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Relationship Building for Evangelism Among English Language Learners in China

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Abstract

This empirical research revealed that relationship-building by missionaries among English language learners in China was a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. For this study, I interviewed 15 missionaries who were identified by various leaders as being active in evangelism and who had shared the gospel with at least 10 Chinese people in the last year that they were on the field. Participants explained that they used the strategy of “funneling” interactions with Chinese individuals by narrowing down a large number of people with whom they had contact to a select few who were interested in spiritual conversation. This process led them to notice, explore, and capitalize on opportunities to verbally communicate the gospel. This qualitative study uses a grounded theory methodology to understand and explain the meaning that these missionaries attributed to their evangelistic activities. Study participants included 15 missionaries who currently work with Purposeful Teaching (pseudonym).

Key Words: China, evangelism, teaching English, relationships, students, Christian missions

Relational evangelism is a strategy that focuses on befriending unbelievers and looking for opportunities to share the gospel with them. This concept is not without critique. Haston (2019) pointed this out by provocatively titling his article, “Is Relational Evangelism a Cop-Out for Timid Christians?” Additionally, Patrick (2007) found via qualitative research that missionaries who “stress building relationships before sharing their faith are likely to be less effective” (p. 173).

While some of the critique is warranted, neither Haston (2019) nor Patrick (2007) speaks against relational evangelism. In fact, Haston’s (2019) article aims to show the merits of the strategy and how it has been mischaracterized, and Patrick’s (2007) finding does not suggest that the lack of effectiveness is directly caused by relational evangelism; instead, a preeminent emphasis on relationship building is a potential symptom of a lack of boldness to share the gospel. In the end, relationship-building remains an important strategy for evangelism.

This is especially the case in creative access nations, which are countries that do not issue missionary visas, deny residential status for missionaries, and restrict evangelism and discipleship (Kim, 2010). Due to the sensitivity of religion in these nations, missionaries need to be careful with how they go about their evangelistic efforts. As such, relational evangelism is an appropriate method to share the gospel in creative access nations.

Among mission practitioners, China is known as a creative access nation and because of these restrictions, entering the country as an English teacher has long been a common practice for those seeking to evangelize in China (Yang, 2005). English teachers in China can communicate the gospel to educated young adults simply because they have access to them. Even though laws and policies are in place, the opportunity is there to build relationships and evangelize if and when the occasion presents itself.

This qualitative research shows how Purposeful Teaching (this is a pseudonym and not the real name of the company) missionaries in China who are active in evangelism viewed relationship building as a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. Participants said that they used the strategy of “funneling” interactions with the Chinese whom they met, which led them to notice, explore, and capitalize on opportunities to evangelize. Participants also stated that building friendships was essential to their evangelistic efforts. Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss the strategy of relational evangelism employed by these missionaries.

Literature Review

In order to provide context, this section explores what is known in the academic literature about relational evangelism in efforts to share the gospel with Chinese nationals. In my research, I did not find any studies on this topic that took place in China. The studies discussed here all took place in America among Chinese nationals living abroad.

First, building relationships is important to both openness and conversion to Christianity for Chinese nationals in America (Abel, 2006; Chamberlain, 2020; Wang & Yang, 2006). Chamberlain (2020) found that classmates, teachers, and church relationships all contributed to an openness to Christianity for Chinese national graduate students at Christian universities in America. Chamberlain (2020) also said that many participants described “how their experience on the friendly Christian campus had helped them overcome loneliness and culture shock” (p. 285). This friendliness from classmates and teachers alike helped these graduate students feel as though they belonged to a community (Chamberlain, 2020). Wang and Yang (2006) also found that building relationships led some Chinese national students to attend church or Bible study. Wang and Yang (2006) also noted that a particular Chinese church in Iowa would begin to share the gospel with Chinese national students when they were “picked up from the airport by members of the Chinese Bible Study Group or the Chinese churches” (p. 187). This kindness was particularly commented on by this study’s participants, who noted that it was part of what led to their conversion to Christianity (Wang & Yang, 2006). Abel (2006) likewise found that relationship building and general kindness—or “favor fishing” as he calls it—plays an integral role in Chinese nationals converting to Christianity in America.

