



Introduction

People don't exist as individuals. They clump together in families, interest groups, friendship groups, language groups neighbourhoods and many others. When we plant a church, we want to know, preferably before we start, what kind of networks the gospel will go through.

There are some people who you will find are open to the gospel, and some that aren't. We believe our job is to find those who are hungry and feed them with the gospel!

Evangelism Networks: the bit between call and opportunity

The vision of the church, which we looked at earlier, can also be thought of as its call. We said that the call was 'half-cooked' by Antioch. That is, we reach the poor of Greater Manchester through replicating community churches. But other parts of the vision, or call, are brought out by the leader and their team. That call shapes a lot of things early in the loop, including who the leader recruits, where the church is sited, and how the leader explains their vision.

That call may, of course, change. In fact, a number of church plants may well see their vision increasingly shaped by the people who respond to their message. You will very probably see your vision honed by reality. You might have a goal to reach an area which is largely 1 demographic group, for example. People from another demographic begin attending the church. You're excited by this, because there's an open door for the gospel. But the 2 x groups may not get on, and you may find it's now harder to invite the first demographic to your meetings. You have some tough decisions to make.

For the moment, however, we're going to treat your call as your framework. It's what you pray into, it's what you work towards, it's what you believe that God has called you to do.

The evangelism networks can be thought of as the opportunity bit. They are the openness to the gospel among the people you are trying to reach. But before we go into the actual kinds of opportunities you might have, we'll have a look at a specific example, and look at where we want to end up.

An example from the Bible

Paul and Barnabas were sent by the Antioch church to plant churches among the Gentiles. That was their call – their vision. So where did they go? The synagogues. Why would a Gentile mission go straight to the gathering places of the Jews? The answer is opportunity. People were gathered there to hear the word of God. Paul was far more educated and credible than most synagogue preachers, so he could get a hearing. And while the synagogues were largely Jewish, there were also God-fearers there. These were Gentiles who had believed that God had spoken through the prophets, and were awaiting the Messiah. These people were very open to the gospel. So Paul and Barnabas looked at their call, and took their opportunity. The synagogues were a key evangelism network.



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Two linked evangelism networks

One church John was involved in had a vision to reach local white working class families. The networks are both generational networks – children, parents, grandparents, but also the relational networks. In this case it was mothers who knew each other, who acted as doorkeepers for the community. They also wanted to reach local Asians, who were largely Muslim.

If your church wants to reach this group, you need to explore how the church can present the good news in a way that makes sense and gather people in a way that makes sense. This church started a mother and toddlers' group and ran Messy Church instead of its regular service once a month on Sundays. Messy Church is an example of exploring a network – parents of young children who gather together and hear the gospel.

The demographic of the whole area was changing. Messy Church produced one new church member. He was an Iranian man in his 40s. His wife left him, taking the child with her. But the father remained in the church. He came to believe, and he began to invite others. Messy church stopped and eventually the mother and toddler group stopped – but the gospel had 'fire-jumped' from one network into another. From here on the spread of the gospel moved in a different, and less institutional way – moved from individual to individual, and the number of Iranians grew rapidly.

The relational fringe and the institutional fringe and the no-fringe.

This is not just an example of two different demographics working alongside each other and the church's call being shaped by response to the message. It's also a reminder that the goal of your evangelism is that the gospel should run through relational networks, not mainly out of activities.

- **The institutional fringe** of a church means the things you do as a church. Christians against poverty, mothers and toddlers' groups, English classes, homework clubs – these can all bring people together and offer a way into their networks. You invite people for an activity.
- **The no-fringe** is an underrated way of bringing the gospel into networks. It's where you tell strangers the good news. It is easy to underestimate the impact it can make, partly because we really don't like doing it. I have seen people come into church from simple invitations from people standing outside the church, from invitations at shops, bookstalls and from door knocking.
- **The relational fringe** of the church is people you know. They are your friends, your workmates, your family. They are the friends and family of the people who respond to the gospel. The three areas of institutional fringe, no-fringe and relational fringe don't exclude each other, of course, and most churches use all three. That said, churches that consistently make disciples almost always work largely through a relational fringe.

**Three Questions for Action Planning**

1. Where are these fringes? And who are in these fringes?
2. How can we bring the good news into this network AND
3. How can we keep the good news spreading through this network?

You have time to develop this as a church, but even at the beginning, you are asking those two questions of how you can bring the gospel into a network of people, and how you can shape the church to keep it spreading.

Friendship evangelism

This division into a relational fringe, organisational fringe, and no-fringe, might seem to miss out friendship evangelism. Friendship evangelism is a step behind relational evangelism – you make a relationship in order to evangelise. While this is a very common way of laying the ground for evangelism, there are some questions.

A friendship is a friendship – it's give and take on both sides. Are you trying to build a genuine give and take relationship with the person. If you're asking for their friendship, while having a hidden motive, it can come across as (and even be) manipulative. It's also not quick. If you make friends with people without knowing how open they are to the gospel, you will probably invest quite a lot of time into getting to know people who never believe the message. Some will, but most won't. So the number of people that you communicate the gospel to is reduced.

If, on the other hand, you present yourself as a teacher of Jesus' message from the outset, people can respond to you on that basis. There's a filter, which means that those who aren't interested can ignore you, and those who are interested can come to you. Those who do get to know you immediately know the purpose of your life and presence in a particular place.

Back to Call and Opportunity

So, if your call is given to you by God, and your ultimate goal is to see the gospel move through relational networks, the question is how? And at this point, we look at opportunities. These opportunities show how we might be able to put our call to reach the lost into practice.

