
RENEWAL



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Walter Ciesluk, Editor

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Evangelical Renewal Fellowship is the New England Association of The Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church

MAKING EVANGELISM A PRIORITY: GETTING STARTED

Rev. Dr. Thomas Bentum

It was with great personal pleasure that I watched our resolution on “making evangelism a priority” pass at annual conference this June. Our goal in offering the resolution was not done with some naïve belief that once passed, it would stir our churches to action. Conference resolutions rarely have that effect, at least on me! But we hope it at least offers encouragement to some pastors or lay people who need that added reason to push against the status quo of our churches to do something to reach out to the lost for the sake of Christ. We also hope that in the midst of all the issues facing the church we have at least gone on record as a conference saying that we have not forgotten that which is so vital to our existence.

In the journal issues this year we are going to devote some space on how we might follow through on making evangelism a priority in our church. It is thrilling to see evangelism training growing in our conference since Bishop Weaver took up leadership. His personal efforts at training and teaching plus the spread of Natural Church Development I believe are starting to turn this church around. However, I also believe that our conference efforts are weakened because in trying to encourage the maximum amount of churches to do evangelism in our pluralistic setting, we are not always clear on the theological issues. At the core of who we are as the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship associated with the Confessing Movement is the desire for doctrinal renewal that will help us clearly define the fundamental theology needed for effective and widespread evangelistic work

With that in mind I wanted to offer a few thoughts on getting started. There are many good programs out there to help us raise up effective witnesses in our churches and I have no desire to invent another. As you look at some of the programs that are out there here are four things that I believe need to be implemented in any evangelism training program to reach particularly New Englanders for Christ

1) *Evangelism training needs to promote dependence on God.*

That independent spirit that New Englanders are known for is indeed alive and well. It’s probably not true that fewer of us believe in God than the rest of the country, it’s just that we like a God who doesn’t bother us except when we need him. Therefore when we think about evangelism we think of it as something essentially what we need to do. But evangelism is primarily God’s work. He is the one who draws people to himself. He is the one who saves. Therefore evangelism training needs to teach people how to pray. It needs to move beyond the prayer United Methodists are good at trying to get God to do something. It needs to be a prayer of humility asking God to use us in what he is already doing.

2) *Evangelism training needs to not be timid about the lostness of humanity.*

I have written about this before concerning the pervasiveness of unitarian universalism (not the denomination, but the theology) in New England. Therefore we tend to have this sentimental view that everything will be okay in the end; God will forgive everyone and let us all into his heaven without any response from us. Evangelism training in our church needs to help people see the world through the eyes of Jesus. That means a solid biblical understanding of who God is and who we are. To say people are lost without Christ is a bold statement and in my experience can meet with some a very impassioned response!

3) *Evangelism training needs to help our members lead others to an encounter with Jesus.*

To echo a statement I heard recently, Jesus is far more exciting than the church! How true that is in New England where the congregations are aging and losing touch with younger generations. The church may seem irrelevant to the folks in our neighborhood, but the person of Jesus still intrigues. Therefore we must find ways to help people to open a Bible and find Jesus for themselves.

4) *Evangelism training needs to encourage face-to-face witness.*

The best way to help people encounter Jesus in the Bible in my experience is in a face-to-face venue. That might be a small group in a home or sitting down one-on-one over a cup of coffee. All of the people in my current charge that have made clear decisions for Christ have been in an Alpha class where they learned about Jesus in a non-threatening way. It may seem like a long slow process to form small groups and invest in people one-on-one, but if you are consistent (do the math over time) it works out to be an effective way to go. After all, this was Jesus' world changing model and also adapted and utilized by Wesley very effectively. We need to get it back in our DNA.

That's actually not a bad outline for a sermon on evangelism if you can use it to motivate your folks! As I have said before we United Methodists have a bad habit of trying things and then discarding them all too quickly because they do not give us the immediate results that we see in other parts of the country. We need to learn to be patient and think long-term. We need to adapt a process of evangelism and discipleship in our churches and stick with it as much as we do our beloved church suppers.

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum is the Executive Coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF). He is an Elder in the New England Annual Conference, and pastor of Christ UMC, Lancaster, NH and St. John's UMC, Jefferson, NH.

TAKING EVANGELISM PERSONALLY

Walter J. Ciesluk

Several years ago, my church adopted a new mission statement with the action verbs, "...loving, witnessing and teaching God's Word". The goal was to activate "witnessing" through our worship, outreach, and evangelism ministries. At the time, our evangelism ministry had been minimal and there was really no committee or formal team responsible for it. As a consequence, I was asked to attempt to develop some plans and suggestions for starting a vibrant and effective evangelism ministry at our church.

