

LOCAL FRIENDS

Helping ordinary people care for one another

Telling the Good News

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Purpose.....	1
This document.....	2
The Good News.....	2
Why tell the Good News again?.....	2
An agreed form of words.....	3
Telling the Good News.....	3
A suggested default.....	3
Words and actions.....	4
How we talk about faith.....	4

Introduction

Purpose

The aim of *Local Friends* is to love and serve people where they are, with no conditions or strings attached and no hidden agenda. Helping people spiritually is just one strand of what we offer, alongside the other ways we offer to help people.

Spiritual help comes in many forms: we can provide a place where people are able to explore the deeper questions of life, people who are willing to walk alongside you on that journey, encouragement when things are tough and resources of various kinds to draw upon when needed.

While the journey of spiritual exploration should – we believe – never cease, at some point in this journey, most people recognise a need to identify with some faith tradition. We can listen to and learn from many different people, groups and disciplines, but at some point it is no longer enough to look on from the outside: we need to commit, to identify with a tradition and a group of people and say, “This is me; this is what I believe; despite all the problems and failures of this group, this is where I belong.”

We never seek to pressurise anyone into making such a commitment, but it is a step which many people want to take, and so we need to ensure that this sensitive time is handled well. When a person expresses an interest in becoming a Christian, we need to tell them how they can do this and what it will entail. This is sometimes not handled well: the aim of this document and the others we have produced is to enable us to help people as best we can and avoid such problems.

This document

One reason why some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of telling others how to become a Christian is that they do not like the words and concepts they think they are required to use: this is one of the problems we are seeking to address.

Christians understand the nature and process of salvation in many different ways, and use a wide variety of language to talk about such things. We are not seeking to achieve full agreement on these matters, but we do need some guidelines concerning how we work together; and ideally we want some idea of what we can agree about.

Within the context of *Local Friends*, we want to talk about the Christian good news when it is appropriate. The question of when it is appropriate is addressed in the *Faith and Spirituality* document. When it is appropriate to talk, and someone asks us how you become a Christian, we respond by telling them the ‘good news’, one presentation of which is provided in the *Good News* document.

The *Spirituality and Society* document provides some of the background for the others, describing how the approach we have adopted fits into the issues and culture of the wider society and going some way towards explaining why we have chosen the approach we describe. The *Less Good News* document describes our reasons for developing this approach and what we are seeking to achieve by using it.

This document considers how we talk with people about matters of faith and spirituality. We will not push people to talk about matters of faith and spirituality, but we need to be clear about how we will respond when it is appropriate to do so.

We are seeking to develop an approach to the gospel message and how to communicate it which is closer to the message found in the pages of the New Testament, and which can be comfortably used by Christians from many different traditions.

Taken together, our documents describe what is intended to be an acceptable approach to spiritual matters. They have been written so that other groups (both faith-based and secular) can understand where we are coming from; and so that we can work together in a constructive and creative way, both with people who identify with the Christian faith and also with those who do not.

Links to these documents can be found on the temporary *Local Friends* web site:

- <http://localfriends.pbworks.com/>

The Good News

Why tell the Good News again?

There are three main reasons why we wanted to produce a statement of the good news.

- Firstly, it is useful to have such a statement so that people can understand our approach to spiritual matters and be comfortable with our work. The background to this approach is described in the *Spirituality and Society* document.

- Secondly, there are problems created by many of the traditional ways of expressing the good news, and we have an opportunity to shape a way of communicating it which avoids these problems. The *Less Good News* document addresses this area of concern.
- Thirdly, it is helpful to have a form of words which can be used when appropriate, because many Christians, when they are asked about their faith, do not know what to say.

An agreed form of words

It is helpful to make available a form of words which can be used. Note that we say these words *can* be used, when appropriate, not *must* be used; other forms of words are also available, although we would like our volunteers to understand why this form of words has been chosen.

Why is it helpful? Again, there are three main reasons.

- Firstly, it helps people outside *Local Friends* to understand what we as a group affirm as an expression of our faith and spirituality.
- Secondly, it is still the case that many Christians, when they are asked about their faith, do not know what to say: these words meet that need.
- Thirdly, it is often the case that Christians argue about details of the faith; a form of words which has been agreed up front can reduce the temptation to worry or spend time arguing about such details instead of getting on with the work of caring for others.

