

“THE BGEA MODEL OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION”

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Although the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has participated in collaborative efforts through national and international conferences, consultations and conventions, our primary model for collaborative evangelization has been the crusades/missions that Billy Graham and his associates have conducted around the world. Billy Graham has conducted crusades and/or missions on every continent, in 84 countries, and in numerous languages and cultures across the world with significant spiritual outcomes. These testify to the validity of the collaborative principles underlying these efforts. In this paper I will share some of those principles that have been applied, primarily through the crusade/mission model.

Essentially, any effort in collaborative evangelization must be built on a foundation of unity: unity of vision, of motivation, of conviction, of communication and of organization. Unity in itself is not the vision or the goal, but it is a byproduct that comes from building such an effort on essential principles. And, unity is a prerequisite to God's blessing in any spiritual endeavor, as the book of Acts clearly illustrates (Acts 1: 14; 2:1,46, 47; Acts 4:24, 31-33, KJV).

A vision for kingdom goals, a servant attitude and a generosity of spirit are necessary prerequisites for the participating parties to attain unity. Given the right vision and the right attitude, we have found in our BGEA experience that the following principles are essential in order to optimize the collaboration of churches, parachurch ministries and individual leaders around a crusade or mission.

PROJECTION OF VISION

1. CENTRAL TO THE CHRISTIAN MISSION

The goal must be central to the Christian mission as understood by the parties involved. It establishes that common ground on which all of the parties involved can agree if they are to support the effort. This is particularly true in the work of evangelism where the Gospel is proclaimed. Evangelicals clearly agree on both the theology and the importance of the mission. Although there are many differences in theology, ecclesiology and methodology among various denominations, those who embrace an evangelical or orthodox perspective of Scripture agree on the Gospel and celebrate when it is declared broadly to everyone. In addition, churches which are not perceived as distinctively evangelical often choose to participate because they believe that proclamation of the Gospel is important.

2. CAST A BOLD VISION

The goal(s) must be bigger than what any of the parties involved believe they can accomplish alone. Each party may share the same goal, but not the same scope of effort or magnitude of vision. In a crusade effort the vision is to reach an entire metropolitan area with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, utilizing a variety of evangelism methodologies with the primary focus on the common evangelistic meetings in a public place. Churches and Christian organizations that have a spiritual burden for their city, and a desire to reach a larger population, welcome this enlarged vision of declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a bold and significant way. It is this larger vision, necessitating that every church and organization do its part, that lifts people's focus from one another towards the ultimate objective.

3. CONFIDENCE IN THE METHOD

The parties involved need a high expectation that the effort will succeed in reaching its goal(s) based on the past successes of this methodology or mission. The abundant evidence of God's blessing upon Billy Graham crusades and missions around the world is very strategic in lifting people's faith and expectation and in motivating them to work harmoniously toward a common goal. The confidence people have expressed in the ministry of Billy Graham and his key associates, and in the proclamation evangelism model which he has traditionally used, elevates the participants' expectations for spiritual success through a united effort.

4. CONFIDENCE IN THE LEADERSHIP

The effort must be led by respected and gifted leaders who are trusted by the parties involved and who have the capacity to impart visionary leadership. This is essential for the local leadership who govern and guide the effort. They must evoke confidence and, indeed, impart vision as they fulfill their roles. It is also necessary for the crusade staff who become the "player/coaches" of the effort, leading, guiding and training local personnel for their role.

PROTECTION OF VALUES

Participants in a collaborative effort are drawn to the mission because they affirm the goal, support the vision, trust the method and have confidence in the leadership. However, before making commitments to such an effort, each party needs assurances that the values and distinctives they hold as essential to their organization or denomination are not compromised by engaging in this collaborative effort. Thus, policies and promises that protect the unique interests of the various collaborating parties are essential.

1 . The parties involved need to be assured that the effort will not violate individual theological, ecclesiastical or methodological distinctives, which they hold dear. They need to

know that the public ministry and published statements will not dilute, deny or denigrate key convictions which are held by their organization, congregation or denomination. The pattern of Billy Graham's ministry over the years of limiting his preaching to the essence of the Gospel, while avoiding spoken and written statements on those areas which divide the church, creates a confidence that engagement in this effort will not be damaging to specific and highly held values.

2. In order to maintain trust among participating parties, policies need to be established that are fair to all involved, clearly understood and enforceable. These policies should deal with at least three core areas:

- a. Organization - Involvement by appropriate leadership from a cross section of the Christian community in governing the effort is essential to ensure a sense of participation and good communication from those guiding the efforts to the participating churches and organizations.
- b. Finances - All financial matters need to be conducted with openness, fairness and integrity in the raising, expending and accounting of funds involved.
- c. Results - The successes of the efforts need to be appropriately and ethically shared by each of the partners in terms of additions to churches, benefits from church renewal, training and public exposure which enhance ministry. Disunity and discord are inevitable if the distribution of the results are perceived to (or actually do) favor one group over another in an unfair manner.

