to give out on the streets, or to businesses, carrying messages about God's light and love, or accompanied by prayers of blessing and peace, have been so well received. Chocolates, biscuits, flowers, badges, magnets, decorations – all beautifully presented and featuring original artwork and/or design – have been things people simply want to receive again and again.

But these gifts must be authentic. We've found the spirit in which they are made makes a huge difference. It's important that people are making or serving prayerfully, joyfully and ungrudgingly... that they're not stressed about making a deadline, or being able to do the crafting well enough etc... and if worship music can be played, and people encouraged to focus more on praying for the recipients than on chatting to each other while crafting, even better.

The truth of the message is amplified when the gift is created with love, and given with multiple layers of love behind it. We've found it especially good to prioritise Fairtrade (and mention a gift is Fairtrade too) so no one has been exploited in sourcing the gift, and to sign the gift from Christians from different churches, rather than just one.

We've also observed it clearly makes a significant difference when there's no hidden ask in the gift. A reference to a follow up trail and clear oversight and accountability builds trust and is good to have so people can get in touch and/or ask questions, but even an invitation to an event can sometimes undercut the gift, turning it into more of a promotional gimmick than a true gift.

There is such a thing as a free gift – and we are told to freely give as we have freely received^{iv} – but in reality, it takes huge discipline to give in this way – or just a lot of love! A gift which tries to persuade the recipient to do something isn't a gift; it is a freebie or an advert. And suddenly, you're moving with – rather than counter to – our consumer culture of 24/7 marketing and spin. A true gift will just give and ask for nothing in return... not even feedback.

This kind of outreach is hard to put impact figures against, but it is wide seed sowing, and if a person's face lights up over what they've received, seen or heard, or they tweet a photo of one of your gifts or pieces of art... well, you know something of the true spirit of what you've said and given has been caught and received.

5. Share beautiful, true things that people will want to keep, photograph and /or share

The value of a beautiful, wholesome, true gift is hard to overestimate. It makes people smile; it brings them together; it is *desired* and *delighted* over. And it gives again and again and again.

Someone is so much more likely to want a beautiful art postcard, decoration, story or hand-made item of delicious food, than they are a leaflet. They are so much more likely to properly look at, display and/or keep something truly creative, meaningful, generous hand-made or attractive than they are something that's been mass produced, has little value or just isn't that nice!

They are also much more likely to want a gift if it's beautifully presented too – itself, and in the distribution form. When we give out gifts, we invest quality in small details, for example using real ribbon or twine to tie gifts and arranging them carefully in attractive baskets to carry them out in.

We've noticed the location-specific cards we've designed and then hand-written kept for more than two years, displayed in shops with pride, and even put back after a full re-fit of a supermarket in one case! Or simple wooden decorations we've customised with a message of blessing, still hung up on a café's front door, treasured and given pride of place months after they were received. And when we love bombed a town with Fairtrade white roses on Valentine's Day, the flowers we'd hidden all over town popped up all over social media too. People were truly blown away by the surprising beauty of discovering them tied to lamp-posts, shop doors and railings.

6. Add personal touches with integrity

It's amazing how much difference hand-made, handwritten and bespoke, tailor-made messages make in the digital age. They speak worth and value because more time has been invested, and it's not a sleight of hand trick where you've simply used personalising software in a 'to' field or selected a font that looks like it's been hand-written.

When we sent our first hand-written card to a local MP, he was bowled over. He wanted to meet us in person to see who would do that – who would get in touch simply to thank and celebrate... but also as much, to know who would sit down and take the time to write something meaningful by hand onto a card that was beautifully and appropriately designed to relate to his constituency. We had not intended to impress; just to affirm him.

He was told he was loved, seen and appreciated (even by those of us who didn't vote for him!) and in his particular job, that stood out too. But he *knew* it was true because it was said in a time-rich, thoughtful and personal way.

7. Create intrigue and space

Most of our core team come from evangelical backgrounds so we have wrestled with this one! But in our desire to tell people the whole of the gospel message all of the time – or at least our interpretation of the key things that need to be covered – we have learned there can be a risk of becoming reductive and/or preachy, or simply being so easily recognisable as 'religious' that people who have at one time decided that's not for them disengage instantly.

We've learned it's almost always more powerful and effective in a post modern context, to tell stories that intrigue

or invite... to talk about one aspect of God, or use art and poetry to explore and open up space, and then to give people a clear path to finding out more.

There need to be clear gospel presentations. But there also need to be winsome invitations, riddles and opportunities for people to move towards God left all over the place in fresh ways. Jesus was the expert at this, as his troubling words about why he was speaking in parables confirm^v – by talking in symbols and riddles, he bypassed preconceptions, removed religious baggage, and opened up space for new revelations and genuine heart responses.

We're finding that still today, 2000 years later, allegories speak powerfully... and, of course, even more importantly, so does the Holy Spirit! We often pray before outreach that the songs, images or words people encounter would contain elements that they've been thinking about or dreaming of in the lead up to encountering them, or provide an answer to a question they have been silently asking, so as to have extra power. And we've had numerous occasions where people have told us their stories, and we've found these prayers have been answered, or something that means a huge amount to a person has coincided with the time they've walked past, and they have been deeply moved as a result.

We've found sharing prayers themselves has also been really powerful, catching people up in what they do often naturally do, and again, bringing to them God not by preaching at them, but by leading them into encounter as a worship leader would do in a church context.

All the time our desire is to bless, inspire and challenge in a loving way that leaves people wanting to know more. After all, it is those who seek that find, and so perhaps, sometimes, sowing hunger can be just as effective as presenting answers?

