

A Guide for Discussion

You may of course read the books in this series on your own, but because they focus on the transformation of the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first century the books are especially useful as a basis for discussion and reflection within a congregation or community. The questions below are intended to generate fruitful discussion about how members of the group have experienced and practiced evangelism not only within the institutional church, but also more broadly in all aspects of their lives. The questions therefore focus both on what has been helpful and what has been lacking; on how the church has been supportive and where it has fallen short.

Each group will identify its own needs and will be shaped by the interests of the participants and their comfort in sharing personal life stories. Discussion leaders will wish to focus on particular areas that address the concerns and goals of the group, using the questions and themes provided here simply as suggestions for a place to start the conversation.

chapter one

“Go Therefore and Make Disciples”

Gortner opens this chapter with his definition of evangelism as a spiritual practice: “Evangelism is your natural expression of gratitude for God’s goodness.” He goes on to note that “true evangelism emerges only out of your own transformation” (pp. 1–2).

- ♦ How would you define “evangelism”? What associations or images come to mind when you hear the word “evangelism”?
- ♦ Do you see evangelism as a spiritual practice, or something else? How do you practice evangelism in your own life? What are your “habits of evangelism”?
- ♦ What has been your experience or impression of the evangelistic efforts made by the religious communities you have known? Who have been the evangelists in your life?



On page 29 Gortner offers a list of eight “core assertions” for evangelism in a new century. Read these statements aloud, and reflect on their implications by asking the following questions of each.

- ♦ What do you make of this assertion? Does it ring true to your experience of and hope for the church in the twenty-first century?
- ♦ What in this assertion affirms the way you practice evangelism in your congregation?
- ♦ What in this assertion challenges the way you practice evangelism in your congregation?

chapter two

“The Road to Jerusalem
is in the Heart”

In this chapter Gortner describes the need for seeing our Christian lives as pilgrimage in order to name “the presence of the Holy” in the lives of people we encounter (p. 34). Although each of our stories of pilgrimage is unique, there are common themes “of seeking and uncertainty, finding and being found, relief from burdens too heavy to bear, the gratification of discovering Love, and deep, transformative gratitude and wonder” (p. 36–37).

- ◆ How would you describe your spiritual journey? Where did your pilgrimage begin? Where has it taken you?
- ◆ Which of the “common themes” Gortner identifies do you recognize in your life?
- ◆ What other themes do you hear in the stories of Christian pilgrimage shared in your discussion, or in your reading or listening to others?



Gortner states: “All mission—and, as a consequence, all evangelism—begins, proceeds, and ends with the Holy Spirit” (p. 40).

- ◆ How would this understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit change the way your congregation practices mission and evangelism?
- ◆ When have you experienced the “fruits of the Spirit” (p. 43) and recognized them as such? What or who helped you see them as signs of God’s active presence in your life? Did you tell anyone about this experience?

chapter three

Living the Pilgrim Faith

Gortner describes this chapter as a “travel guide” to a number of places where intentionally evangelistic ministries are flourishing and “seeds of transformation are being sown” (p. 70). He focuses on how evangelism is uniquely expressed in each place, and includes interviews with members as well as some history of how the focus on evangelism came to be central to the ministry.

- ♦ What stood out for you in the stories of these communities?
- ♦ If your congregation were to be included in this “travel guide,” how would you describe its history in terms of ministries of evangelism? Who would you need to interview—from the past or the present—in order to tell its story?
- ♦ What ministries or events or decisions taken by the congregation would you highlight?



Gortner also describes several programs that have been developed for parish-based evangelism and faith renewal, such as Alpha and Cursillo (p. 108).

- ♦ What experience do you have of these or other parish-based programs for evangelism and renewal?
- ♦ In your experience, how effective are such programs in sowing the “seeds of transformation”? What makes them effective?
- ♦ What can hinder the ability of these programs to create a community of believers who embrace the telling of their stories as a spiritual discipline?

chapter four

With Open and Courageous Hearts

Gortner identifies in this chapter several “habits for evangelism”: practicing gratitude, learning to listen, and naming the holy.

- ◆ How have you practiced these habits in your life?
- ◆ In what ways do you experience these habits being practiced in your congregation?
- ◆ What or who encourages the development of these habits in your life? In your congregation? Who or what discourages them?



Turn to the exercise “Where is God Here?” on page 147.

- ◆ How could you adapt this exercise to the needs and circumstances of your discussion group?
- ◆ Develop a plan on how you will practice this exercise now or in the coming week—how you will divide into pairs or small groups, where you will go, to whom you will talk, what you will ask, and when you will return to report your findings.
- ◆ What are your hopes and expectations, your misgivings and concerns, as you envision doing this exercise?

chapter five

“Were Not Our Hearts
Burning Within Us?”

In this chapter Gortner states: “Getting evangelism right means living as a pilgrim, following after wonder and delight, and being prepared to share from the treasure-house of your life the great unfolding story of God’s redeeming work” (p. 167).

- ♦ What do you need to sustain your life as a pilgrim?
- ♦ What do you need to be better prepared to share the “story of God’s redeeming work” in your life?
- ♦ What is stopping you from telling your story?



Gortner speculates that if we “get this kind of evangelism right” then “the life of the church will begin to look very different indeed” (p. 168).

- ♦ What do you imagine the Episcopal Church would look like if more of its members saw themselves as practicing evangelists?
- ♦ How would the Episcopal Church look different if its ordained leaders placed evangelism as their top priority? What aspects of church life would change? How would their ministries be different?
- ♦ How can we reset our priorities? How can we move around, over, under, or through what stands in our way in order to encourage renewal throughout church?