PROBLEMS IN PARTICIPATION

When Billy Graham and his Team are invited to conduct a crusade or mission in a major metropolitan area, the local church pastor faces a choice of whether or not to participate in the effort. Participation offers a pastor and his church a challenging opportunity to declare Christ in

an effective and powerful way across an entire city or region. But for some pastors it also raises significant questions such as:

1. “Can I support this expression of the Gospel?”
2. “Can I cooperate with the other churches that become involved?”

The first question is a very real issue for some pastors and their congregations for whom the application of the Gospel to poverty, prejudice and injustice in the community is a primary emphasis, while proclamation of the Good News is secondary. The opportunity to become involved in a project for proclamation raises certain concerns for them such as: “Will I be diverting time, energy or money from other programs to which my church gives priority?” or “Will I be disowning my commitment to the social aspects of the Gospel?” These pastors and congregations must be assured that they do not have to abdicate their commitment to the “social” aspects of the Gospel in order to participate in a united effort to proclaim the Gospel's “saving” emphasis. In fact, they often enhance and enlarge their primary focus through the establishment of new networks and relationships.

For other pastors, the second question is of greater importance as the participation of their congregation in the effort raises the question of cooperation and association with persons and churches holding different theological views from their own. Perhaps the underlying question in this area is “How do you maintain the purity of the church in an interchurch cooperative ministry?” The fear is that persons who hold theological views that differ from their own may negatively infect them with a different theology or cloud the clarity of their witness.

These legitimate concerns are best dealt with by clarifying the real choice involved. Involvement in a collaborative evangelistic effort does not imply total agreement by all parties in all matters. It does not mean that everybody involved totally agrees theologically with everybody

else. Collaboration also does not mean that everybody involved is in total agreement with all methodology. Finally, collaborative evangelism does not mean that those churches which become involved across denominational lines are changing their theological position or compromising their doctrinal distinctives.

Collaborative evangelism means that those who become involved have a common desire to give witness to Jesus Christ throughout a whole community or area. Their willingness to become involved is usually born out of common agreement on the message of the Gospel and a conviction that there are times and ways and places where “the Church” can accomplish its work better cooperatively than it can individually. It also means that those who become involved believe they can commit themselves to this project at this time. There will be other projects for church growth, social action and family life, which they may also choose to have a part in at some future time. These are not mutually exclusive decisions.

Collaborative evangelism is not union. It does not require congregations to make a long-term organizational commitment to one another. The organization for a crusade ceases when the project is complete. Collaborative evangelism is not uniformity. It does not require everyone to be pressed into the same theological, methodological or ecclesiastical mold. Rather, it shows a unity of purpose. It is the common desire to make Jesus Christ known to the whole community as Savior and Lord. It is to call men and women of all ages to a commitment to Him. This kind of unity causes participants to subordinate their differences and affirm the things that unite them in order to lift up Jesus Christ.

The issue facing a pastor or congregation is not whether they can commit themselves to other congregations but whether they can commit themselves to the purposes and programs of crusade evangelism. When Billy Graham comes to a community, it is clearly known that he

comes to preach the Gospel from the Scriptures. He invites men, women and young people to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Those who respond are counseled by trained counselors who have met specific qualifications. Inquirers are given Bible study materials and referred back to local churches for follow-up and nurture. It is about participating in this project, for this purpose, that pastors and their congregations must choose.

PRODUCT OF PARTNERING

In the last decade, we have observed a new and wonderful sea change in the North American cities where Billy Graham crusades and missions have been held. There has been a growing prayer emphasis involving both laity and leadership in almost every city we visited. The result of this prayer emphasis has been an increased sense of unity before the vision of a crusade was ever presented and a deeper concern for evangelism and spiritual awakening in that community. This climate, built on the application of the same principles, has greatly enhanced the crusade effort when the formal organization has begun.

Perhaps the best illustration of this was the Portland, Oregon, Crusade held September 23-27, 1992. Some three years prior, Dr. Joe Aldrich, president of Multnomah School of the Bible, began the pastors' prayer summits in that area, which have now spread across North America. This resulted in a new and deep sense of unity and trust among the pastoral leadership. Portland is an area of the country where liberal theological, sociological and political views are prevalent. The population of the crusade area was about 1,100,000. We knew that God had significantly prepared this city when, at the Christian Life and Witness Classes, we saw the highest attendance of any Crusade training, averaging 24,000 per week. The previous record for Christian Life and Witness Class training was held by the Southern California Crusade, which embraced a population area of 11 million people. Attendance at the Portland Crusade broke all previous records for

North America, averaging 53,200 gathered in a stadium which seated 39,000 and which offered absolutely no parking. The response to the preaching of the Gospel saw more than 15,000 come to Christ. The extraordinary results can be attributed to the unity among the spiritual leadership of the community. The crusade merely reaped what had been wonderfully sown several years earlier.

In the most successful crusade/mission efforts, we can clearly see that essential principles have been applied extensively over a significant period of time, creating a climate in which God has been pleased to powerfully bless the obedience to His command, “Go and preach the Gospel.”