Second, regarding church relationships, Chamberlain (2020) noted that many of the Chinese graduate students in his study were first invited to church by classmates or friends. Some participants described how attending church allowed them to see that belief for Christians was something real and practical, which contributed to them being more open to Christianity. Thus, Chamberlain (2020) found that having a relationship with a Christian and observing how their faith impacts their everyday life can both lead to openness to Christianity.

All of the empirical research mentioned above involved Chinese nationals but took place outside of China. Thus, empirical data that focuses on the importance of relational evangelism among missionaries in China has yet to be explored.

Methodology

For this qualitative study, I utilized a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The primary purpose of grounded theory research is to “develop a ‘theory’ and the theory so generated is based on data obtained from the field and attempts an ‘interpretive’ understanding of the meaning people attach to the phenomenon being investigated” (Priya, 2016, p. 51). To conduct the research, I interviewed 15 people. The participants included men and women, all over the age of 18, who currently work with Purposeful Teaching. Additionally, they have all been on the mission field for at least two years, which allowed them to speak from a perspective of longer-term service. Furthermore, all of the participants have shared the gospel with at least 10 Chinese individuals in the last year that they were on the field.

Data were collected during 45- to 90-minute structured and open-ended interviews with the participants. An advantage of this approach is that it yields an emic perspective. As Marshall and Rossman (2014) said, “The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)” (p. 144). This approach seeks to provide an accurate voice for the participants in my study.

Relationship Building for Evangelism

The findings of this study revealed that putting time and effort into relationship building with Chinese individuals is a factor that facilitates the participants’ verbal communication of the gospel. In this section, I will show how the data related to two subthemes. The first, “funneling” interactions after an initial contact with a Chinese individual, shows how participants actively sought to notice, explore, and capitalize on opportunities to share the gospel with those whom they met. The second subtheme, building friendships, shows that participants used a strategy of relational evangelism in their evangelistic efforts.

“Funneling” Interactions with Chinese Contacts

Data revealed that participants regularly engaged in the practice of “funneling” interactions with Chinese contacts in order to build relationships. In this undertaking, study participants explained that they were able to notice, explore, and capitalize on opportunities to share the gospel with Chinese contacts. This process was not necessarily linear but often progressed in these three successive stages. Bob (a pseudonym, as are all names used in this study) used the term “funneling” to describe

this process:

And then over time if you have people who are involved in hiking with you and going to the beach with you and cooking with you and whatever, over time they became really good friends. And so it was an interested student who became one of the special students who had a closer relationship with us and who eventually became one of our friends. And at that point, it would come down to people we were specifically pouring into as friends to build a relationship that would head toward Christ. So that's kind of how that funneling process worked.

Rebecca likewise used the same terminology to describe the process of evangelism that begins with meeting a person with the goal of studying the Bible with them:

And just funneling it down. We have classes and then coffeehouse and then we did something that was like an English corner too, a big lecture. And then we'd do things like going hiking or hanging out at the beach, and then go even further by inviting them over and having dinner. And this then funnels down and we build relationships with those who want to talk about deeper things. Those that are willing to open up and talk about those things, willing to listen, and you see that those are potential people that would be willing to read the Bible.

Participants described many activities that fell into this “funneling” process, most notably noticing, exploring, and capitalizing on opportunities.

Noticing Opportunities

Data showed that the first step to “funneling” interactions with the Chinese whom they met came by noticing potential opportunities to evangelize. Participants perceived these prospective chances to share their faith by recognizing when a person open to the gospel would “rise to the surface.” Participants also detailed the importance of sensing an opening for spiritual conversation and assessing spiritual receptivity.

