

The State of Evangelism in Theological Education in 2019

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In 1973, Pat Robertson was in his second decade of running CBN and anchoring the 700 Club, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were working at CBN along with Robertson, the *Jimmy Swaggart Telecast* was in its second year, Kathryn Kuhlman was leading daily healing services in Los Angeles, Oral Roberts was still a Methodist and was offering prime time specials on television that reached up to 80% of the American population, and Billy Graham was conducting seven crusades, including two in South Africa, one in South Korea, and four in the United States. Crowning all of this, The Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education was established. Twelve years later, in 1985, it began publishing its peer-reviewed journal. Truly, these were heady times for evangelism!

The Need for AETE

There was a common impetus behind both the academy and the journal: the need to establish evangelism as an academic discipline. There were several factors behind this need. First, evangelism seemed like a cultural phenomenon rather than a subject for academic enquiry. The bailiwick of celebrities that appealed to the masses, evangelism seemed unworthy of serious academic investigation beyond, perhaps, anthropological studies related to the people who practiced it and responded to it. Certainly, it did not seem to have enough internal material to become an academic discipline in its own right.

Second, evangelism had no discrete methodological approach of its own. Unlike the classical theological disciplines which had developed critical approaches to their work,

evangelism was merely a practice of the church that had little secondary level discourse related to how it should be studied. In addition, evangelism was normative, calling people to make a decision to order their lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ. This seemed to make it incompatible with the forms of critical methodology used in the other theological disciplines, many of which sought to strip the confessional elements from theological studies.

Third, evangelism seemed out-of-step with the local church. During the 1950s, the church in the United States helped construct an American civil religion that taught a broad Judeo-Christianity over and against the godless communism promoted by the Soviet Union. It also emphasized pastoral care as a way of dealing with the mounting anxiety caused by the potential atomic destruction during the Cold War. Evangelism, especially in the form of calling people to faith for the first time, seemed unnecessary in this setting. Even the ministries of Billy Graham and Fulton Sheen were often interpreted as part of the American cultural move against communism.

As the church in the United States moved through the 1960s and the early 1970s, it reflected the splintering nature of the American culture. Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, various assassinations, increasingly liberal morality, and the rise of identity politics all were emblematic of how the nation convulsed as its population sought to reframe what it meant to be an American. Some congregations remained supporters of American civil religion, seeking to provide stability for suburban nuclear families and promoting patriotism. Others began to take what they dubbed a “prophetic stance” by joining the chorus of criticism leveled at the United States Government and American social structures more broadly.

These forces also split the church in reference to evangelism. The World Council of Churches grappled with the rise of liberation and postcolonial theologies by embracing a broader

understanding of mission that seemed to neglect the evangelistic call to Christian faith and conversion. Evangelical Christians emphasized the central importance of evangelism as the verbal proclamation of the gospel. This would take its fullest form in 1974 with the drafting of the Lausanne Covenant.

The unhappy result of this was to marginalize evangelism further in theological education, much of which was overseen by theological schools related to mainline Protestant denominations. To claim a need to study evangelism would seem at best like special pleading for evangelical Christians, at worst like a Trojan horse for allowing evangelical sentiments to infiltrate the otherwise (purportedly) pristine objectivity of scholars.

It was into such rocky ground that a group of evangelism scholars sought to plant the flag of evangelism as an academic discipline. They did this by founding AETE, an academic guild that provided them a place where they could share their work among peers and support one another. They also could demonstrate that their scholarship was legitimate and deserved academic recognition within theological education. The journal was created specifically to show that the study of evangelism could produce high quality, peer-reviewed work that was worthy of publication.

Charting a New Academic Path for Evangelism

AETE did more than provide a venue for legitimizing evangelism as a field within theological studies. It also bucked the theological disruption that wracked the larger church by welcoming members from across the theological spectrum, from Baptist to United Methodist, from Evangelical to Liberationist. The only consideration for membership was whether someone

took evangelism seriously, not whether they adhered to a specific understanding of the gospel message.

The first members made the most of this new guild. The earliest journal volumes speak to this, as authors created the scaffolding for evangelism as an academic discipline. Emboldened rather than cowed by the lack of internal methodology, the members drew from history, systematic theology, ethics, and other fields as they established what would become the foundational ideas of the discipline. In doing this, they showed that the study of evangelism required deft scholarly skill because it synthesized together so many of the classical theological disciplines along with the lived experience of Christians. It did all this all before “integrative theological education” became the watchword of seminaries and divinity schools!

