

THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

Second Place Winner

Laity

The Reverse ABC's of Evangelism

Ginny Mooney Gullett

Let's call her Claire. I met Claire through a work project. She in her late 20's, lives in Northern Ireland, and is an evangelist. A few times a week, Claire and her small team of two friends reserve a spot in a corner of a local park to preach about Jesus. Yes, she literally stands in a corner of the park and tells people who live in what she calls "a spiritually dark place" about the Light of the World.

But Claire hasn't always been an evangelist. Several years ago, you would have found her in a club in the hot spots of town, drinking, partying, and in one abusive relationship after another. One of those evenings, while partying with friends, she saw the guy she was dating cozying up to another woman, quite unabashedly. The sense of rejection overwhelmed her. She fled to the bathroom to escape the gut-punch she felt. That rejection deepened Claire's pervasive sense of worthlessness. She was unlovely and unlovable. In her self-hatred, she began cutting herself. Why not? She was of no value, and it helped to relieve the pain in her heart for a time.

What happened to Claire? How did she change from a despairing young woman, harming herself relationally, spiritually, and physically, to a courageous voice in the corner of a park inviting others to the Cornerstone.

The answer to that question is a powerful example of what I believe to be one of the most effective and do-able approaches to evangelism in our day. I'm

calling it the Reverse ABC's of Evangelism - because it starts with C, then goes to B, and finally A - CBA. (Yes, very sophisticated, I know.)

We begin with **C – Chat with everyone**. The first step in Claire's journey was an online chat with a young woman about her age who often posted about her faith in God. Claire began to write to her, and she wrote back. Claire describes it like this: "I wasn't writing to her and asking how I could have faith like she did. I was challenging her, asking her why she thought she knew so much, how she could say these things about God, basically attacking her." But the woman always answered kindly, not taking offense, gently responding to Claire's questions as best she could. This intrigues Claire and she kept writing.

The beginning of any connection is communicating some kind of positive regard to another person, often verbally. In our culture we call that "chatting," whether online or in person. Think about the people in your life that you see on a regular basis— neighbors, the guy at the check-out counter, your hairdresser, the package deliverer, other parents at school, or the server at your favorite restaurant. What if you just started a conversation, took a moment to engage with them. But why, you might ask? How is this part of evangelism? Well, if evangelism is sharing with others the good news about the One we believe created all things, knitted together every human being, knows and loves each one individually, then perhaps the first step in telling others about him is reflecting his character in interactions with them. Second, our actions form us. We are always talking about "formation" these days—how we are formed into the likeness of Jesus. By beginning to chat with people around us, regardless of the awkwardness we may feel at first, we are doing what Jesus did— noticing, acknowledging and engaging with people—and thereby being formed into the kind of people who act like Jesus.

A pastor friend of mine was on an examining committee for new pastors in his denomination (not the ACNA). He asked all the candidates the same question: “We read that Jesus spent time with tax collectors and sinners, those of questionable character who weren’t what we might call religious. Why do you think they wanted to spend time with Jesus?” Crickets. They were stumped. After a time, my pastor friend would gently say, “I believe it was because they knew Jesus liked them.” *Jesus liked them*. Do the people we meet every day, those eternal beings we are surrounded by, know that we *like them*? Certainly not if we don’t even speak to them.

But what to say? Instead of the predictable “Hi. How are you today?” with the check-out clerk, I’ve been trying questions like, “How is your shift going today?” or commenting on any common ground: “I notice your name is Paula. That’s my best friend’s name.” Perhaps they are wearing the logo of a sports team you like you might ask about. It may feel corny and awkward at first, but I believe you’ll be surprised at the responses. Whatever way you want to do it, just start chatting and see what happens.

B is for **Be Open**. There’s a book with the title *Unoffendable*, which I confess I have not read, but I love the title. Imagine if we as followers of Jesus refuse to be offended by what anyone says or does – their colorful language, their beliefs, the way they dress, their lifestyles. We may still disagree with someone or believe that choices they are making are harmful to them, but what if we refuse to let those offending characteristics define our interaction with them? Reverend Steve Brown, a hero of mine, used to say on his radio program, “Stop expecting regenerate behavior from unregenerate people.” Our purpose as believers is not to try to fix people’s morality, but to show them the love of the Jesus. If someone hasn’t yet met Jesus and experienced his love for them, why would they be

motivated to change their morality? Yet, this is what we often do. In fact, followers of Christ have become labeled as hateful in our culture today for just such behavior – trying to change people’s moral choices instead of being Jesus to them. What if, instead, we were open to befriending anyone God brings our way? How would that change not only our perception by the culture but also the extent of our reach?

