



# Open Air Evangelism

By Andrew Garvey-Williams

## Why preach in the Open Air?

- 1) It reaches the unreached.  
*Many will not go to church, so we need to go to them.*
- 2) It reaches as many people as possible where they are.  
*By going to the places where crowds are and by using attractive and creative approaches it is possible to 'reach' hundreds of people very quickly. In a small open air of twenty on-lookers, you are reaching more unbelievers than you will find in an average church meeting.*
- 3) It is biblical.  
*Jesus preached in the open air, so did Peter and Paul.*
- 4) It is effective.  
*People become Christians on the street; contacts are made that can be followed up; the gospel is preached. . . .*
- 5) It can be enjoyable and can demonstrate the life and creativity of the church.  
*Most people's impression of the church is that it is boring, has nothing to say, and doesn't speak the language of the ordinary man. Good open airs can prove them wrong.*

***'No sort of defence is needed for preaching out of doors, but it would need very potent arguments to prove that a man had done his duty who has never preached beyond the walls of his meeting house. A defence is required rather for services within a building than for worship outside of them.'*** C.H. Spurgeon

## Aims of Open Airs

- **Proclamation:**
  - To proclaim Christ and the gospel in an honouring yet relevant and clear way.
  - To give out literature and tracts that proclaim the gospel.
- **Presence:**
  - To demonstrate an active, creative and relevant Christianity on the street to people and spiritual powers.
  - To encourage spirit-filled Christians to pray, witness and worship in public places.
- **Persuasion:**
  - To tell people what they need to know in order for them to become Christians.
  - To move and educate people in their understanding Bible truths and God.
  - To locate backsliders.
  - To make contacts that can be followed up and developed.

# Organising an Open Air

## 1) Personnel - Importance of Teamwork

Open air is far more effective when a team is involved. A team can support each other, encourage each other in prayer and witness and demonstrate the 'body' of the church.

A keen team that fulfils its role well can make an open air even if the preaching or presentation is not good. However, bad teamwork can ruin an open air even when the presentation is brilliant.

There are different possible roles on the team:

- People involved in the presentation.
- People involved in prayer on the street or back at the base.
- People involved in tracting.
- People involved in practical help - holding the sketchboard, organizing props, looking after the literature, making coffee when you get back, transporting the team, etc.

Look for ways to involve people and build an awareness and appreciation of everybody's role. Roles can be changed and quite flexible, as long as each knows what they are doing at any given time.

## 2) Place - Choosing a site.

The site and number of people there will affect your choice of programme.

Some questions to ask yourself:

### a) Who is here?

- How many people are there? Are there enough to make it worthwhile?
- Are they static - sitting around in a park - or are they moving - shoppers in city centre?
- Will they stop and listen? What would attract their interest and attention?

### b) What about the area?

- Is this public right of way or do you need permission to hold an open air?
- If you need permission, who do you ask?
- Will you block the right of way and open yourself to being moved along by the police?
- What about the space? A larger area will need something big and loud to fill it, e.g.: a carnival or festival approach. For smaller areas you need a narrower space, so people are funneled closer to you.
- What about noise and other disruptions? Is there too much noise to be heard, e.g. passing traffic, other hawkers, road works, etc. Are there vehicles needing access?

### c) What about time and weather?

- What would be the best time of day?
- When are people here? When are they free to stop?
- Is it too cold to stand for very long?
- What if it rains?
- Where is the sun shining? You don't want the sun in the audience's eyes.
- Where is the wind blowing? Standing with your back to the wind when speaking means the wind will carry your voice better.

### 3) Programme - What to include?

*The programme or presentation should:*

#### a) Attract attention

Unless we have people's attention we cannot communicate anything. People's attention can be attracted by something visual or noisy or by some unusual activity. It can be attracted by a crowd - a crowd gathers a crowd. This initial attention has to be transferred from what is being done - the means - to what is being said - the message.

#### b) Interest people

Having got their attention, you'll only keep them if you hold their interest. You interest people by addressing issues relevant to them. Jesus used everyday illustrations to interest people and bring out spiritual truths. People are interested in people and illustrations from personal experience attract interest. Don't bore people by going on too long. Know how long you have their interest and stop before you lose it.

#### c) Communicate spiritual truth.

While our programme can entertain, we need to go beyond that and communicate spiritual truth. Jesus' stories always had a simple though profound spiritual truth that he wished to communicate. Sometimes the truth was clearly applied and at other times somewhat veiled. He always left people questioning spiritual things. We need to be clear what we are communicating and keep to one or two basic truths we want to get across.

Start introducing the spiritual early on in the presentation. Don't tack it on at the end or your crowd will feel tricked. Weave it through the presentation. You need to illustrate the truth, give examples of it, and apply it to your hearers. Where a response is expected from them make it clear what it is.