“Rise to the Surface.” Participants consistently noted that certain individuals would stand out amidst a larger group. While teaching at a school, they said that students stood out in a variety of ways. One participant, Peter, explained the general idea of a student standing out to him. He said, “Sometimes it just seems like certain students rise to the surface and that's what we often pray for. I'll ask, ‘Out of these 200 or 300 students this semester, let some rise to the surface.’” What Peter meant by

this was that out of the hundreds of students that he interacted with each year, a couple of them would stand out as potentially being receptive to having a spiritual conversation. Rhonda explained how a particular student may stand out for her, “I think for me, I’m just looking for if the student sticks around afterwards to ask a question. Or do they want to have lunch or something?” Rhonda also shared a story of noticing a student in the classroom:

There was one girl that, she was pretty quiet but after class, she would say, “Bye miss Rhonda.” Just a little parting or something like that, but then eventually that parting turned into like, “What are you going to do after class today miss Rhonda?” or, “What are you going to do this weekend?” And then I remember we had this conversation for like 40 minutes after class.

Walter recalled how Zhang, with whom he later did a Bible study, first came to his attention in the classroom, “She stood out from the beginning in terms of her work ethic—she was a very hard worker. She enjoyed contributing to class discussions.” Peter shared a story of a student standing out in a large classroom whom he later evangelized and who eventually came to faith in Christ:

I can picture her in the front row on the left, that’s where she sat. And it was nothing other than saying, “You know, there’s something going on there.” Part of that was just a spiritual sensitivity and part of it was that she had a bit of personality where there was again that sense of that she was drawing people in and open to relationship.

Hence, data revealed that noticing opportunities to share the gospel often began by recognizing certain individuals who “rise to the surface” from among all the rest.

Sensing an Opening for Spiritual Conversation. Study participants described sensing an opening for spiritual conversation while interacting with Chinese individuals as a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. Randy shared about how a student’s necklace signaled to him an opportunity for further conversation, “And I noticed she had a Star of David on her necklace, and I said, ‘Do you know what that is?’...Yeah, so that gave me an inroad to talk to her about lots of different things.”

These instances of sensing a potential openness to spiritual conversation were all mostly inconspicuous. Participants displayed a certain spiritual

awareness. Peter detailed his thought process about how one student's vulnerability indicated to him that there was an opportunity to share the gospel with her:

Listening to her story and saying, "Hey, this is someone who is opening up on her side of things, expressing and talking about her own relationships with her dad and her hurts and there's an openness there obviously where she's being vulnerable, so let's just see if there's more there."

Stella mentioned that a student's unwillingness to talk about frivolous things demonstrated an opening to share parts of the gospel with her. She said, "There was something in me that was like, 'I want to talk about something that's real' and I could sense that she wanted to talk about those real things. So, I was like, 'Okay, let's talk about them.'" Walter recalled an opening with his friend Yu that immediately led him to share his faith. He said that his friend talked frequently about "a lack of peace and joy in his life and I got to a point where I said to Yu, 'I do have true peace and joy, would you like to learn more about my experience with that?'"

Thus, participants described sensing openings for spiritual conversation as a factor that led them to be active in evangelism and facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. They did this by being observant in their interactions with Chinese individuals.

Assessing Spiritual Receptivity. Different than sensing an opening for spiritual conversation, study participants also described actively trying to assess where contacts may be spiritually in order to determine if there was any spiritual interest. Bob detailed how he would assess potential opportunities to share the gospel:

We were always looking for FAT students, as we'd call them. Faithful, Available, Teachable. Ones who were faithful—they would always come. Available—they always had time to hang out. Teachable—they were interested in hearing about these things and wanted to talk about them.