They also spoke to the church, addressing issues like church growth, contextualization, and the nature and mission of the church. In doing this, they showed that the work of AETE rejected the long-held idea that the scholar and practitioner of the Christian faith were two different people. This was scholarship with a clear practical application built in, meant to be accessible and useful to all Christians. AETE and the journal were as much a gift to the church as to the scholars they served.

Perhaps the most impressive example of the reach AETE had is seen in Volume 3 of the journal. Relating the minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of AETE, held at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, it includes the full manuscript of the keynote address entitled “The Task of Evangelism.” The speaker? President Jimmy Carter.

Thanks to the forward-looking and hard work of these academic pioneers, two full generations of evangelism scholars have reaped the benefit of having the credibility, support, and fellowship provided by AETE. They have been able to build their CVs by having articles

reviewed and published in the journal, by presenting their research at the annual meetings, and by demonstrating leadership in the field through serving on the executive team. They also can build relationships with other scholars and practitioners committed to evangelism across denominational and theological lines. And, they can continue to speak to both the academy and the church about what evangelism looks like in the present age.

It is with deep appreciation for the work that this first generation did establishing AETE and setting the foundation for evangelism as a legitimate academic discipline that I conducted the present study. This study is meant to determine the extent to which current scholars of evangelism feel they are valued and their work is integrated into the curriculum at their respective schools. The results are largely positive, offering a testimony to the effectiveness of efforts by the early evangelism scholars. The results are also suggestive of where additional work can be done in the coming years.

Introducing the 2018 Study

The study was conducted by sending email questionnaires to the 146 present and past members of AETE. Of these, there were 14 that bounced back, leaving a possible pool of 132 respondents. Of these, I received 27 completed questionnaires, for a return rate of 20%. Given the length of the questionnaire and the time it would take to fill one out, I was pleased with this return rate. Also, as we will see, these returns offered a good sample of professors teaching in a variety of schools.

The questionnaire included two parts. The first dealt with the respondents themselves, including their roles at their respective institutions and the work they do. The second dealt with the courses they teach and the extent to which evangelism is integrated into the curriculum.

The Respondents

Of those who answered, 53.8% have the word “evangelism” in their job title and 46.2% had held an evangelism position for 8+ years. This included three retirees who all had served over ten years, with two of them serving over 20 years.

A full 50% of respondents expected to teach evangelism upon entering the academy, with 27% considering it as a possible area of teaching. Whether or not they expected to teach evangelism, the vast majority were committed to it. A full 92% said they would prefer to continue in an evangelism position for the foreseeable future.

Less than half of the respondents were either tenured or tenure track. However, this was skewed by the fact that some of the respondents were not in regular faculty positions. A worthwhile follow up study could measure how many schools employ regular faculty to teach evangelism courses and how many rely either in part or entirely on grad students or adjuncts.

This same skew was likely present in the question about how many times a year respondents taught evangelism courses. 56.5% taught only one course per year, with 26.1% teaching two courses and 17.4% teaching three. 65% taught at least one of their courses online, suggesting that many evangelism professors reject the adage that it is impossible to teach practical theology online.

Another reason that evangelism professors may only be teaching a few courses per year is because they are busy people, expected to cover the roles of administration along with their teaching. 65.4% of respondents reported that they carry a formal administrative position. This could be partly the economics of higher education today, partly that evangelism professors are

more competent in dealing with people and multitasking because of their practical and multidisciplinary bent. I am partial to the latter explanation!

Multidisciplinary and Multitasking

There is evidence for this multidisciplinary perspective beyond my wishful thinking. Professors with the word “evangelism” in their title teach, on average, three courses per year that are not about evangelism. This contrasts to those without “evangelism” in their title, which only teach two. Again, this might be because of non-regular faculty who are less likely to teach other courses being in the latter category.

Evangelism professors teach courses in a wide range of disciplines. Listed in order of how many respondents stated that they taught the following subjects, these courses were on: missions, cultural studies, theology, denominational studies, history, discipleship/spiritual formation, practical theology, leadership, world religions, pastoral ministry, church planting, New Testament, and Christian ethics. Given the lack of pure evangelism degree programs, especially on the doctoral level, it is not surprising to find that evangelism professors are being called upon to teach in disciplines that they likely studied along with evangelism.

