



# Reimagining Evangelism

## Community Organising

For our second provision in this series, Charnelle Barclay shares about the process of community organising.

Charnelle sits at the intersection of faith, politics and justice. She is the co-director of Organising for Growth at The Centre of Theology & Community, overseeing the south-east region. She is also a neighbourhood organiser in Waltham Forest. Through her roles, she encourages and works with churches to engage in Jesus' justice and grace ministry through faith-filled community organising.



Evangelism has often meant sharing the good news of Jesus through a message of salvation or by proclaiming the good news on the streets or through acts of service in ongoing relationships. But what if we were to think of evangelism in terms of the wider issues of injustice in our communities?

Through my own changed understanding of God's justice and mercy, I have been challenged to reimagine evangelism through a lens of justice and transformation. At The Centre for Theology & Community (CTC), we do this by equipping churches to engage with community organising – a way for churches to work with communities to pursue kingdom transformation.

### Evangelism as mercy and justice

During the Covid pandemic, my understanding of what it meant to engage with a holistic gospel really took root. The death of George Floyd challenged the world to look at race and racism in a new way, and its ugliness couldn't be ignored. And for the first time, I let my private feelings around this personal issue become more public. It was also the first time I really questioned God. Did God really care about me – not just nondescript me, but me, a Black woman who has experienced the joys and challenges of that existence?

These questions led me to Scriptures that challenged my understanding of the God of justice. I read about God's anger at the injustice experienced by the marginalised throughout the Old Testament. I also saw this in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus didn't come only to offer people a new way of thinking; he came to bring whole-life transformation, speaking truth to power and offering liberation and social reintegration for the marginalised. The theology of incarnation (Jesus being fully God and fully human) demonstrates that the gospel should be an embodied experience. This isn't because material things are more important than spiritual, but because we encounter a transformative faith through our physical and material experiences – our political joy or distress, social alienation or belonging, economic hardship or agency.

Can we honestly say we have a gospel that is 'good news' if that news isn't felt holistically by those we are trying to serve? When we move from a position of 'just mercy' to one of 'mercy and justice', we point people to a God who meets them in their varied experiences, needs, questions and hopes, with spiritual, political and economic implications.

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### Tackling injustice

The experience many of our communities are having is one of deeply felt injustice. The movements of anger we have recently seen emerge in our society signify a deep grief over systematic trauma and material loss. This anger can be incorrectly redirected – co-opted by narratives that scapegoat other marginalised groups, causing further harm – but are rooted in the same systemic oppression causing harm to marginalised peoples.<sup>1</sup> The core issue of these groups is feeling unheard or silenced. Good news for these people is societal transformation that addresses systemic oppression, changing their lived experiences.

The kingdom Jesus proclaimed brings healing, acceptance and forgiveness. It liberates people not only spiritually but also economically and socially, with a profound impact on the systems of the day. This holistic gospel is demonstrated through the very way Jesus interacted with those around him. Whether restoring dignity to the haemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43-48), or healing the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6), Jesus revealed not only the manifestation of God in the spiritual realm but also a challenge to and defiance of the systemic structures and systems that rendered people to the margins.

Today, I believe this looks like challenging inequalities such as racism, lack of affordable housing, mental health and loneliness epidemics, and food insecurity. Through community organising, our work with churches has addressed a range of issues that affect people in various ways. From the creation of a neighbourhood collective where local people connect and build relationships across divides; the installation of better lighting in parks and on community buildings to increase a sense of safety; campaigns for local shops to be added to the government's food voucher schemes; securing funding for affordable housing to be built for local people; tackling energy poverty and loneliness with warm spaces and gardening projects, and campaigning for cleaner streets.

These movements are happening across many different areas, and change has often been a long, hard-fought endeavour. However, at their core, these movements are about change that transforms the experience of people in these communities.

<sup>1</sup> A. Spence, 'Who Is Organising Poor White Folks Towards Liberation? – Is anyone speaking directly with them besides the fascists?' (2025).