Opportunity 1: People who are open to the gospel

Iranians are more open than Pakistanis, in general, for example. That might present an opportunity to focus on them, but obviously, you will have to watch that your call doesn't drift accidentally. But there are other groups who might be more open within your group. New parents often ask big questions. People who are in transit, have migrated, or have seen



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radical changes in their lives are often open to new ideas. Think about the most open people you know within a particular demographic: who are they?

Opportunity 2: Who do we have in our team?

Suppose you have a great cricketer in your plant team – that might make you think about how to reach his team-mates. If there is a young mother or two, then you might want to put something on for mothers and children her age. If you have a Bengali speaker, then you might want to adapt some of your work 4 of 8 towards Bangladeshis. In each case, you are bringing together the call of your church, and the opportunities you have.

Opportunity 3: Super spreaders.

Some people have an unusual evangelistic gifting, in general. They'll talk to anyone, and for some bizarre reason, people listen. Listen very carefully to your evangelists: what will make their life easy? What do they need to bring people to Christ and his church? An odd variant of this is **atheist evangelist**. These are people who don't believe (although they're not necessarily atheists), but they love you and your church, and invite people to it, even they don't come themselves. They are often influential people and can be extraordinarily effective. One drug dealer local to one of church plants has told a number of people about the church and even been to baptism services. He was happy for them to believe in Christ, but didn't believe himself. There are also, less commonly, people who are evangelists, not because they have an extraordinary gifting, but because they have an **extraordinary position**. These aren't often the people you might think, such as influential businessmen, or leaders in education or science. They're those who have contact with a lot of people, such as taxi drivers, hairdressers, library workers, GPs, translators, and language teachers. If you have a team member who has the opportunity to talk to a lot of people, again, get behind them, support them, and talk to them. Or get a job in a laundrette, and become a super-spreader yourself. Some of these super-spreaders may be in your team, and some of them may just be your friends. But super-spreaders are always worth listening to.

Opportunity 4: Languages, networks and the church.

This is a variant of 2 and 3. Language, culture, and even to some extent race is important to people. People look at a church and think 'Is this for my kind of people?' There are two potential pitfalls here in linking someone from a different culture or language group to your evangelism strategy. One is to ignore it, unless you're obviously not called to that culture as a church. This is particularly a risk over language. If you've lived in another country and learnt a language, you will know 5 of 8 how disorientating it can be. The person who's speaking doesn't realise just how hard it is for the listener to understand even half of what they're saying. Deep friendships usually only happen when people share a fluent common language. Some of the deep truths of the faith – and particularly the Trinity – are very hard to understand and prone to misunderstanding if they're not explained in a language in which someone is completely fluent. The other is to delegate everything to the language expert.



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People generally want some kind of cross-cultural community, and just because someone is from a culture, and speaks a language, it doesn't mean that they'll be a world changing evangelist who can transform a culture on their own. There is another discussion about building cross-cultural team, but the main thing is that every evangelist and worker is part of a team.

Opportunity 5: Buildings, venues.

Your church might be meeting in a public library which everyone knows, or a community centre which people come to during the week. The Rusholme church meets over a bookshop where we also hold English lessons. Oldhams Church meets in a Council community centre. It's a great referral point. So the evangelistic network can centre on a place, just as a community can centre on a space. This might be true even where it isn't the Sunday meeting point. If you can meet in a public space in midweek, this can often achieve the same effect. The people who gather in that public space may be a network that you tap into.

Opportunity 6: What methods work?

It's not illegitimate to run something that you think might work, and see what it turns up. If you're happy running Alpha, Messy Church a parenting course, the Start course, Celebrate Recovery or something else and seeing who comes. Of course, you have to be happy that you'll still be within your call, and this isn't the most precise way of finding your evangelism networks, but you can put this in front of your team. You may only be pushing the issue back a level, as you'll still have to find a way to invite people.

Opportunity 7: Who has responded to us?

Sometimes people who respond to us early on when we're in a place can have a big effect. They may become the people of peace – this is similar to opportunity 3 – the super-spreader. What's different here is that you set out to tell them the message. God sometimes puts people into our path who just respond to us. 6 of 8 In John's early years in Africa, God put people into his path who responded to the message, and we, as a team adapted to that.

Opportunity 8: Projects and institutions

There are perhaps two kinds here. The first kind is created by the church. It might be a language class or a foodbank. This gives the church quite a lot of freedom to use the space, but it puts a burden on the church to keep the activity running, which may strain a small church. The alternative is to look for an opening into a school or a relationship with a community foodbank. It can lead us to shape our evangelistic strategy around that. A word of caution here: in taking these opportunities, you often have to create some kind of activity that sits between the church and the formal institution. It may be difficult evangelise children directly in a school. But you can invite them to Messy Church. And you can evangelise them in Messy Church. No doubt you can think of other opportunities. What other opportunities might show you how an evangelistic network is opening up?



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Counter-cultural networks

We've talked about the identification of evangelistic networks as the intersection of your church's call and the opportunities available. There may be some counter-intuitive ways of looking for those networks. One is to ask God who he is opening up. We might suppose that the people in the churches are the ones open to the gospel, and if we look at the churches nearby, then we can guess that those are the open people. But that might not be true: it might be that Somalis are more open than we suppose, and no-one has taken the time to reach them. It may be that the absence of fruit is a sign of God's call on your church. Is there something that you see – almost a prophetic insight – that other people do not. God is changing people, cultures and nations. He will show his people what he is doing.

Prayer

Pray, pray, pray. The time we have seen the most fruit as a network is so often linked to how committed we are to prayer; both the practice and posture of prayer; complete reliance on God. When we pray, we are praying for the naturally impossible. If we see the opportunities in the wrong way, we can end up saying 'what is the easiest way to do this?' and meaning by it 'what does not require answered prayer?' This attitude, if you allow it to grow, will come back to bite you. Pray, Pray, Pray.