While evangelism professors are teaching multiple subjects, they reported attendance was higher in their evangelism courses than their non-evangelism courses. While 41.6% of respondents said their evangelism courses had 21-60 students, only about 25% of non-evangelism courses had this many. The balance of students in each case were in courses with twenty or fewer students.

Further bolstering the idea that evangelism professors multitask is the statistic that shows 50% of the respondents consulting with churches on the local or denominational level a few

times a year and 30.8% consulting once a month or more. This may also point to their personal piety in being involved with local churches.

Beyond this, about one-third of respondents hold either paid or volunteer positions with churches locally or denominationally, serve as affiliates with other seminaries, provide consultations with congregations, or help in their communities. Again, this high number suggests a tendency for evangelism professors to multitask as well as to “practice-what-they-preach” by being involved with people outside of the seminary.

These external commitments also point to evangelism professors seeing their primary audience as the church, not the academy. This is even more visible in the publication and presentation records of the professors.

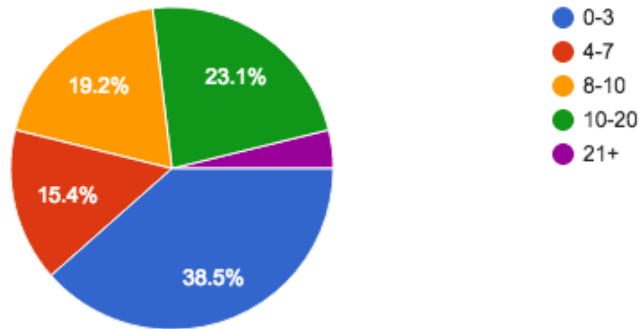
Scholarship for the Church

Evangelism professors are a prolific group. Three-quarters of respondents had published at least one book, with 15% having published three books and 35% having published five or more. Added to this, there are a raft of articles in both peer-reviewed and non-academic publications. This is impressive given that nearly half of respondents stated that they only have up to two hours per week for research and writing. The other half claimed to have three to five hours per week. Nearly three quarters (73%) stated that they felt they do not have enough time to do research.

These articles published by evangelism professors bear closer scrutiny. Consider the following two graphs:

How many peer-reviewed articles have you published?

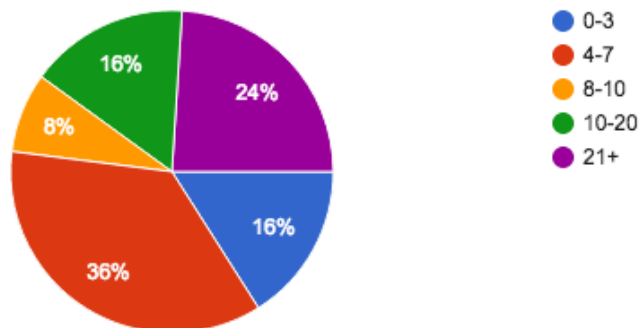
26 responses



The majority (about 54%) of respondents have published seven or less peer-reviewed articles, with the largest segment being those who have published three or less. Just over a quarter have published ten or more.

How many non-academic items have you published (e.g., in church publications, in Christian magazines, etc.)?

25 responses



When compared to the number of peer-reviewed articles, there are far more non-academic publications. Approximately the same number have published seven or less (52%), but the largest segment is made up those who have published 4-7 articles instead of 0-3. Most

dramatically, nearly one-quarter of respondents have published twenty-one or more non-academic items.

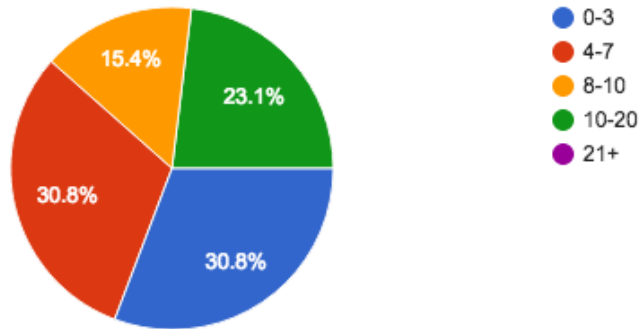
I would offer two possible reasons for this. First, the audience evangelism professors want to reach is primarily in the church, not the academy. As such, evangelism professors generally focus more on writing for the church and broader audiences. Second, there are more opportunities for evangelism professors to submit their writing to non-academic publications. Even with the AETE journal, there is a lack of peer-reviewed journals that deal with evangelism, but there are many trade and church publications that often are eager to have insights on evangelism.