Initially, I started by researching how churches known around the world for their outstanding outreach to unchurched people do evangelism. In this search, I came across a very interesting and comprehensive book which I thought might help us a great deal, namely, "Building a Contagious Church, Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism" by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, Willow Creek Community Church. My pastor and a group of our church leaders spent several months reading and discussing this book. Simply, the basic approach to evangelism espoused has three steps:

- 1) we all need to learn how to build relationships with unchurched and irreligious people which we meet in our daily lives;
- 2) we need to be able and willing to articulate clearly and succinctly the gospel message and why we live by it; and
- 3) we need to provide worship and outreach events to which all our members can invite their newly made friends and family members.

One thing that became clear very quickly is that if a church is going to have an effective evangelism ministry, the pastor and church leaders need to give it high priority. What this means is that everyone of us needs to be involved in evangelism in some way or another. But for most of us, declaring our faith to others, or trying to help others to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ is a scary proposition. For a lot of us the image that evangelism brings to mind is a person going door to door handing out religious literature or standing on the street corner preaching with Bible in hand.

To address this concern, Bill Hybels, has also written a book and developed a small group course on personal/relational evangelism, called "Becoming a Contagious Christian". This book and the companion course articulates the central principles that have helped the believers at Willow Creek Community Church become a church known around the world for its outstanding outreach to unchurched people. The course, based on the words of Jesus and flowing from first hand experiences of the author, was considered by many a ground breaking, personalized approach to relational evangelism. It was designed especially for those who think evangelism is *not* for them. Instead, it was designed to equip believers for effective evangelism in today's world. It avoids stereotyped approaches that feel intimidating to many Christians. Instead, it shows ordinary believers how they can share the Gospel in a natural and powerful way while being the person God made them to be.

The "Becoming a Contagious Christian" course consists of 5 two-hour sessions. It is designed to help *all* of you to discover your own natural evangelism style; develop a contagious Christian character; build spiritually strategic relationships; learn to direct conversations toward matters of faith; share biblical truths in everyday language; and respond to the most common objections to Christianity.

As the first step, the course demonstrates that God works through the unique personalities He has given us to spread his Word. To make the case, Bill Hybels presents examples of six different evangelism styles in the Bible. Most people find that they relate well to one or a combination of these styles. They are *confrontational*, *intellectual*, *testimonial*, *interpersonal*, *invitational*, and *servng*.

Peter in Acts 2 is a biblical example of the *confrontational* style. In this passage, Peter stood up in front of thousands of people in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus had been crucified just a few weeks earlier, and confronted them with the truth about Christ. The important thing to realize here is that this approach was not foreign to Peter's personality.

He was a straightforward, "all or nothing" person. The confrontational style fit Peter because he had a naturally confrontational personality. This was just the style God wanted for the situation in Acts and the Holy Spirit powerfully used Peter's challenge to "repent and be baptized." In fact, over three thousand people came to Christ for forgiveness that day. People with this style tend to be confident, assertive, and direct. When their style is developed, they are not afraid to approach spiritual matters directly.

Paul in Acts 17 is a biblical example of the intellectual style. In this situation, Paul was talking to a group of philosophers in Athens who probably were not the kind of people who would have responded well to the confrontational style. Therefore, Paul used the intellectual style, which is seen in the way he reasoned with them. Paul started with the "unknown god", and built a logical and factual case to the point of presenting the resurrected Christ to them. People with this style tend to be inquisitive, analytical, and logical. They might like to debate, and they enjoy working with ideas.

The blind man in John 9 is a biblical example of the testimonial style. Here the blind man was miraculously given sight by Jesus. When questioned by the hostile religious leaders, he did not respond by confronting them or by reasoning with them. Rather he told of his own experience and explained what God did for him. He said, "All I know is that I used to be blind, and now I can see." We all have a story to tell concerning God's work in our lives, but some people are especially suited to present the Gospel in a testimonial style.

A biblical example of the interpersonal style is Matthew in Luke 5:29. Matthew had just come to faith when he realized that his tax collecting friends still didn't know Jesus, so he came up with the idea of throwing a banquet, or a "party with a purpose." It was strategically designed to get his friends to rub shoulders with Jesus and the disciples. Although all of us need to build relationships with those we hope to reach, those with the interpersonal style specialize in this area. They go deeper relationally with a greater number of people and are able to use the friendship and trust they develop to personally walk them toward Christ.

The woman at the well in John 4 is a biblical example of the invitational style. Jesus talked with the woman at the well. After Jesus convinced her that He was a prophet from God and possibly even the Messiah, she ran back to the people in her town. Her goal was not to personally challenge them with the truth as much as it was to get them all to come to hear Jesus for themselves. She used an invitational style, with the result that many became believers. Some people are uniquely able to get other people interested in participating in what they are doing. People with this style tend to be hospitable, relational, and persuasive. They enjoy meeting new people and are often seen with new friends.