Albert spoke about trying to move conversations beyond the surface level and into the spiritual dimension. When asked how he does that, he said, "Just talking and listening to who you're talking to and just kind of seeing—not just the words that are being said but what's behind that." Peter described at length how he and his wife were constantly assessing Chinese contacts to see where they may be spiritually:

We've been more sensitive to, "Where are they at? What are they dealing with? What are their issues? Do they even believe that there is a God?" And starting with worldview and how they look at spiritual things in the first place or what are the things that they're dealing with and their own experience practically speaking.

Participants viewed this assessment as important because they wanted to be sure that a contact was prepared to engage in spiritual conversation. If a contact was not ready, it could lead to unfruitful conversation and potential trouble for the organization if that contact would tell school administrators about the conversation. Thus, assessing spiritual receptivity is important for these missionaries in China.

Participants described the "funneling" process as beginning with noticing opportunities. The next step was to explore those opportunities to see if there were chances to evangelize. Stella provided a good example of a bridge between noticing and then exploring an opportunity. She shared at length about the process of how she first noticed what would become a core group of friends and how she then moved into the phase of exploring opportunities with them:

I started noticing who were the core people that showed up every week and I was like, "Okay, these people truly want to be here. They're showing up every week, they're making it a priority to come." So then I thought it was an opportunity and I had them to my house, just this core group, and had them over for Thanksgiving and I started doing game nights and inviting this core group and they considered themselves my friends and we had a WeChat group and it just kind of evolved.

Exploring Opportunities

Participants explained that the second step in the process of "funneling" interactions with Chinese contacts is exploring opportunities for evangelism. Participants probed potential chances to communicate their faith by creating opportunities and "following up" when spiritual interest was detected.

Creating Opportunities. Data revealed that those who engaged in evangelism consistently made efforts to create opportunities to see if an opportunity to share the gospel was present. Twelve of the 15 participants spoke about purposely manufacturing potential opportunities to meet and share the gospel. Walter explained his mindset of creating opportunities, "I would say that that is always in the back of my mind—that question of, 'If I do this or go to that place and put myself in that situation, what is the

Holy Spirit going to do?” Tommy described what he and his wife did to create opportunities to meet people. He said, “And we always did walks on campus with our kids when we were there, so we would try to meet people through that.”

While the previous examples happened off campus, participants also shared that they sought to create opportunities while in a school setting. Peter explained how something as seemingly unimportant as making eye contact can create an opportunity with a student. He said, “I’m going to make genuine eye contact with everyone in that class at some point during the class. I think that gives opportunity to connect, like it’s a small thing, but I think it gives an opportunity for connection.” Stella shared how she utilized office hours to generate chances to develop relationships with students. She said, “I was doing this office hours and just once a week I told all my classes that it’s at this time in the evening and you can come if you want.”

While making the time and the physical space to meet with individuals was important, what these missionaries actually talked about with Chinese whom they met was more important. Participants described creating opportunities to have spiritual conversations by asking questions, teaching “salty topics,” and “steering the conversation.” All of these helped to generate chances and also to further build relationships with the Chinese whom they met.

Study participants regularly said that they asked questions to create potential opportunities to communicate their faith. Bob explained how he asks pointed questions as a part of his evangelistic strategy, “Where are you placing your hope? Does your life have meaning? Where does it get that meaning? Is it sufficient? What happens when things get bad? ... To just ask those kinds of questions and see what they say.” Walter said that he really values being able to ask questions to create a setting to share the gospel. He said, “And I do covet those opportunities to ask a deeper question or to push students because we don’t have as many opportunities.”

Next, study participants said that they often added “salty topics” while they were teaching as a method to create potential opportunities within a larger group. Doing so involves inconspicuously adding spiritual elements to a teaching lesson to see how students respond with the hope of creating opportunities to share the Christian view of the world. Roger explained how he uses his teaching platform in relation to evangelism:

So, I try to craft my lessons, I try to salt my lessons to bring about questions or thoughts, “What’s most important to you? Where does honor and shame come into play? What happens if you lose face? What

happens if you fail?” And so all of these things are trying to trigger a discussion so that I can share my worldview on those things.