8. Critique your language, messaging and implications carefully and prayerfully

Whether you're selecting words, songs or visual elements to communicate, it's important to look prayerfully and carefully at what you're using to do so.

Be careful of the kind of religious language that excludes, is simply inaccessible, or will simply enable people to say, that isn't for me, and disengage, almost straight away. This goes for images that feel 'religious' too – it isn't a hard and fast rule, and it depends what you're doing with them, but you want people to feel like the art or message you're featuring is for them too.

Think too about the pronouns you're using... addressing people directly as 'you' can be powerful, but 'we' language can be more inclusive, although you have to watch out for this seeming exclusionary too. For example, if it's written on the outside of a church building, the 'we' is likely to communicate the people inside/ church rather than all of us, even if that isn't what you meant. But if it's on a gift placed into someone's hand it can work really well. Using 'I' can be very intriguing, as each reader, reads the language as theirs...

Think about how you refer to God too... using God rather than 'Jesus' is more accessible, but is also less distinctive as to who you mean. And there is an indescribable power in the name of Jesus. Often what we try to do is use 'God' higher up in the messaging, and bring in Jesus later on. Be aware that most people outside the church have a hazy understanding of how God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit might relate, and will not necessarily even be familiar with the concept of Jesus being part of God. So think as carefully and prayerfully as you can how to describe God in the context of each outreach, but also remember it's not the only opportunity to share the message, and you're aiming to partner with God to bring people a step closer to him, not resolve every aspect of Trinitarian (or any other)

theology straight away! We've learned to try to trust him to fill in some of the gaps as and when each individual person needs that too.

However simple and brief the message ends up being, we've found that getting the wording right on gifts can be really freeing for the givers – especially if they're less confident, or more introverted. You don't need to worry about saying everything, if the main message is on the gift, you can just share a greeting and smile, or choose one word or phrase to say, or even simply ask if people would like one of the gifts as your main communication with them?

9. Balance blending in and standing out

This is particularly relevant when you're communicating at a 'crowded' time when everyone's messages are competing, or building up a sense of complete participation. As we've said, you want to build on common messaging, and you don't want to have standing out as an aim per se, seeking to simply shout louder than everyone else. But you will want to be distinctive because it's important that the differences in what you're saying are clear.

For example, we learned to develop a really nice balance of blending in and standing out around Valentine's Day. We blend in by displaying messages about love in February, by featuring hearts in all our visuals, and by giving gifts and sending cards, many of which follow cultural norms – i.e. chocolates, roses and mementos to hang up. But we also take care to be very distinctive, so what we're doing can't be confused with romance or commercialism. *Everyone* else uses the colour palette of red, but we stuck with blue accompanied by natural tones of beige and brown, distinguishing ourselves from romantic love's red.

Additionally, some distinctions have come about simply because of the different motivation we have. Instead of focusing on the weeks leading up to Valentine's day, we're focused on the day, and it's just as relevant for us to leave messaging around afterwards, all the more powerful for remaining when the shops no longer have a reason to display theirs and have moved on to promoting the next occasion.

It can be incredibly powerful to take yourselves out of the picture sometimes too. Whilst we've found it rewarding and joy-bringing to us as givers – and very effective for gift receivers too – to take out huge baskets and to chat to shopkeepers and passers by, or simply be available to talk more about a piece of art, a story or our duo sparrow song... it's been incredibly special to be completely out of the way too.

There's a particular humility and power to secret giving, or giving which enables the person to simply receive and have their true reactions in the moment unobserved. It's just them and the gift; or them and the true giver – God...they don't have to pretend, or be polite. We've found this approach is good for growing our generosity too; it's even more of a gift when you don't get to see the smile on the receiver's face. And it invites more trust in God to take our seeds and grow something special with them in his perfect timing.

10. Remember it might all be beautiful, but it's still a battle. Don't be afraid, be brave, but be wily too...

It's important not to be deceived by the beauty – and fun! – of this kind of evangelism. Don't forget that this is frontline activity, all the more likely to be contested for the fact that it is so beautiful, powerful and genuinely appealing for people to receive or respond to.

We've learned the hard way not to take on too many of these initiatives at once, and to get a huge amount of prayer

covering all the way through, especially for those taking any kind of frontline role in the creative work. Opposition and/or oppression can be fierce. This is not something to be frightened off – God's Spirit is so much stronger. But it's also not something to be naïve about.

The public and the press can occasionally present human opposition too, so be prepared for this, and also just be very wise, sensitive, respectful and non-intrusive about how you do things.

Protect your team, and set them up to protect, not intimidate others, too. Don't send individuals out on their own so they're vulnerable, but do think what even two or three of you descending on one person could feel like... also think about gender issues or misinterpretations. For example, when we've been giving out gifts for Valentine's Day especially, we've tried to send out a man and a woman together in each pair of gift-givers, and asked them to always stay together in approaching someone.

If you truly are generous and loving, you may well also build up some significant allies in businesses, organisations and public office, whatever they currently think about God, Christianity or the church. There are many people of peace in the world – it is the powers and principalities that are battle is really against^{vi} – and a huge number of people can and do respond positively to genuine acts of generous love.

Take heart, for too long many of us have viewed the world as a hostile place – something to protect the church from. But the whole world is where the Spirit is at work, and there are beautiful adventures waiting to be had – and precious hearts we will discover are hungry to receive – as we go out to our bandstands, town centres and public gathering places to join in with his work with gentle, bold love.



ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:1-4

ⁱⁱ Acts 17:16-34

ⁱⁱⁱ James 1:17

^{iv} Matthew 10:8

^v Matthew 13:10-23

^{vi} Ephesians 6:12