Dorcas in Acts 9 is a biblical example of the servicing style. Dorcas was a woman who, in the name of Christ, served others by "...doing good and helping the poor..." (Acts 9:36). One of the ways she did this was by making robes and other clothing for the widows in her town. Some people serve others in a way that brings attention to Christ and the difference He has made in their lives. People with the serving style are not serving people *instead* of evangelizing them. Rather, they evangelize *through* their serving. Their selfless acts of kindness open the door of opportunity to speak about God, often with people who would be difficult or impossible to reach with any other approach.

The "Becoming a Contagious Christian" course has helped *many at our church* to discover and develop their own natural evangelism styles. If your church has not yet launched a course in personal evangelism, I encourage you to urge your church leadership to do so and offer it periodically. Jesus said He came to "seek and save the lost". And right before he left He said. "As the Father sent me, now I am sending you. In a nutshell that's our mandate as Christians. If each of us is actively involved in evangelism and each of us is able to bring one person to Christ this year, then 100 or more new people will come to know Jesus Christ. However, if we take the attitude that evangelism is the job of the pastor or an evangelism committee, then it will be fortunate if your church is able to bring 10 or more new people to our Lord this year. In our hearts, all true followers of Christ long to become contagious Christians. They sense that there isn't anything as rewarding as opening a person up to God's love and truth. Just think of how satisfying it would be if you were able to bring some dear relative, friend, acquaintance, or neighbor who has never experienced the joy and peace that you enjoy to finally come to know and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Walter J. Ciesluk is the coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF) communications ministry. He is a member of Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Chelmsford, MA.

THE PRAYER CORNER

Robbin R. Grill

One of my daily devotionals is “God’s Daily Promises.” Each week there is a different theme and the first week in August it was “Our prayers bring us into God’s presence.” What an awesome thought! We only have to pray with sincerity and effectively to be in God’s presence.

“I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. As you make your requests, plead for God’s mercy upon them, and give thanks. Pray this way for kings and all others who are in authority, so that we can live in peace and quietness, in godliness and dignity>” 1 Timothy 2:1-2 NLT

Paul urges Timothy to lift up requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving. So let’s take those few words apart and look at them”

- A request is a need. It is a deep desire for something we don’t have, something only God can supply.
- A prayer is words of praise and adoration. A translation of the word from the original Greek might be “worship in earnest.”
- Intercession is praying on behalf of others. We need to be praying for others daily and doing that will reflect a selfless life style.
- Thanksgiving would mean remembering those past prayers that God has already answered. We need to acknowledge that God is supreme in our lives and that His hand has moved and guided us in the past.

When we pray effectively we are doing more than communicating with God; we commune with Him. By so doing we become one in mind, spirit and purpose. Let’s concentrate on connecting with God in a real and personal way, just as a son or daughter would enjoy the company of a loving Father.

Let us listen for His still, small voice as expressed in the hymn by Emily May Grimes: “Speak, Lord, in the stillness, while I wait on Thee, hushed my heart to listen in expectancy. Speak, O blessed Master, in this quiet hour, let me see Thy face, Lord, feel Thy touch of power.”

Robbin Grill is the coordinator of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF) prayer ministry.

SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE EYES OF WESLEY

Irv A. Brendlinger

A common critique of evangelicals in the eighteenth century was that their emphasis was exclusively other-worldly. It is true that the slave society, having no ability to change their situation, found some release in focusing on heaven. The development and widespread singing of Negro spirituals reflects this. But the critique was leveled at those who did not improve society, but had opportunity to do so. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was of the opinion that Christians in general were too concerned with the future to be socially responsible in the present world. John Wesley took issue with this. It was his conviction that Christians were ideal citizens and were a positive influence in the world. It was his desire that Methodism produce the kind of Christians that would fulfill their moral obligation and serve their fellow human beings. For him, the idea of the future world was not a soporific for the miseries of this world, but an incentive to be involved in relieving those miseries and responsibly changing the negative situations of society.

A revealing insight into Wesley's social ethic comes from his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount. It serves as a kind of microcosm of this topic. While this particular text could easily lend itself to a mystical or "inward" focus, Wesley's use goes the opposite direction. Questioning his hermeneutic (how he interpreted this text) reveals his deeper purpose. There is no question about his intent; he uses Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to teach the Christian response to society and its needs. The greater purpose of addressing human need completely colored his interpretation of various passages. In the thirteen discourses, his overall interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is consistently conveyed in social terms. His definitions of particular words and his explanations of phrases leave no doubt. Here his social ethics are brought into clear focus, in a relatively concise sermon series. The series also contains various strands of his theology, particularly Christology, atonement, and Christian perfection, but with distinctly social applications.

