

## Evangelism and Discipleship: the purpose of our systems and structures

By Thomas C. Brauer

General Synod will soon gather to discuss the ongoing mission and ministry of the Anglican Church of Canada, including its structures and administration. I want to assume these discussions to be both right and helpful to the life of the church. These discussions, however, need to hold evangelism and discipleship in the Good News of Jesus Christ to be central to the purpose and function of church structures and administration. Regardless of how one might view the proposed 'six pathways', or the five 'transformational aspirations' to which they respond, the debates and discussions around these points must seek to discern the best way forward to support evangelism and discipleship.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I present reasons why supporting evangelism and discipleship are the purpose of our church structures and administration, why evangelism and discipleship should be viewed to work together as a single action of faith (rather than two separate disciplines), and I propose some practical actions.

### Why Evangelism and Discipleship are the purpose of church structures and administration

As institutions grow and age, their structures tend to lose flexibility. They begin to operate as though they exist for their own sake, rather than to serve a more fundamental purpose. A robust discussion about any institution, its structure, or its administration is therefore good, when aiming to rebuild those structures to meet their fundamental purpose. The current mission statement of the Anglican Church of Canada begins, "we proclaim and celebrate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in worship and action."<sup>2</sup> This statement, and the propositions that follow it, are predicated on robust and effective evangelism and discipleship.

In Luke's Gospel, where Jesus offers the mission statement for his own ministry, we also find propositions that rely on evangelism and discipleship.<sup>3</sup> Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll and declares:

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- 1 Matthew Puddister, "Future of General Synod, Journal on table as CoGS gets set for March meeting," *Anglican Journal*, published online February 26, 2025, <https://anglicanjournal.com/future-of-general-synod-journal-on-table-as-cogs-gets-set-for-march-meeting/>; Sean Frankling, "Panel outlines six paths to 'big change' in church," *Anglican Journal*, published online April 28, 2025, <https://anglicanjournal.com/panel-outlines-six-paths-to-big-change-in-church/>; Matthew Puddister, "General Synod approves 'transformational aspirations' to guide new strategic plan," *Anglican Journal*, published online June 30, 2023, <https://anglicanjournal.com/general-synod-approves-transformational-aspirations-to-guide-new-strategic-plan/>.
  - 2 "Our Mission Statement," Anglican Church of Canada, <https://www.anglican.ca/about/beliefs/>.
  - 3 See John Nolland, Luke 1:1–9:20, vol. 35A, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word Books, 1989), 202. "Luke clearly uses the text to express Jesus' identity and to define his role."

<sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”  
(Luke 4.18-19, this and all biblical references ESV)

In this passage, proclamation of the good news and of the year of the Lord’s favour form a framework for the liberating and healing acts Jesus would enact through his miraculous power, his transformative teaching, and his redeeming passion, death, and resurrection. If proclamation of the good news and of the year of the Lord’s favour are the framework for Jesus’ own ministry, then surely they ought to constitute be the framework for our own ministries in Jesus’ name.

### **Why Evangelism and Discipleship should be viewed as a single action of faith.**

Proclaiming the good news is both evangelistic and discipling. Traditionally, many have seen evangelism and discipleship as separate acts, but they are actually two sides of the same coin. We often see evangelism limited to the declaration of the good news to those who have not yet heard or received the story of Jesus, and believe that once a person enters the life of faith the role of the evangelist ends. The catechist then begins the work of discipleship. It is rarely, if ever, so clean-cut. Rather, evangelism and discipleship further and build upon each other and their effects in a person’s life. If evangelism brings sight to the blind, discipleship helps them to see further. If evangelism sets the captive free, discipleship maintains their liberation and gives them keys to open the prison for others. The converse is often equally true, with discipleship preceding the work and effects of evangelism. Far from the “one and done” perspective of evangelism as conversion or discipleship as catechism, the proclamation of the Gospel is a lifelong, upbuilding, relationship with and contribution to others.

What difference does it make, then, whether evangelism and discipleship are regarded as a single action of faith, or not?

Scripture frequently blurs the line between evangelism and discipleship. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26ff) shows how discipleship might need to come first, before evangelism can result in a commitment to faith in Jesus. The story of the Apostle Peter’s continual need for both evangelism and discipleship (Matthew 17:1ff, Mark 8:31ff, Matthew 26:69ff, John 21) suggests there may be for some a need to return frequently to the basics of faith or to have the gospel enter some aspect of their lives in a new way. The union of evangelism and discipleship is also evident in passages like the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20), the sending out of the disciples to the villages to teach and heal (Matthew 10:1-42, Mark 6:7-13, Luke 9:1-6), as well as Jesus’ commands to love neighbor and one another (Mk 12:28-33; Jn 13:34-35), and James’ call to live out what we believe (James 2:14-26).