***'I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.'***  
***John Wesley***

#### What you might include in an open air:

##### Preaching

This could be a straightforward message from a soap-box (or not) or it could be using a sketchboard, flannelgraph or other visual aid. Jesus preached using everyday illustrations - a net, seed, etc. The Old Testament prophets used a pot being smashed on the ground, an ox yoke, etc..

##### Testimony

This could be delivered on its own or with visual aid. It is personal and shows God active in someone's life.

##### Music

Music doesn't tend to attract a crowd in U.K. unless it involves costumes and/or dance. It also has to be good quality and catchy.

Music can be used to enhance mimes, etc. Music is better as part of a longer programme where P.A. etc. is available. Featuring international items can also attract attention, especially where national dress is worn.

Worship music is often inappropriate in evangelism, though it is good that as a team to sing some worship songs on the street as a form of spiritual warfare.

##### Dance

Dance can be used to attract attention. Certain dances, such as mime-dance, can communicate a message, though most dances need to lead into another presentation to get spiritual truths across.

International dances can be a good conversation starter. After a presentation it is easy to lead into a testimony or conversation as to why these folk are over here.

### Conjuring/Circus acts

Juggling, fire-eating, chain-escapes, uni-cycling, clowns, conjuring are all excellent for grabbing and holding attention. They need to be done well and by people who are skilled. Often a message can be shared through the item.

### Puppets

Puppets still attract attention from all ages. A simple puppet stage with hand held puppets is ideal. The puppets can sing and dance to backing tapes or enter into dialogue with each other or a front person.

### Drama and Mime

Often used in open airs and effective. Some are attention grabbers others contain a provocative spiritual truth. Keep the item visual and simple with one main point. Avoid too much dialogue. Use simple props. Make-up adds to the visual impact.

Sometimes it is possible to combine two or more of the above disciplines. For instance sketchboard and mime. A bit of sketchboard is followed by a bit of mime to illustrate a point; back to the sketchboard to finish and apply the message. This reduces the problem of people watching a mime and walking off before the sketchboard.

### **Some principles in performance**

- Avoid jargon      Speak the language of an average person
- Keep it simple      Not too many props, dialogue, points, etc.
- Practice      Make sure your performance is good and everybody knows their part. Practice beforehand with a critical audience. It doesn't need to be professional quality, but let's avoid the "cringe-factor".
- Timing      Keep it as short as possible. Vary pace to keep it interesting - watch your cues.
- Voice Projection      If you are speaking, don't shout as it muffles words, but speak clearly and as though to someone at the back of the crowd. Don't turn your face away from the crowd when speaking.

#### PA or not PA?

Public address systems are not necessary to effective open airs if the visual is strong. In larger events or in large areas, PA is essential in order to be heard.

If you are planning to use music or backing tapes, some form of amplification is necessary – this could be a regular battery-powered ghetto-blaster.

#### Bear in mind:

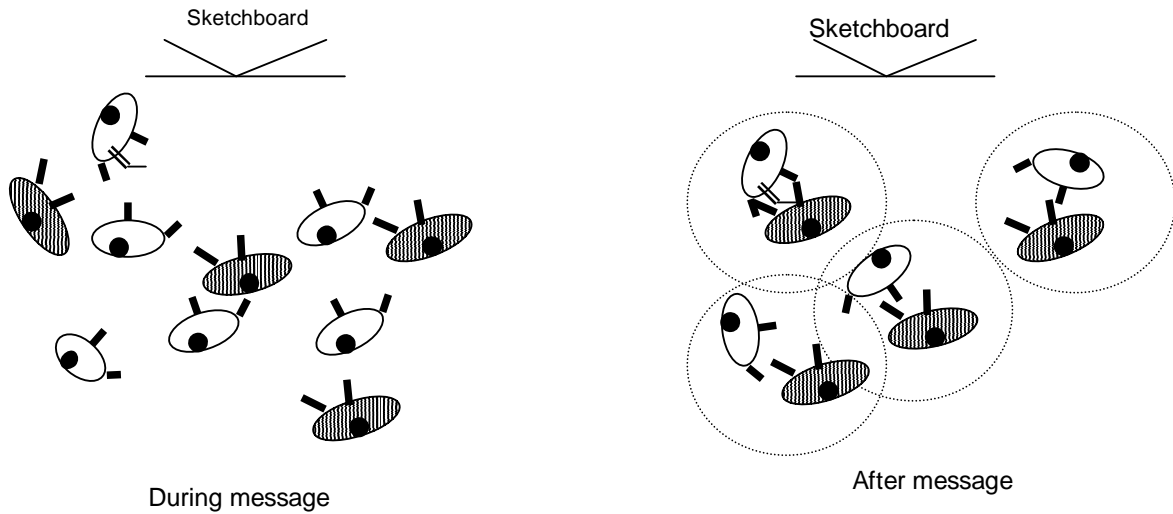
- Loud PA can force people away rather than draw them near. The natural human voice will draw people closer.
- Power supply is not always available and generators can be noisy
- Loud noise can be classified as noise pollution and you may infringe local by-laws.