Peter also confirmed this as part of his strategy for evangelism in China, “Whether it’s through English Corners or office hours, making sure that I’m putting stuff in my curriculum; whether it’s English Corner or my classes, putting things in there that can be conversation starters or lead to deeper conversations.”

Lastly, participants also stated that they often tried to create opportunities for evangelism by dropping spiritual topics into a regular situation, which they called “steering the conversation.” When asked who initiated a spiritual conversation, Albert said, “I’d say that was probably me. It wasn’t always, but I would often be looking for ways to steer the conversation.” Bob explained what he did to accomplish that. He said, “But a lot of it was just in any normal conversation I’m always looking for what can turn the conversation back to spiritual matters. What can I do to get them to think about what the meaning of life is?” Lisa had a similar strategy and detailed how she dropped faith topics into conversations as a way to develop opportunities:

It’s not dropping Jesus’ name, but just sprinkles of letting her know that I have hope or that my identity is not found in what a student thinks of me. Things like that. And sometimes it’s mentioning God, but mostly just, “I just mentioned God’s name and you moved on, clearly you’re not going to ask any questions.”

Following Up. Participants said that once a Chinese student showed some interest in spiritual matters, they sought to foster those evangelistic opportunities by “following up” on the conversation at a later time. Nick mentioned what he would do if any students responded positively to his attempts to bring up spiritual topics. He said, “Afterwards, if there was interest then we try to follow up on it.” Bob talked about being in a group setting where one individual is interested in spiritual things, but the others clearly are not:

Maybe there are times when one person does have interest but there’s someone else there who doesn’t and they change the subject in the middle of while we’re talking and you can tell they don’t want to talk about it and it’s like, “Okay, this person doesn’t want to talk about this so I should change the subject, but I’ll get back to this other person later.”

Roger detailed what he said when a particular student indicated a spiritual interest at a time when they were not in a good location to have a conversation. He said, “‘Hey, I’d love to talk with you more about this, could we get together for lunch some time?’ And he said, ‘I’d love to get together.’ And then boom, there we go, we’re starting that conversation, we’re going deeper.” Lastly, Peter shared about a contact who displayed spiritual interest and how for more than a decade he has continued the conversation, “Pretty much every time we talk, spiritual things come up and I’ve asked him, ‘What do you think now? Where are your thoughts now about Christianity and your spiritual life?’”

As demonstrated above, participants described exploring opportunities to evangelize by creating opportunities for spiritual discussion and making sure to follow up on promising conversations.

Capitalizing on Opportunities

Study participants demonstrated a penchant for capitalizing on opportunities to verbally communicate the gospel with the Chinese. Once a noticed opportunity had been explored and an individual displayed spiritual interest, these missionaries immediately made use of the opportunity and shared the gospel. Bob used a volleyball analogy to describe how he often moved from exploring an opportunity to capitalizing on it, “Most usually it was a bump about an abstract topic, and they bumped it back because they’re interested in that topic, and my spike is, ‘This is what Christianity has to say about that.’” In volleyball, the end goal of the offensive team is to score points, which is commonly done by spiking the volleyball after a bump and a set. In Bob’s analogy, the “bumps” correspond to exploring the evangelistic opportunity and the “spike” equates with verbally communicating the gospel with the person.

Participants often described a sense of obligation to evangelize once the opportunity was clear. Brianna described her mindset while capitalizing on one particular opportunity, “I asked my team to pray for this and it was just kind of like, ‘Okay, this is it! You’ve been praying for this for a couple days and you just know this is the time to jump in.’” Rebecca explained the importance of just going for it, “Most young people don’t ask good questions, so you just have to share, ‘Oh, this happened in my life.’ If you’re waiting for someone to ask you, most college students aren’t going to ask you. So just jump in.” Stella discussed taking advantage of an opportunity to share the gospel, “I was like, ‘Oh, this is too good of an opportunity not to speak up and say something.’ I don’t know who else she has in her life who is speaking truth to her about Jesus.” Emma

described her mindset of sharing her faith with a taxi driver, “But that day, God just opened the conversation, and he pushed me to speak the truth. And I dare not to hold it in, you see what I mean?”