To get more insight on whether this second item is accurate, it would be worth asking what percentage of these journal articles have evangelism as the primary topic. Given the multidisciplinary nature of evangelism professors, the number of both peer-reviewed articles that are about evangelism may be even less. If, after controlling for the topic, there is an even wider gap between the number of peer-reviewed articles by professors of evangelism that focus on evangelism relative to the general-audience articles by the same authors that focus on evangelism, then we can determine if a lack of opportunity to publish in peer-reviewed journals specifically about evangelism is an issue.

We can see the same kind of dynamic between reaching out to the academic audience versus a general audience in how many presentations evangelism professors have given.

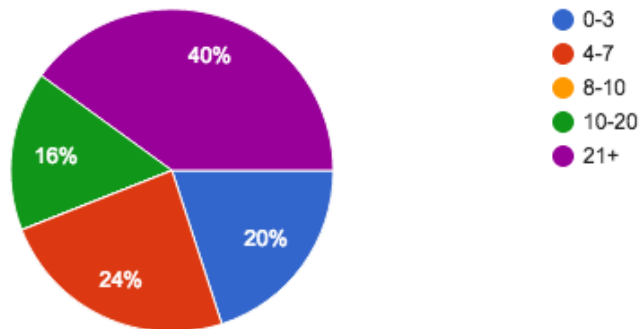
How many times have you presented at academic conferences?

26 responses



How many times have you presented at non-academic conferences?

25 responses



Non-academic presentations are far more common. Whereas 38.5% of professors have given 8-20 academic presentations, a full 40% has given more than twenty-one non-academic presentations, with another 16% having given between 10-20. Moreover, on the lower end, whereas 30.8% have given 0-3 academic presentations, only 20% are in this same range for non-academic presentations.

The same analysis applies here as with publishing. This seems likely to be a result of: 1) evangelism professors seeing their primary audience as outside of the academy, and 2) greater opportunities to present outside of the academy rather than inside it. Again, asking what the topics of these presentations are could shed further light on whether evangelism professors present on topics other than evangelism more often in academic settings. This, as with publishing, this could uncover an existing dearth of opportunities for evangelism to be treated in scholarly venues.

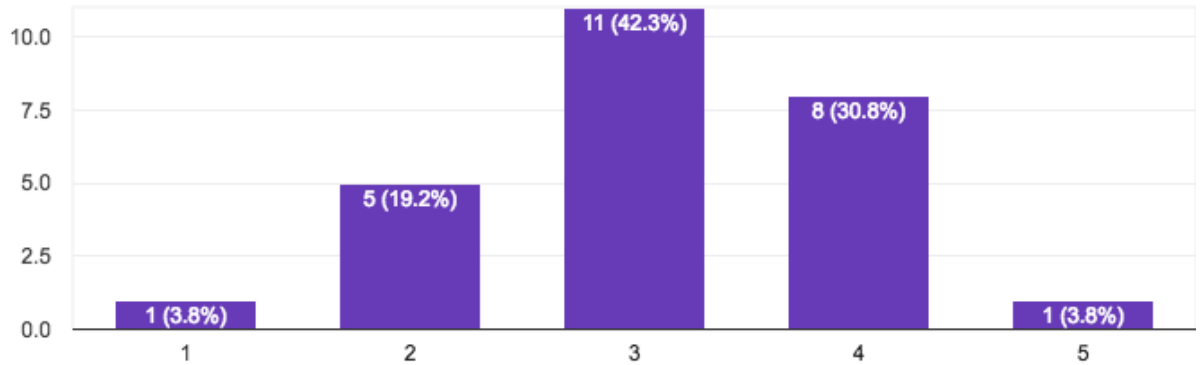
This is an important point to share with school search committees and review committees. Especially in university schools, these committees often expect all professors to be measured by the same academic achievements. Demonstrating that evangelism professors are more engaged with the non-academic world is essential for them to know. This is part of an evangelism professor's calling and work, even as they also engage in academic production.