There’s a second part to Be Open that I think is critical to showing people Jesus, and that is being open about our own struggles, including our struggles of faith. Can you imagine if the next time you got your hair cut or talk with someone on the airplane, you said something like, “I’m supposed to go to church tomorrow, but I’m really feeling angry with God right now. Someone I love is suffering. It’s just so hard.” How refreshing would that be! We are not the ones with all the answers, without any doubts or struggles, and with continual optimism. We are the beloveds of the Lord, who constantly need him to come and get us gain, to bring us back, and to hold us tightly. To quote Steve Brown again, “People don’t come to Jesus because of someone else’s holiness. They come to Jesus because of someone else’s honesty.” Are you willing to be open not just about your faith story – as important as that is - but also your faith struggles? Give it a try. It’s helpful to remember, as Ruth Bell Graham said when asked about her relationship with her husband, Billy, “It’s my job to love him. It’s God’s job to change him.” It’s not our job to convert people – it’s our job to love them. And part of loving them is giving them the dignity of our honesty.

That leads us to the **A** of our Reverse ABC’s. And **A** is the clincher: **Ask Them In.** In? Into where? Into what? Into our lives, and I think especially important today, into our homes. My friends Anita and Neil have been married for more than 20 years, are raising five children and a beautiful foster baby. When the couple first met as teenagers, Anita invited Neil to her house to meet her family.

Neil describes the experience as completely “other” from anything he had experienced. Anita’s family was real, not trying to impress anyone, just open and friendly. They prayed before their meal, which was a shock. They welcomed him and engaged him. But mostly, he experienced an atmosphere of peace and warmth that was so inviting that he wanted to come back again and again.

Our homes are places of rest and restoration for us. They are places of family activity and growth. But they are also to be places of hospitality. If we are to believe the statistics, people today are more isolated and lonelier than ever before. In the midst of social media immersion, what they really crave is true, in-person connection. There is really nothing as honoring or as intimate as inviting a person into your home, especially to your table.

A college student I interviewed for a television program had come to know Jesus from a Jewish background. Instead of rejecting all the traditions of her heritage, she looked at how the early Christians practiced them, even as they celebrated their fulfillment in Jesus. So she continued to bake Challah bread each Friday night for Shabbat dinner. Soon she started inviting friends over to join her. It was then that she had a realization about what hospitality means for followers of Jesus: “It realized it wasn’t about my house looking good or what I fed them. It was simply about inviting them over. They didn’t care if we sat on the floor and ate pizza. They just wanted to be invited over.” If God is a God who so deeply desires table fellowship with us that he invites us to his table every time we gather to feed and to nourish us, perhaps one of the best ways we can show others what he is like is by inviting them to have table fellowship with us.

You may wonder if your home is a place where people are going to encounter Jesus at all, but if you belong to him, I am willing to wager that it is. That’s because, when the Holy Spirit is present in our lives and in our homes,

people sense it. I remember being a single mom living in a rented house with second-hand furniture and floors that hadn't been swept in who knows how long. Yet, when I'd invite people over, even with kids racing around or bickering, they would so often tell me how welcoming it was and how peaceful. I was amazed. It certainly wasn't something I had done or tried to engineer. I believe it was a gift to them of the peace and presence of the Holy Spirit he had brought to my home as his child. Trust that those you ask into your home will experience his presence too.

This final component, Ask Them In, is what finally brought Claire to Jesus. The young woman she met online, who chatted with her and was open to friendship with someone so different, eventually invited Claire to her home to spend time with her family. Not only did Claire come, but she came again and again and again. Almost every weekend for two years! She would eat with them, go to church with them, do ordinary everyday activities with them. The family simply "loved on" Claire, as she describes it. Claire observed, and she asked questions. Finally one day, the mother of the family came to her and said, "Claire, you've been going around in circles for a long time, asking questions about Jesus, spending time with believers. But I think it's time to act, to decide for yourself." Claire still wasn't ready. That night, she sat down and thought deeply about the questions she still had about the faith. The next day, when she attended church with the family, the pastor stood up to give the sermon and proceeded to answer each and every question she had. That day, Claire went back to the guest room in the home of the family who had asked her in, got down on her knees, and surrendered her life to Jesus. In that moment, she understood her true value and her true purpose. And that's why today, you can find Claire in a corner in a small park in Ireland, inviting others to Jesus.

The question the Church often poses to Christians is, “Are you ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you, as the Apostle Peter commands?” The question I want to ask all of us is this: What good is being able to give a reason if no one is asking?

Chatting with people, being open to friendship with those who we may find offensive, and inviting people into our homes is certainly not the only way to invite people to meet Jesus, but in a world of people desperate for connection with real, honest, struggling humans who seem to have “hope within them,” is a method I believe worth trying.