## Community organising as evangelistic practice

Community organising is a way of bringing God's mercy and justice together for holistic, gospel transformation. It's working with others, not for others – ensuring dignity and agency are at the heart of change. In essence, community organising brings people together across diversity to act together around issues of common concern, building community-led solutions to big and small problems that work for all.<sup>2</sup> It also develops leadership (often outside of the dominant culture) that enables people to turn the resources they have into the power they need to make the change they want.<sup>3</sup>

It is within this framework that CTC has seen faith-filled community organising emerge. What's more, this method enables participating Christians and churches to grow more deeply in their own faith while breaking down barriers in the community as they grow in solidarity, trust and knowledge of people of other religions and beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

At CTC, we developed a framework for faith-filled community organising called The Cycle of Prayer and Organising. This process begins with seeing and listening to others in order to understand their experiences and what is happening in their communities. We want to listen in a way that helps us understand people's life journeys and experiences, outlooks and desires. Only when we truly listen can we create space for lament and repentance (the next step in our process), which are the precursors to proper restoration and justice work. Being the hands and feet of Jesus is experienced through acting together in truth and justice. Salvation comes from hearing and experiencing the Word (Jesus), as John 1:1-5,14 teaches. For that experience to be truly transformative, it must include acting together for justice based on the lived experience of others.

When we begin by listening and building relationships through the sharing of stories, we open a way for people to engage with each other as their true selves. This is what draws people to faith because we have not left their personhood at the door. Julie's story highlights this.

*Before coming to the Food Share, I was struggling. The introduction of the bedroom tax had created financial pressure, and though I've never looked down on others facing hardship, I felt deeply embarrassed about my own financial situation. I felt isolated and alone. However, the vicar, Polly, the curate, Lauren, and a volunteer, John, made me feel incredibly welcome from my first visit. They simply got to know me. This led me to attend the church service every week. Now, I help by serving drinks at the Food Share, which makes being there even more enjoyable, as I've found my gift for serving others.*

Julie's liberation began not with a sermon, but with a relationship that honoured her whole person and helped overcome the social and economic shame she carried. She felt seen, known, and accepted through community, which led her to find faith.

## “Listening makes space for shared discernment that can move into purposeful action”

Listening makes space for shared discernment that can move into purposeful action; another example of this is a coalition led by St George-in-the-East: angered by the local swimming pool's prolonged closure, a team including leaders from a mosque, MIND and six local schools, launched the 'Give the Pool a Helping Hand' campaign. Their key action was a collaborative artwork created by 1,000 school pupils. The event unveiling this artwork was attended by the local mayor, who also heard stories from children. Following this, there has been a commitment to ensuring the pool's redevelopment and the building of council homes in the area.

These are just two stories of many that highlight the importance of listening and working *with* people – engaging those who will be impacted by the change to drive and define what that change looks like.

## Practical next steps to engage in community organising

Listening is the best way to start. Think about the services and spaces you already provide at your church, school or workplace: book clubs, children's services, food banks, youth clubs or even your PCC/leadership meetings. Could you transform these spaces into more relational environments, where stories are shared, connecting life experiences and common concerns and providing a space to hold the grief of injustices being experienced?

**Questions:** Begin sessions or meetings by asking every person to speak for a timed period on a question posed to the group.

**Get beneath the surface:** In relational settings, such as over coffee, ask questions that delve deeper into people's life journeys.

**Reflect and share story:** As you engage in these conversations, take a moment to reflect on your own story and be prepared to share it. What has been a defining moment for you? What relationships have impacted you, and what change do you desire?

**Make change that empowers:** Before jumping into action or making decisions about what steps should be taken to address injustice, ask whether those being affected by these issues are with us in bringing about change and are active participants in tackling this injustice. It's easy for us to slip into quick solutions, or think we have all the answers, but holistic change involves those who experience injustice having a say – and a hand – in bringing about that change.

Ultimately, reimagining evangelism through community organising means committing to a truly holistic gospel, rooted in listening and working alongside people for their spiritual, political and economic liberation.

- Listen to Melanie and Charnelle's full conversation on the Roots podcast: [www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com](http://www.rootsforchurches.podbean.com)
- See CTC's resources on their website to help you begin this journey: <https://www.ctcuk.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.citizensuk.org/about-us/what-is-community-organising/>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://leadingchangenetwork.org/resource\\_center/what-is-organizing/#What\\_is\\_Organizing](https://leadingchangenetwork.org/resource_center/what-is-organizing/#What_is_Organizing).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.communityfirst.org.uk/community-organising/>.