The Schools

Respondents were asked to describe the schools where they worked. First, they did this by ecclesiastical affiliation: 53.8% said their school was affiliated with a mainline denomination, 23.1% as evangelical and related to a denomination, and 23.1% as evangelical and unaffiliated. Second, they did this by describing the theological perspective of their school, from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5). Respondents provided an almost perfect bell curve on this description.

Rate your school theologically.

26 responses



The single one and all the twos were used to describe United Methodist schools. All of the schools that claimed to be evangelical in some way ranked themselves as a three or four. The balance of the threes and fours were the other mainline schools. The lone five was a Wesleyan/Methodist school, but not United Methodist.

Throughout most of the following analysis of the curriculum and of respondent satisfaction at the schools, I use the theological ranking to assess the answers I received. Schools ranked as a 1 or 2 I denominated liberal, schools ranked as a 3 I denominated moderate, and schools ranked as a 4 or 5 I denominated conservative. I did this to see if a particular theological stance is more supportive of evangelism in theological education. Is the Lausanne/WCC separation still holding in theological education today?

Degree Analysis

A chief concern I had in this project was determining how well professors felt that evangelism is integrated into the curriculum at their schools, since this would measure the extent

to which evangelism has been accepted in the academy. I was pleased to see that the responses were largely positive, with some differentiation based on the theological bent of the school.

Before digging into the respondents' views of the curriculum, I considered how evangelism was included in the degree programs offered by the schools. 38.5% of the schools have a specially designated degree or concentration within a degree related to evangelism, and 52% of the schools require students to take an evangelism course in order to graduate with non-specific degrees. In both these cases, all but one of the schools with a positive answer were moderate or conservative.

Conversely, when asked whether students are required to take an evangelism course for ordination in the school's affiliated denomination, it was almost entirely respondents at liberal schools that said yes. The majority of these were United Methodist schools. This denominational requirement may explain why respondents at liberal schools also reported that they felt their teaching was more valued by their denominations than those at schools that were moderate or conservative.

The same pattern held when asked if schools are supported by an outside organization in teaching evangelism. The positive answers came almost entirely from United Methodist-related schools, which makes sense since the Foundation for Evangelism has endowed professorships of evangelism in most of the UM related schools since the 1980s. So, ironically, while liberal schools are affiliated with denominations that are more likely to demand students take evangelism for ordination and are more likely to have outside resources available to support the teaching of evangelism, evangelism professors teaching at them are less likely to feel that evangelism is valued as an academic discipline within the schools' respective degree programs.

Curriculum Analysis

The primary question in this section asked whether respondents felt like evangelism courses were integrated into the curriculum of their schools. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being least and 5 being greatest, the average response was slightly above 3. Liberal schools were right at the center with a score of 3, moderates were at the high end with a score of 3.6, and conservatives were at the lowest end with a 2.875. Since there was no comments section, it is hard to parse why this is, especially given the degree structure we have already seen. Possibly it is that conservatives have a stronger notion of what evangelism entails, and so they have higher standards for what it means to be integrated into the curriculum.

To determine the extent to which evangelism is valued in each school, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they believed their fellow faculty and their deans or other administrators were 1) familiar with what they taught and 2) valued what they taught. I have presented the results broken out by the theological standing of the school.

	Familiar with Teaching	Value Teaching
Liberal – Other Faculty	2.2	3
Liberal – Administrator	2.6	4
Moderate – Other Faculty	3	3.8
Moderate – Administrator	4	4.5
Conservative – Other Faculty	3	4.1
Conservative – Administrator	3.6	4.2

These scores show a marked difference between the liberal schools and the moderate and conservative schools. Evangelism professors at liberal schools are significantly less likely to believe that other faculty or administrators are familiar with evangelism as a field of study. They also believe that other faculty in their schools are less likely to value the teaching of evangelism than their counterparts at moderate or conservative schools. One respondent from a liberal school even told me that a senior faculty member publicly said that he didn't "give a shit about" what the evangelism professor taught. This was said at a faculty gathering with the president and dean of the school attending, and no one responded to this comment or called it out of order.