As shown above, “funneling” interactions with Chinese individuals included an expectation to share the gospel which led participants to notice, explore, and capitalize on opportunities to evangelize. This process was not necessarily linear but often progressed in these three successive stages. Peter mentioned a full story of sharing the gospel with an individual that illustrates all three phases of noticing, exploring, and capitalizing:

And it was just her coming up after class to ask for some documentary recommendations. But there was just something in that interaction that made me think, “Hmm, there’s something different about this student. She asks questions. She’s inquisitive, she’s learning.” So, I mentioned it to my wife, and she said, “Well, let’s have her over for dinner sometime.” And we did and it’s just boom, boom, boom and since then we’ve been super close.

Thus, one aspect of relationship building came by actively “funneling” interactions with Chinese students. The next subtheme discusses the importance of building friendships.

Building Friendships

Data showed that participants used a strategy of building friendships in their evangelistic efforts and that this was a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. All 15 participants mentioned building friendships and it was a component in the majority of successful stories of evangelism shared by participants. Throughout the interview process, participants shared a total of 46 separate stories of sharing the gospel with a Chinese individual. In 35 of those instances, the missionary had built a friendship with him or her before evangelizing. In the 11 other stories, missionaries shared their faith on the first or second meeting, well before a relationship could be formed. Thus, study participants demonstrated that building friendships was a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel.

The importance of building friendships was shared as an evangelistic strategy by several participants. One participant, Randy, used the term “pole fishing” to describe this activity: “I always say, some people fish with a net, and some people fish with a pole. And I’m a pole fisher. I spend a lot of time with certain individuals and hope God opens doors.” Albert explained it this way, “I guess just that the main thing—my main focus has

been relationships. And how you can't really share if you don't have a relationship." Rhonda also confirmed the importance of establishing a friendship before evangelizing. She said, "I think it's super important to have a relationship before sharing anything."

While building friendships is a pretty generalized idea, study participants did describe the following facets that helped them to build relationships with the people whom they met: "Hanging Out," inviting Chinese friends into their home, "I'm Here to Serve You," maintaining friendships, and "Am I Just a Project or Am I Your Friend?"

"Hanging Out"

Study participants frequently described involving a Chinese student in everyday things like cooking, eating meals, or language learning as a means to build relationships. Bob put it like this, "Like my last semester teaching, I had four nights out of the week it seemed I was buying food and cooking with students at my house." Roger recalled one activity that he used to get to know Chinese students better, "I played basketball with all of these guys." Lisa detailed how she built a relationship with one person with whom she later shared the gospel on multiple occasions. She said, "We hung out and she was really fun, so we just became friends and we would hang out all the time and she would help me learn Chinese and introduce me to new restaurants in the area." Calvin recalled how many missionaries lived life with one particular individual who later came to faith through their collective witness:

And he was hanging out with us more and he didn't have a lot of Chinese friends that he'd spend time with, so he'd hang out with us. He wasn't always talkative, he just ate with us and wanted to spend quality time and just hang out. ... He graduated and went to Beijing to be a teacher and so every October and May holiday he'd come back to visit our school and hang out with our teachers, even if he didn't know us. Every year we have a lot of new teachers, and he would just meet them, hang out with them and us on the holidays.

Study participants consistently noted that "hanging out" with Chinese individuals and letting them observe the missionaries' everyday lives were factors in their efforts to evangelize. Thus, they regularly made a point to spend lots of time with Chinese friends through cooking, sharing meals, and language learning. Additionally, they also allowed for the observation of the everyday aspects of their lives like marriage, parenting, and how they interacted with their Purposeful Teaching teammates.

