

**Celtic Christianity, Evangelism and the United Church of Christ
(or how the UCC might embrace evangelism today)**

If it's not about "ramming Scripture down people's throat" or "scare tactics - frightening people into certain kinds of strict conduct¹," what is evangelism in the UCC for today? For most UCC pastors and members the kind of evangelism that is hoped for is described as "relational," "interactive," "engaging," "an evangelism that grows and nurtures discipleship, rather than demands discipleship²."

A book I recently read has helped me understand the difference in theological and practical dynamics between the evangelism that has put us off and the evangelism we seek to embrace.

The book is The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again by George Hunter III. In his book, George Hunter describes the difference between what he describes as the evangelism approach in Roman and Celtic Christianity. Celtic Christianity is the tradition of mission and ministry that was first developed by St. Patrick in Ireland and then journeyed into Scotland. Roman Christianity is the tradition of mission and ministry that was practiced by missionaries from Rome that sought to 'Christianize' the people of England.

"Bluntly stated, the Roman model for reaching people (who are "civilized" enough) is: (1) Present the Christian message; (2) Invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; and (3) If they decide positively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship. The Roman model seems very logical to us because most American evangelicals are scripted by it! We explain the gospel, they accept Christ, we welcome them into the church! Presentation, Decision, Assimilation. "³

In contrast, this is the Celtic model for outreach: (1) you first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. (2) within the embrace of community, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer and worship. (3) As people discover their gifts and faith, you invite them to commit to discipleship.

The two models can be simply charted as such:

Roman Model

Presentation
Decision
Fellowship

Celtic Model

Fellowship
Ministry and Conversation
Belief, Invitation to Commitment

¹"What does the 'e-word' mean in the UCC?" United Church News, June 2002, p.A10

²Quotes from e-mail statements on evangelism forum, UCC Website

³The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West....Again, George Hunter III, Abingdon Press , Nashville, TN, 2000, p.53

The Celtic model reflects the adage that for most people, 'Christianity is more caught than taught!' As Professor Robin Gill observes 'belonging comes before believing'. For this reason, evangelism is now about "helping people to belong so that they can believe."⁴

The Celtic Christianity ministry of inclusion and nurture before the discipleship decision seems very much like the evangelism that members of the UCC are looking for. Perhaps, because the Roman tradition became the dominant model of evangelism, UCC members have often felt that we weren't doing 'evangelism' unless we were doing it Roman style. It's encouraging to know that there is a historic alternative approach to evangelism that we can embrace and learn.

The book has many more insights about Celtic Christianity that are engaging; including discussions on it's imaginative, yet down-to-earth spirituality, it's identification with the people and their culture, the hospitality and nurture of the Celtic Christian communities, it's team approach to evangelism, and it's passion to serve beyond itself to others not yet in the community of faith.

I particularly would hope for the UCC that we would be inspired by the Celtic passion to share the love of Christ simply for the sake of the Gospel, not as a tool of empire building, but as an outreach mission of sharing with others the life that we have found in Jesus.

If you would like to learn more about Celtic Christianity and evangelism, do read Hunter's book. You may also want to check out this website on Celtic Christianity <http://members.lycos.co.uk/DavidEW/index.html> . Under the 'Theme' tab on the homepage there is a good article on Celtic Christians and Culture by David Ward that compares Roman and Celtic evangelism, stressing the cultural sensitivity of Celtic outreach.

⁴The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West....Again, George Hunter III, Abingdon Press , Nashville, TN, 2000, p.54

