

Creating a Culture of Invitation

By the same author

Unlocking the Growth

Creating
a Culture of
Invitation

Why is it so hard?

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MONARCH
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*In memory of Frank and Anne Perrott
and to my incredible wife Eike,
and children Ben, Kirsty and Lydia*

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To my children Ben, Kirsty, and Lydia, know that I am really proud of you.

Finally my beautiful wife Eike, who allows me to wander the world as an itinerant provoker. She says to all who listen, my short absence gives her a break!

Foreword

I've worked with Michael Harvey for almost ten years. In each one of those years I've seen what a disciplined, passionate love for God's church can do, as Michael has brought his ideas, experience and skill to bear on the moment of invitation.

Evangelism is not difficult, but it can be hard. Both for individual Christians and for churches, the call of God is to overcome fear and to grow in confidence. I know of no one who has explored these matters, and who has resourced the Church in this area, more wisely than Michael.

His book cuts to the heart of the evangelism conundrum. It's so simple to say to our friends, "I'm a Christian", or to say "Would you like to come to church with me?" Simple, but not easy. We know exactly what we need to do, but somehow when the moment of invitation comes, we let it go by. This book focuses in on the reasons why we find it hard to share our faith or to invite our friends, and with unerring humour and lightness of touch it skewers the rationalizations and the "sophisticated" reasons we invent to get away from the moment.

Reading the book, you meet Michael. For the thousands who have already met him in his "Unlocking the Growth" seminars, the book will bring back a smile or a nod as we hear his voice again and agree with its common sense. If you've not yet met him, the book will open a door into the research, analysis, passion, and prayer that have made his work so valuable to us all.

"My friend is rather shy, but she formed a bridge and Jesus Christ walked over it." That's evangelism. You may want to form

a bridge, to help your church form bridges, so that Jesus Christ can walk across to the people you know and love. If you want that, read this book.

Paul Bayes is Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, and a member of the leadership team for the Season of Invitation.

Preface

This book was born in 1971 when an eight-year-old boy was invited to a church much closer to home than the one that took a two-mile walk every Sunday. Where would that boy be without that invitation? I am that boy, and this book is another step along the path of my healing. It was at that church in north Manchester that I met my spiritual father, Frank Perrott, who invited me into the life of the church and to a faith in Jesus Christ.

Between 1963 and 1971, my formative years, I didn't live with my mum, I never knew my father, a sibling was born and taken away without my knowledge, I had a skin colour that was different from those at school, and I had my original name removed. These events became the window through which I viewed the world – and to some extent, they still are.

Frank was later joined by his wife, Anne, in helping me to discover a relationship with God. They were both a vital presence during my teenage years, as I spent time with others in the youth group in their home. Together with other people at the church, they encouraged the transformation of the life of a boy hurt by his past. They wept alongside me as I saw my mum die early and my grandmother develop Alzheimer's. At that difficult time I swapped roles with my grandma and became her carer. Later on, Anne and Frank rejoiced with me as I married and had a family of my own. They both felt pride as they saw me succeed in business, and then were amazed and delighted as I started to take a message of invitation first around the UK and then around the world. Their faith was inspirational, and without their constant

invitation to take a closer look at Jesus Christ, I am not sure where I would be today.

I wept with Frank as his precious wife died. And I wept again as Frank died even as a new life was starting for him. In a way, Frank had carried me into the church through his friendship, and I now had the privilege of carrying him back into church for his final earthly journey.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Anne and Frank Perrott. But it takes a whole church to raise an inviter for Christ.

Introduction

Take a moment to thank God for the person who invited you to take a closer look at Jesus Christ. It might have been an event, a church service, or simply to a cup of coffee... but they invited you.

I want to start a process that leads to change. As I have travelled the world in the last ten years, increasingly I have tried to understand why Christians have such difficulty in reaching out to friends and neighbours through the simple act of invitation.

This is a book born in pain. My pain stems from the fact that I have spent ten years fighting for attention. I have had to travel thousands of miles to speak for fifteen minutes. When I have reached an important part in talking about my research, I have been cut off because time has gone, and another meeting calls. We are all just so very busy. We have created unceasing endeavours to divert ourselves.

While many of my ideas may sound familiar, they cut across an aspect of church life which might best be described as “business as usual”. The ideas I promote might be “lovely”, but we have a church to run and maintain, services to plan, rotas to fill, systems to keep going, and people to pay. Therefore the question I hear the most from church leaders is: “Does it work?”

If it is too hard for clergy, they tend to go quiet, change the subject afterwards, and get back onto much safer territory. There are very few questions afterwards, polite and blank looks with very little engagement. These are the hardest audiences, not because they challenge what I say but because they don't know what to do with it.

Then there is the criticism from some missional thinkers who have labelled Back to Church Sunday nothing more than an energetic attempt to get the lapsed to attend. They maintain that the attractional model of church is not based on “mission” and is going nowhere. In their otherwise excellent book *The Faith of Leap*,¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch highlight an Anglican church that gave chocolate to those who accepted the invitation and go on to say that the church was thus “reduced to begging people to come” which they said is “not only pathetic but borders on false witness”.