At the same time, all respondents were similarly confident in feeling that their administrators valued their teaching. Perhaps this has to do with how useful evangelism professors are. Since they teach courses in multiple fields, often shoulder administrative roles, and are excellent liaisons with the church and others outside of the schools, there would be much in evangelism professors for a dean or other school administrator to value even if those administrators didn't understand or appreciate evangelism as a distinct field of study.

A similar dynamic was present when looking at how students related to evangelism courses. Respondents were asked the extent to which students wanted to take the evangelism course before taking it, and how much the students valued it after taking it, with 1 being least interested or valued and 5 being most interested and valued. The averages of each type of school is reported in the following table:

	Wanted to Take Course	Value Teaching
Liberal	2.3	4.5
Moderate	3.1	4.5
Conservative	3.1	4.1

Those at liberal schools saw themselves facing a much more skeptical group of students initially. Again, this is ironic given that at least the professors at United Methodist-related schools seemed to feel that their denominations value them strongly. Evidently that institutional support does not translate into grassroots enthusiasm among students for taking evangelism courses.

Happily, respondents at schools of all theological stripes, liberal, moderate, and conservative, felt that the students valued evangelism much more highly after taking the course. This suggests that evangelism professors anticipate their incoming students' discomfort and have become adept at addressing that. The slightly lower post-course score from respondents at conservative schools may arise from the course not being quite so different from what students expected from the courses at the outset contrasted to their peers at liberal or moderate schools.

Also interesting is that respondents at liberal schools are far more likely to report remaining in contact with their students after they graduate. This is likely influenced by United Methodist polity being connectional, meaning that opportunities are built into the denominational structure for interaction between professors and former students.

All of this suggests that evangelism professors are at least well respected in the academy now, though not evangelism as a subject. Fellow faculty members, administrators, and prospective students remain unclear on the value of and, in at least one situation, hostile to the teaching of evangelism. However, the professors themselves are effective enough to be seen as valuable additions to their schools and, on the part of their former students, as having something of value to teach.

Looking Toward the Future

Another set of questions probed the possible future of evangelism as a continuing discipline in theological education. They asked 1) whether respondents would recommend that their current students become evangelism professors, 2) the ease with which respondents are able to find someone to cover their courses when they are not able to teach (e.g., when they go on sabbatical), and 3) the ease with which they believe their schools will find a replacement for them when they leave their current position.

The first question had resoundingly positive results, with 89% of respondents stating that they would encourage students to teach evangelism. Again, with no comments section, those who said “no” could not explain their answer.

For the other two questions, on the ease of finding temporary and permanent replacements for teaching evangelism, it became clear that while respondents from more conservative schools thought it would be easier than liberal schools (Liberals 2.8, Moderates 3.1, and Conservative 3.5), another dynamic was more important. The larger the school the respondent taught at, the more likely the respondent thought it would be easy for the school to find replacements.

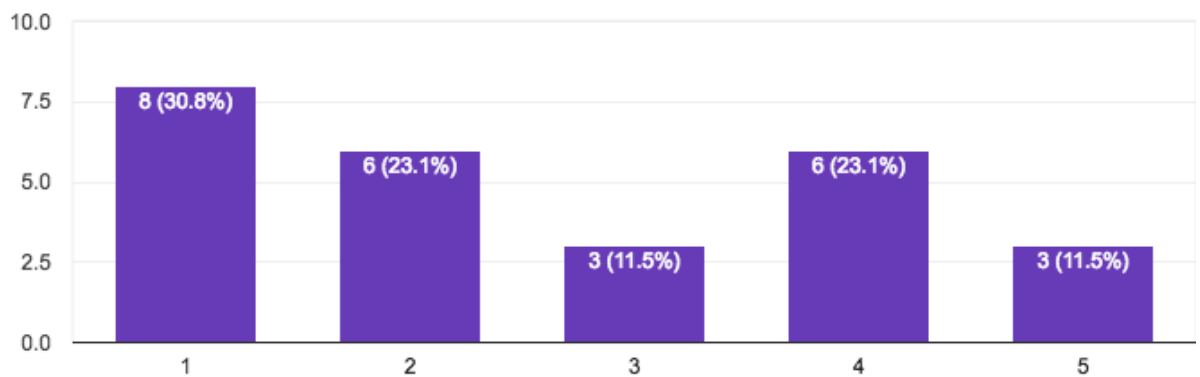
In sum, the future for evangelism continuing to have a dedicated corps of scholars seems bright, with some reason to believe conservatives will have a stronger group of participants among those scholars. At the same time, like all other fields of study, the extent to which those scholars are sustained is based on the economics of theological education more than on the theological perspective of an individual institution.