Inviting Chinese Friends into Their Home

Study participants consistently mentioned that they regularly invited Chinese friends into their homes as a fundamental strategy for developing friendships. Albert stated that inviting others over to his home was central to his evangelistic efforts, “I’d say that a large part of my ministry has been movie nights. So, I would invite students into my apartment, show a movie, and have a discussion afterward.” Nick explained how he used his home to get to know students on one particular campus, “I passed out a sign-up sheet to come visit me and my wife. And they’re usually very excited to do that. And, you know, my wife also bakes some food for them—some Western food.”

Beyond further developing relationships with Chinese students, participants also described using their home as a good place to have more meaningful discussions. Peter gave another example of utilizing this strategy when he noticed, as mentioned previously, that a particular student might be open to a deeper conversation, so he and his wife invited her over for dinner and they have been close since. Rebecca shared about how they invited students from her husband’s class over and said they “talked about all kinds of things, brought up ghost days or funerals or other things that kind of brought out some of those more spiritual aspects of life.”

Participants also stated that a willingness to invite students into their homes would often become a springboard to sharing the gospel. Data showed that many times, in 20 of the 46 stories of evangelism, participants shared inside a Purposeful Teaching missionary’s home.

“I’m Here to Serve You”

Participants both expressed and demonstrated that an important aspect of building friendships was making themselves available. Albert stated this disposition plainly, “At least make myself available to them. If they don’t want the relationship, that’s fine. But I don’t want to neglect them. I do want to make sure that I’ve offered that and that I’m not excluding students.” Roger also detailed how both he and his family make themselves accessible to students:

And this is where I said I’m really putting it out there that I want to help them with their English beyond the classroom. You need to practice beyond the classroom. I’m here to serve you, my family is here to serve you. Come build a relationship with us. And I’m really putting myself out there to really try to engage with them outside of the classroom.

While Albert and Roger explicitly stated that making themselves available was central to their evangelistic efforts, several other participants demonstrated this in practice. Emma explained how she and her husband were always willing to stop and talk to a neighbor, even when they were actively headed somewhere with their young children. She said that as they met this neighbor outside more often, “every time we wanted to go somewhere we just stayed at one place standing there and talking for 40 minutes. But we knew that was our Father’s plan, using us to deliver the message.”

Maintaining Friendships

All 15 study participants mentioned that maintaining friendships was a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel, even continuing relationships after they had moved away. Brianna connected successful evangelism to maintaining a friendship over the years, “See, I think that the most successful stories have come out of being in someone’s life for eight years.” Several other participants also recalled how they have continued friendships over the years. Albert spoke about maintaining a relationship even after a Chinese friend rejected the faith, “And so, we haven’t given up on him. We’ve continued the friendship.”

Other participants explained how maintaining relationships shows a sense of genuineness and also provides more opportunities for God to work through them. Rhonda stated that she believes that maintaining relationships is paramount to evangelism, “Even after sharing, I think it’s even more important to keep up with the relationship. I guess it’s maybe authenticity too.” Walter discussed how he continues to connect with a student with whom he did a Bible study and also hinted at what motivates him to stay in touch, “So, that’s an unfinished story. We continue to communicate via WeChat. So, we’ll see how the Holy Spirit continues to work there.”

Another benefit of maintaining relationships, as indicated by participants, is that it can lead to additional opportunities for evangelism and presents opportunities to encourage those who have come to faith. Peter shared about how he continues to this day to encourage a former student and her sister—both of whom came to faith through Peter—to meet with other Christians to whom he had introduced them, “But we continue to stay in touch with both of them and continue to encourage them to be connected with the people that we’ve connected them with in the past.”

“Am I Just a Project or Am I Your Friend?”