However, while there is pain, I have used the frustration and the space given by rejection to seek greater clarity in this area of mission. The frustration has proved very beneficial! It has helped to test and refine the calling, to gather ideas and embrace more innovation.

My hope is that the strategies in this book will be used to address the difficulties we face in our churches, and that this will lead to far more mission activity.

As we go into mission or pastoral work we might think that we are bringing God with us – as if previously God were somehow absent. Vincent Donovan, author of *Christianity Rediscovered*, says this:

*God was there before we ever got there... it is simply up
to us to bring him out
so that they can recognise him.*²

We should be going into mission with confidence that we will find God as we go – and when we get there. This is the thrill of developing a culture of invitation.

I have conducted ten years’ study of the art of invitation, over 650 times in twelve countries, and for the first ten years I asked

just one question: “Why don’t we invite our friends to take a closer look at Christ and his church?”

On all of those occasions no one ever told me that it was a stupid question. They just went on to tell me the reasons that were hindering them from invitation. Now, I am one of those people more fascinated when things go wrong than when they go right. In my first book, *Unlocking the Growth*, I made the case that we are locking down the growth that God wants to give to the church. We are in fact hiding a breakdown in our relationship with God. When we hide this and bury it deep within our thinking, we lose out. But there is hope. From sin comes salvation; from Good Friday comes Easter Sunday; from a breakdown in our relationship with God, transformation can come. When God turns up in many of our Bible stories it is to bring deliverance from disobedience. And so it is today.

So is anything hindering you and your church? Let me ask you a different question that might well expose why this book might be important for you. One question, but you’re only allowed to choose one of the two options.

Is your congregation welcoming or inviting?

You can imagine the answer I receive to that question, can’t you? “Welcoming.” But how welcoming can we be if we are not inviting?

We are welcoming (well, some of us are) as long as people get themselves across the threshold of a church building. And this is where we so often fail, by not taking our welcome outside with a gift of an invitation. Whereas I have found that when Christians start to invite, we see people accepting (as well as rejecting) invitations in big numbers across the world.

Invitation is at the heart of God himself. He sent his Son to invite us all into a relationship. And so to be a person who invites is to be like God.

But there is a problem deep within in us, causing our reluctance. Consider the following verse quoted by Jesus from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners (Isaiah 61:1)

I find Christians who are unknowingly captive, bound up in fear and broken-hearted. But the great news is that Jesus came to set us free and heal the broken-hearted. Ralph Waldo Emerson discussed the potential in releasing the captives:

Everything in creation has its appointed painter or poet and remains in bondage like the princess in the fairy tale till its appropriate liberator comes to set it free.³

But you cannot escape captivity if you don't know you are captive in the first place; you can't begin a healing process if you don't know your heart is broken. On the other hand, if Jesus has proclaimed freedom for the captives, why would you ever go back to prison when you are free?

There is a reason why. It is a fact that the unconscious habits of a lifetime don't just roll over and die when we become Christians. We have to appropriate the freedom that Christ proclaims, and mission gives us the opportunity to see our captivity and our broken-heartedness brought into the clear light of day.

I must declare an interest in this area of captivity and broken-heartedness, lest I "look at the speck of sawdust in [my] brother's

eye and pay no attention to the plank in [my] own” (Matthew 7:3). I too find myself full of fear and hindered by a past which is still being healed and is not yet sorted. So I am addressing myself as well as you. It is the possibility of my own freedom and healing that makes this subject, for me, almost impossible to resist. I teach and research that which I need the most.

I write into a generation of church leadership that is puzzling to work out how to be effective in mission on one end of the spectrum, while on the other end it is trying simply to keep the doors of churches open by attracting newcomers. I am reminded of the question of the Ethiopian eunuch: “How can I [understand],’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’” (Acts 8:31).

Now, if I could be considered a teacher, I am almost embarrassed to bring you uncommon sense, but here it is:

If we invite people, some will say no and some will say yes; but if we don't invite people, the answer will always be no!

John Wooden, a legendary US sports coach, once said:

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.⁴

Truth is often hidden in clear sight.

So here is a formula for invitational mission in just three letters:

a... s ... k

Receiving is reserved for those who ask; finding for those who seek; and open doors for those who knock on a few! Experience of getting a negative response can be so overrated – especially when it keeps you from going on asking people.

Invitation to church may seem old hat to you. But sometimes blessing comes if we revisit some well-worn but forgotten spiritual principles. We need the fresh water of God's blessing.

Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them. (Genesis 26:18)

Just as Isaac revisited and reopened the wells, I intend to re-look at some very old principles.

In chapter one we will look at where invitation is going wrong; in chapter two, the reasons we don't invite; in chapter three, how to face fear; in chapter four, responding to rejection; in chapter five, how to address the problem; in chapter six, best practice; and in chapter seven, who is the ultimate inviter.

1

What's Wrong?

One example will suffice to underline a paradigm running in Western Christianity today. I will ring a church leader after an event where the congregation has been encouraged to invite people along, and ask, “How did it go?” Then follows a variation on the following theme:

Church Leader: Terrible.