Most of the Bible consists of narrative: stories, letters and dialogues; a great deal is in the form of poetry and song. Where there are doctrines and rules, these are presented in the context of a story. The *Good News* we offer is constructed as a story which can be told and heard, rather than a set of doctrines which must be either believed or rejected.

Telling the Good News

A suggested default

We have talked about the ‘traditional gospel message’ but, of course, the traditional message for you depends entirely on which tradition you come from. Over the centuries, Christians have understood and presented the gospel message in many different ways.

There are many possible valid responses when someone asks about becoming a Christian: we are not seeking to tell you what to do or say, or suggest that there is only one ‘correct’ response – or one response which is better than all the others.

The approach we describe here and in other *Local Friends* documents can be understood as our ‘default’ approach. You can choose to use a different approach, but we ask that you consider this approach, even if you decide to use a different one.

Understanding this approach is important in several ways.

- Some Christians have never really considered how to respond if someone should ask them how to become a Christian: it is important that they have something to say when the question is asked.
- Some Christians have a very clear (and fixed) understanding of how to explain to someone how to become a Christian: it is important that they recognise there is more than one valid response here.
- The approach we describe here embodies not just a theological understanding of the issues involved but also a cultural expression of who we are and how we operate. If someone is unhappy with this way of communicating the Christian good news, they will probably be uncomfortable working in this environment, and it is helpful to identify this sooner rather than later.

Words and actions

Christians have also disagreed about the importance of presenting the message at all: those in the evangelical camp often believe that communicating this message is the most important thing we can do, while those in the liberal camp often feel it is better to communicate our faith through our actions and prefer to avoid the words (and the arguments which come with them) as far as possible.

Our position is that words and actions both matter, they should agree with and reinforce one another, and we should do our best to ensure that both words and actions are as helpful as possible to the people we are seeking to help.

How we talk about faith

This is a big subject, but here are some brief notes.

God loves everyone. So we must treat everyone with dignity and respect, however much we may disagree with their beliefs or disapprove of their activities. This respect must extend to their beliefs and practices, and be clearly expressed in the language we choose to use.

Our aim is to tell people about Jesus, not criticise the alternatives. Never seek to attack or criticise other groups, or people from other groups. Talking with people and about what they believe, and seeking to genuinely understand it, can only be helpful. Remember that all of us at times fall short of our own ideals, so it is neither fair nor helpful to compare our own ideals with other people's practices.

Be humble. Neither you nor your group has a monopoly on truth, and all of us would benefit from understanding the things we believe more deeply. If you come across as arrogant or dogmatic, people will find it harder to respond to your message.

Be gentle and sensitive. Think about the effects your words may have on the other person, and don't be so taken up in what you want to say that you fail to notice how the other person is feeling. People are sensitive to many issues, so try to discipline yourself to use language which will not offend unnecessarily. If you don't have to talk about God as a 'He', why press that button?

Be tentative where possible. Try to avoid absolute claims if you possibly can. Every 'every' you utter is a hostage to fortune; even if you think it is justified, it tends

to encourage people to think about whether they can find any exceptions, rather than thinking about the point you are making.

Think about your approach. Consider the position you are speaking from and try to adopt a consistent ‘voice’: if you are engaging in a reasoned discussion, don’t suddenly throw in an authoritative truth claim (“It’s true because God says so!”). If you feel the need to express something like this, try to quote someone else – ideally, someone they will recognise.

Don’t use the Bible to prove your point. If they want to know what Christians believe, quoting the Bible is a reasonable and helpful thing to do; but if you are simply talking about matters of faith and spirituality, you can use the Bible to inform them about the Christian faith, but don’t quote it as an authority they should recognise. In a conversation with someone who is not a Christian, what the Bible says can be interesting and helpful, but ‘the Bible says’ does not mean, ‘you must believe this’.

Good News. One final thought: if the gospel message is ‘good news’, why are Christians so reluctant to share it? And why do people get so upset and turned-off by us sharing good news with them? We suggest that it is because, most of the time, we are just not doing it right. What we are offering does not sound, taste, feel or smell like good news. There may be a reason for this.

If you really believe a message is good news, you don’t have to push it or force it down their throats. You can just tell the story, give people space to consider what you said and time to formulate their own response. It really is that simple, and that easy.

Copyright © 2017

Last updated: 12:53 on 27 March 2017, revision: 0.75

Location: /home/paul/Dropbox/LF/docs/LF_Vol_Telling_Good_News.odt