Building friendships was not viewed simply as a ploy to share the gospel with various individuals. Instead, study participants revealed that an underlying motivation to build relationships was to truly become friends. Albert explained that an acquaintance of his was partially concerned about what was motivating Albert and his teammate to want to become his friends. He said, “That was an unspoken concern. ‘Where does our friendship lie? Am I just a project or am I your friend?’ And so we affirmed him, ‘No, you’re our friend. You’ll always be our friend.’”

While there was no deception in wanting to share the gospel, opportunities to evangelize did naturally come about through these friendships. Several participants noted that as a relationship grew, a mutual trust was formed which then opened the door to a more sincere—and perhaps a more impactful—presentation of the gospel. Walter mentioned how he is aware of the importance of building a strong friendship and how trust plays a role in evangelism:

But also trust in—well you know how two people, how they form a friendship or relationship and how over time trust increases. ... Yes, the Father can work outside of a close relationship. But often openings develop over time or part way through a relationship. So, I try to be sensitive to that.

This sentiment of mutual trust was shared by other participants. Peter explained that he and his wife felt comfortable inviting people with whom they had already built trust to a Christmas party where one of their primary aims was to share the true meaning of Christmas with everyone who attended. He said of those that came, “They are people that we already had well-established relationships with. People who had already been in our home, who we had already entered into their life and they had entered into ours.” Other participants explained how they took time to foster mutual trust with individuals. Rebecca recalled that she met a person who wanted to study the Bible with her, but before doing that, she took some time to build a friendship first. She said, “For me, there was less of a relationship in the beginning, so I think her heart was already ready and open for the Word, but to study with me I think the relationship building was important.”

The ideal context for evangelism in China, according to participants, was created by building friendships. This included the intertwined features of “Hanging Out”, inviting Chinese friends into their homes, “I’m Here to Serve You,” maintaining friendships, and “Am I Just a Project or

Am I Your Friend?” There was no particular order or process involved; instead, these features all worked together as relationships were started, strengthened, and sustained.

Discussion

In the results section, I showed that participants’ putting time and effort into relationship building with the Chinese whom they met was a factor that facilitated their verbal communication of the gospel. These missionaries described relationship building by “funneling” interactions with Chinese individuals and building friendships in order to use a strategy of relational evangelism in their evangelistic efforts. I will now discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this study.

Theoretical Implications

The current literature highlights the importance of relationship-building for the sake of evangelism. However, much of the existing empirical research was general and did not say much about specific strategies for developing relationships for the sake of evangelism. This research serves to support previous studies and to advance them by clarifying a strategy for evangelism, most notably the process of “funneling” interactions. Admittedly, such a strategy is by no means groundbreaking or new conceptually; however, this study does add to the literature and provides a specific strategy for evangelism in creative access nations.

The findings of this study also presented specifics on how participants went about relationship-building with the Chinese they met. Again, the existing empirical research is sparse in this regard, as in my review of the literature, I found only one other study that discussed building relationships in connection with evangelism. This research substantiates the existing literature and also adds to it by providing information-rich data on how missionaries have gone about relationship-building for the sake of evangelism.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for not only missionaries in creative access nations like China but also Christians worldwide who desire to be active in evangelism and to verbally communicate the gospel. First, this research implies the importance of relationship-building for the sake of evangelism. Christians around the globe can implement the strategy of “funneling” interactions. Regardless of location or occupation, followers of Christ can implement the practice of noticing, exploring, and capitalizing on opportunities to share the

gospel. However, they should keep in mind that this process is a means to an end, not the goal itself. To best utilize this strategy, Christians should be active in prayer as they seek to build relationships with the people whom they meet.

Additionally, this research shows how to practically employ relational evangelism. Taking the time to build a friendship with a person before sharing the gospel does not need to be a vague or imprecise activity. Instead, the findings of this study have shown practical steps of how to build friendships with an eye toward evangelism. And with proper cultural adjustments, these actions could be applied by Christians in any context throughout the world.

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