Me: How do you mean, terrible?

Church Leader: We only had ten invited guests.

Me: That doesn't sound terrible.

Church Leader: Yes, well, only one of them has stayed.

So we're not doing another one of these events next year!

Apparently we are not content with ones and twos, and we discount everything else in the process. I said in *Unlocking the Growth*⁵ that I believe success isn't a percentage, a number, or a line on a graph; success is one person inviting one person. My findings show that whatever we say, we still really believe that success is one person inviting one person *and that person saying yes*.

To counter this success thinking, I want to remind you of what Jesus said in the parable of the talents: “You

have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things” (Matthew 25:21). Faithfulness should be our main concern. Results are God’s concern.

I would say that it is hard enough for a congregation member to invite without the added pressure of having to get a yes. This pressure to succeed actually cuts off invitation, because the common defence in avoiding the possibility of failure is to stop trying. Lower your expectations until they’re already met, and you’ll never be disappointed.

The heavy pressure to be successful can be replaced by the lightness of faithfulness, even when that includes what looks like failure. I believe the greatest way to change another person’s behaviour is to change their paradigm – change the map of how they see themselves, their role, and their responsibility. So if you remember nothing else in this book, please remember this:

Success is one person inviting one person, leaving the yes and the no to God.

Even the great apostle Paul said:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. (1 Corinthians 3:6)

Will someone say yes, or no? The fact is, you cannot plan the impact that you will have. In fact, you won’t even recognize it when it is happening. You certainly will make an impact, but you will probably never know what it is.

Research professor at the University of Houston, Brené Brown says:

We have lost our ability to be uncertain.⁶

It seems that these days, before we do anything, we need to remove all risk of uncertainty and failure. As a result we don't actually use our faith. Faith which goes into uncertain situations has gone out of fashion, exchanged for certainty.

Now, that does not mean that we are going into mission as a completely disinterested party. We go into mission with hope. Hope contains both trust and distrust in tension. Hope is the confident expectation of something desired in the face of the possibility that it may not happen. But our Christian hope brings a belief that good will come even in the face of things that look bad. The difference between the two is crucial. Do we have hope that in every difficulty lies an opportunity?

By contrast many of us in the church measure our self-worth according to results rather than efforts. We then put in less effort – which produces less by way of results! As the saying goes:

If at first you don't succeed... hide all evidence that you tried!

The success paradigm has developed in the church through distorted truth. We hear ourselves saying about an event, or an initiative, "Did it work? Did it produce fruit?" Of course we strive to be the best for God; we want to see people come to a relationship with Christ, for that is best for them. But when we don't see people responding positively immediately, the feeling of failure creeps in. We don't see that God might have another agenda. Perhaps he wants to use this to produce the fruit of the Spirit within us, the inviters; perhaps he wants to bring to the surface wounds that need healing.

What is driving the push for success? It is one of the most enslaving parts of church life and it is plaguing our generation. You may even be questioning my sanity as you read this,

wondering why I would even suggest that success is wrong. But I am interested in this almost manic “push” for success. Alain Botton sees it as part of our loss of belief in a world beyond this one. In *Status Anxiety*⁷ he writes:

When a belief in the next world is interpreted as a childish and scientifically impossible opiate, the pressure to succeed and fulfil oneself will inevitably be inflamed by the awareness that there is only a single and frighteningly brief opportunity to do so. Earthly achievements can no longer be seen as an overture to what one may realize in another world, they are the sum total of all one will ever be.

So we have become a society where we mustn't fail and there is only one right answer. As Glynn Harrison says in *The Big Ego Trip*:⁸

So trained by our culture we think in terms of being winners and losers.

It is a fear of getting things wrong. We only like the word “yes” and regret hearing the word “no”. But this is highly problematical in mission, because we are bound to hear people say the word “no” to us!

Fear of being wrong has another consequence for us: it closes us off to growth. A person who does not mind being wrong is continually detecting, processing, and correcting in any potentially negative situation. Things are allowed to develop. I think it is time for us to give up the desire to be perfect and concentrate on *becoming* who we are meant to be.

In my research I have been pointed towards attribution theory to help understand this pervading desire to succeed that stalks the church.

Attribution theory looks at how we attribute meaning to

others' behaviour, or our own. For example: we ask, is this person angry because they are bad-tempered, or because something bad has happened to them?

Let's apply this to persistence in mission in the face of failure. Do we lack persistence because we are weak, or because of the difficulty of the task? Rather than use guilt as a stick to beat people with, I suggest we promote the difficulty of the task before us. This, then, gives scope to develop the character of the participants, as attribution is now shifted from internal to external factors – and we acknowledge that it is for God, not us, to give the results.

Paul picks up on this dynamic:

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3–4)

Paul found that inner healing hurts. In going from freedom to slavery, there is pain. He found it through a process of facing difficulty.

The example from the children of Israel:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 8:2)

So, as we promote the difficulty of the task, I think our slogan could be:

Become an invitational church – not just for the yeses, but for what you become in the process.

Persistence is the field of proving. Jesus went to the wilderness to be tested, and in a similar same way, so will you. Another slogan:

No test, no testimony.