The reality that evangelism and discipleship are a single action of faith can also be seen in contemporary changes in the ways some churches engage programs like Alpha. In the past, the Alpha Course was used primarily as a support for evangelism. The target audience was primarily those who had not yet heard the good news in a way that they could accept or believe. Today, it is very common to see the Alpha Course being used as a discipleship program, teaching current church members what our faith holds and what some of our doctrines mean. There is nothing wrong with either use. But this change suggests that increasingly the content and relational approach that used to be offered to non-believers now need to be provided for long-standing members. Viewing evangelism and discipleship as a single action of faith can prevent neglect or over-emphasis of one over the other. Programs like the Alpha Course, which were once primarily for evangelism, are now also used for discipleship, showing that the same Gospel teaching can benefit both non-believers and long-standing members.

Evangelism and discipleship together call believers and non-believers into deeper knowledge of God, deeper faith, and deeper works of justice and mercy. And together, believer and non-believer learn how it is that we are liberated from our captivities, enlightened from our blindnesses, and delivered from our oppressions as we hear and receive the good news in the midst of our poverty.

### **Practical Actions and Tangible Effects**

Supporting and extending evangelism and discipleship as a single action of faith is the purpose of our church structures and administration. We need to view them as a single action to ensure continuity of teaching and care for non-believers and believers alike. Here are a few tangible effects regarding evangelism and discipleship as a single action of faith, and some practical actions that might build the church and aid in framing our current discussions about church structures and administration while also aiding in our response to present challenges.

**Unity:** An approach to evangelism and discipleship as a single action of faith calls our church structures and administration to lead in the growth of a common understanding of the Good News, and common supports for sharing that Good News. This will have the effect of building unity within our church and within the world we serve as we are unified by our proclamation of the Good News and works of mission in our diverse ministry contexts.

**Holiness:** Further, understanding evangelism and discipleship as proposed here calls our church structures to support and encourage the whole people of God to live that uniqueness of life expressed in the actions and teaching of Jesus. Developing and offering resources to support all the people of the Church in Gospel living will have the effect of building both the institutional and personal holiness that leads to lives of justice, goodness, and transformation across our Anglican Church of Canada.

**Universality/Catholicity:** A third call to our church structures that arises from understanding evangelism and discipleship as a single action of faith is a call to support and extend the Church's capacity to receive the inheritance of our ancestors, to receive the gifts of other cultures and experiences of Christian faith, and to steward both, passing them on to future generations. Therefore, we need to develop resources and support to best receive the teachings and wisdom from Christians of all cultures and experiences and from every era of the Church. This will lead to a greater capacity to understand and learn from the many cultures and subcultures of faith and

believing in our Anglican Church of Canada (further enhancing our unity). It will also enable us to more effectively speak and serve into the manifold worldviews and communities that we will encounter where we live and serve.

**Apostolicity:** Finally, we can also hear a call for our systems and structures to support our Anglican Church of Canada in being people sent by Christ, sent by the Church, and sent by the Gospel to partner with the Holy Spirit in making disciples. This is our apostolic ministry as the “sent senders” of Jesus. This is a call to enable the people of the Church to go into new and old places of faith and non-faith in order to grow expressions of polity, mission, worship, and ministry in ways that meet the needs of our changing contexts and cultures—the effect of which will be an Anglican Church that can meet and be met in the lived needs of all people in ways that transform and inspire.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary landscape of the Anglican Church of Canada, the intertwined practices of evangelism and discipleship are more crucial than ever. As we face the stark warning that there may be “no members, attenders, or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040,” it becomes imperative (as Archbishop Linda Nicholls has suggested) to re-evaluate how we present the hope and good news of Jesus Christ to this generation.<sup>4</sup> As we re-evaluate the systems and structures of our church, we need to ensure that they support evangelism and discipleship as a single, continuous action of faith. By understanding and embracing a unified approach to evangelism and discipleship at every level of ministry and governance, we will more effectively address the challenges facing our church, while also fostering growth in unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.



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4 Tali Folkins, “Gone by 2040?”, quotation from the Rev. Dr. Neil Elliot, in *The Anglican Journal*, January 6, 2020.