A Convicting Point

One final question that may be convicting for those who teach evangelism. To what extent do evangelism professors engage in personal evangelism on a monthly basis, with one being the least and five being the most?

Extent to which you engage in personal evangelism on a monthly basis.

26 responses



On average, those who are at liberal schools state they only engage in this about half the time (2.5). Those at more moderate schools less than this (2.2). Conservatives lead the pack with a 3.2. Perhaps we should ask the question as to whether we all ought not have a 5 out of 5? AETE Past President Rick Richardson has shown with senior pastors that when they personally engage in evangelism, their congregations increase their evangelistic activity. I would suspect the same holds true for evangelism professors. Students will be far more likely to participate in evangelism personally if they see their evangelism professors doing it.

Conclusion

It is clear that this generation of evangelism scholars owes a debt of gratitude to its forebears who established AETE and the journal. Their persistence and hard work have created a setting in which those who dedicate their professional lives to the study and teaching of evangelism have a firm basis from which to operate. It has also given current evangelism scholars reason to hope that this foundation will continue to support a new generation of evangelism scholars.

As AETE and the journal enter into their third generation, the positive trajectory evangelism scholars have before them has to do with the adaptability and broad number of talents of the current generation of evangelism professors. Their ability to multitask, teach in multiple disciplines, administrate, and publish for both academic and general audiences makes them highly valuable to their schools. More than this, they are identifying and developing people who can succeed them, giving schools a way to continue providing high-quality courses on evangelism.

The work that remains to be done has to do with helping the larger academy appreciate evangelism as a field of study in its own right. There still remains a high level of ignorance surrounding what the study of evangelism entails, and there is even some lingering distaste for evangelism having a seat at the table of academic disciplines.

This is especially true in liberal schools. While the WCC/Lausanne split may not be as evident among individual evangelism scholars, it remains visible in how conservative and liberal schools value evangelism. Teaching evangelism is demonstrably a harder road for our sisters and brothers in more liberal-leaning schools.

I have two basic applications to help overcome these difficulties. They are certainly not a full strategy for dealing with them, but they will help.

First, as mentioned earlier, we should make use of this report to help interpret for deans, presidents, selection committees, promotion committees, and review committees, what to expect from faculty members who focus on evangelism. The same metrics may not apply to them as to those in classical fields. This is not to call for special pleading or to lower the academic bar for evangelism professors in any way! Rather, it is to help interpret the metrics that can best be used to determine the effectiveness of an evangelism professor. For example, as we have seen, when a promotion committee is applying its school's requirements for publications or academic guild leadership, it would be helpful for the committee to know that evangelism professors have a much more limited range of opportunities for publishing peer-reviewed journal articles and serving in leadership than others. By the same token, they should also know that evangelism professors see providing materials for the broader church as a critical component of their work. So, perhaps the publishing requirement could be modified to allow for a certain number of quality articles in general audience publications along with peer-reviewed journals and the guild leadership requirement could be modified to accept more ecclesiastical consulting.

The second way to overcome the lack of clarity about evangelism as a field of study is for those of us who are evangelism professors to make the most of each opportunity for public presentations at our schools. Given that most of us have at least one other field we are competent to teach in besides evangelism, it can be easy to shift to that other field when we are asked to give a public lecture or other presentation. By being certain that we focus on evangelism, using these opportunities to remind fellow faculty and administrators what the study of evangelism entails and why it is valuable, we will help chip away at the accreted resistance in the academy to accepting evangelism as one of its own.

These are not difficult or onerous recommendations. That is due largely to the excellent work of those who blazed the path for us one-third of a century ago. We owe them our thanks. To those who are members of those evangelism scholar pioneers, please receive this generation of AETE members' deep gratitude for what you have made possible for us. May God continue to prosper you in your ministries, and may what you began continue to bear good fruit until the day we see it perfected in Christ Jesus.