## Putting it together

There are a variety of approaches to open air. The following are the most common:

### a) Short presentations with breaks.

A short presentation is used to attract a crowd, eg.: drama and sketchboard, followed by a break to allow team members to engage in conversations with folk who stopped to listen. After the conversations have ended, you can repeat the presentation or do another presentation. This is highly effective in places where there is a lot of flow and movement of people such as shopping streets. The presentations should be quick and communicate a simple spiritual truth, with most of the 'work' done in the conversations the team gets into afterwards. Good team work is vital in this approach.



The first role of the team is to gather naturally around the presentation/preacher. A crowd gathers a crowd. The team pray silently for the speaker, themselves and for those stopping. After the end of the presentation or preacher's appeal, they engage in conversation with those next to them. "Hi, I'm with that guy. What did you think of what he said?" This usually opens up an opportunity for personal work. Give training beforehand on starting and steering such conversations.

### Some do's and Don'ts for the team:

Do's	Don'ts
✓ Stand in close	✗ Move or fidget during the presentation
✓ Pray for the preacher (silently!)	✗ Carry prominently a big bible or stack of literature
✓ Look interested	✗ Argue with hecklers (that is the preacher's job!)
✓ Smile	✗ Talk when the preacher is talking
✓ Be clean and presentable	✗ Respond to the appeal – unless you really need to get saved!
✓ Carry a pen and paper for contact's names	✗ Give out tracts during the message

Don't give out literature except when the presentation is over, or unless you are well away (20 metres) from the presentation and giving out tracts to people going away from the presentation.

If you don't engage in conversation:

- Look for people nearby who have heard something of the presentation for example those in shop doorways or on benches.
- Give out tracts.
- Pray for conversations going on.

### **b) Rolling Programme**

A longer programme linking several items. A master of ceremonies might be used or a theme to link items. This is most effective where you have an audience who are there purposely for the programme, such as a beach mission, bandstand, kids club, or roadshow. Its disadvantage is that it is difficult to talk to people individually while the programme is on.

In choosing the order of presentations make sure there is variety in the programme, without too much of one thing. Think also of the pace and weight of items: follow a more serious item with a lighter one, or a slower piece with a faster one.

Don't allow 'dead' times with no activity. Each item should be introduced and linked smoothly by and M.C.

Have a 'stage manager' to make sure everybody is aware of the running order and when they are on. Also have someone to organise the P.A. and props.

People need to be comfortable when watching a longer programme. Have them sit down. For kids it is wise to have a large mat or sheet for them to sit on. It keeps them clean, but also contains them and defines where they are supposed to sit. Make sure people can see. If necessary have a stage or place yourselves near a bank for people to sit on.

### **c) Festival / Carnival**

Where you have a lot of folk involved and plenty of 'acts' to draw upon, the whole event can take on a carnival atmosphere. Items can be presented from one main site as with the rolling programme or from several sites, especially where you have a large space.

You could also have the main event with other fringe activities such as face painting or hair braiding. This approach is ideal in an event such as a county show where local churches have a designated area or in a large square in city centre. This is very much presence evangelism and works best when the atmosphere is one of celebration.

## **4) Preparation - before you go out.**

- Look at your personnel. If you have too many on the team, leave some behind to pray for you or send them off from the site to pray or to distribute tracts.
- Make sure everyone knows their role and are briefed beforehand. They must know their role and if they keep to it all will work well. However, misunderstandings happen, so love has to cover a multitude of errors!
- It is good if the team has had some basic training in:
  - How to start and steer conversations.
  - How to lead someone to Christ.
  - Using gospel literature.
  - Sharing your testimony.
- Link an inexperienced person with someone who has more experience.
- Have a time of prayer together before you go out. A time of prayer and worship at the site is also recommended to clear the 'spiritual air' and build faith. Prayer should have been a part of all the planning process - choosing site, programme, personnel . . .
- Organise your literature, props, etc. to make sure all is brought down and used properly. Don't just bring tracts, but also literature for any who make a profession of faith or who are very interested, e.g. "Journey into Life", gospels or New Testaments.
- Ensure each team member has a pen and paper to record contacts names and addresses.

- Organise a time after the open air for a feedback session to hear about contacts made, pray and evaluate the time.
- And remember: God wants us to do our best, even though it may not be 'professional'. God is pleased that we are out there reaching the lost. Open hearts are more important than 'technique'.

*'We are constantly on a stretch if not a strain, to devise new methods, new plans, new organisations to advance the Church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. This trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink man into the organisation. God's plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than of anything else. Men are God's method. The Church is looking for better methods: God is looking for better men.'* E.M. Bounds

## **Suggested Reading:**

Open Air Evangelism - by Mark Howe

Street Theatre - by Alan MacDonald, Steve Stickley, Philip Hawthorn.

Any 'March for Jesus' manuals have many ideas.

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