In the first discourse he described "righteousness" as both love for God and "the love of all mankind for his sake." In the same sermon, he defined those that mourn as those who feel conviction for their own sin as well as mourn "for the sins and miseries of mankind." In the second discourse he describes the necessity of social involvement, warning that "...performing our duty to God will not excuse us from our duty to our neighbor: that works of piety, as they are called, will be so far from commending us to God, if we are wanting in charity, that, on the contrary, that want of charity will make all those works an abomination to the Lord."

The trend continued in succeeding sermons. The "merciful" were those "who love their neighbors as themselves," and a "peacemaker" was one that "doeth good to all men." Wesley defined "good" predominantly as physical aid to the needy, as outlined in Matthew 25. In explaining the passage, "take no thought for the morrow," he stated, "the most fatal way of 'taking thought for the morrow'" was to "make the care of future things a pretence for neglecting present duty."

In dealing with God's kingdom (comprised of those renewed in God's image, loving God and all people), he clarified the issue that present duty clearly involved service to others. Wesley's understanding of God's "kingdom" was not seen as a state but as a force of Christians doing the kind of ministry Jesus did while on earth. This is also revealed in his thinking about the petition, "Thy will be done in earth," which implied deep involvement with the needs of society. His interpretation held that this petition primarily required actively doing what God desired, and only secondarily, passively resigning to God's will.

In the tenth discourse Wesley spoke of "genuine morality" in terms of the golden rule. Again, it was applied to human need in a manner similar to his teaching about the use of money. He taught that progressive distribution is based on meeting the needs of others before enjoying the luxuries of wealth; "our superfluities" Wesley wrote, "give way to our neighbour's conveniences," then "our conveniences, to our neighbour's necessities; our necessities, to his extremities." Many of Wesley's early followers applied this principle so literally that to outsiders they seemed to be giving recklessly, without regard for their own needs. They were criticized for such behaviour. However, from their perspective, their industry had brought them more than they had ever had and they were gratefully willing to share. The criticisms early Methodists received underscore the point being made: Wesley taught a radical social application of religious truth, not a spirituality that focused primarily on one's self.

Even Jesus' statement, "narrow is the way which leadeth unto life" included social actions for Wesley. He defined that "way" as not only including inner attitudes, but doing "all possible good to all men." When such good (the work of charity) was not done, he had an explanation: persons were simply unwilling to deny themselves. Self-denial was necessary to genuinely follow Christ and grow spiritually, and charity was the direct correlation. Thus, the topic of self-denial became a platform for social concern.

In the concluding sermon of the series, Wesley reinforced the interaction of faith and works. The two were inseparable, but the order was critical. The first and foundational step was faith, not works, but the evidence of authentic faith was response to human need. Using the parable of the one who built on unstable ground, Wesley admonished that unless one begins on the inward principle of personal faith, all good works are no more than a foundation of sand. However, to claim faith but not be "zealous of good works" was equally erroneous. Again, good works were defined as feeding and clothing the destitute, visiting the sick, and relieving those in prison:

"But 'what does it profit, if a man say he hath faith, and have not works'? Can 'that faith save him?' O no!," states Wesley. "That faith which hath not works, which doth not produce both inward and outward holiness, which does not stamp the whole image of God on the heart, and purify us as he is pure; that faith which does not produce the whole of religion described in the foregoing chapters, is not the faith of the gospel, not the Christian faith, not the faith which leads to glory.... If thou layest stress on this, thou are lost for ever: Thou still buildest thy house upon the sand."

The place where social acts and responsibility were usually addressed was under the topic of works of mercy. Although Wesley sometimes gave his followers specific instructions regarding works of mercy (usually related to the poor), he was more concerned to help the believer establish a basic attitude from which the action appropriate to the situation would result. It was a comprehensive, "Christian" perspective from which to view all of life's responsibilities and relationships. It could be summed up as the ethic of love and it comprises the whole of Wesley's social ethic. Social concern and involvement of the believer were essential. By example, Wesley made the application to slavery, which he perceived as the greatest enemy of love for others. The ethic of love, which he often termed "true religion" or "total religion" involved total commitment even to the extent of relinquishing ownership in favor of stewardship and resulted in the Christian being a distributor of God's bounty. The Christian was the "one for others," and Wesley was committed to teach a style of living that reflected the selfless service of Jesus and the first-century Christians.

It is true that Wesley placed significant emphasis on people's "inward" religious experience. However, he saw clearly that the inner life was the source of—and never a substitute for—the true expression of faith: social relationships in a world of need. The inner life and outward expression worked in tandem, but if there were a choice, the Christian should opt for the latter. He consistently taught his followers to "be more zealous for works of mercy, than even for works of piety." If it had to be either one or the other, Wesley's choice was unequivocal: "...works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, 'at charity's almighty call,' when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbor, whether in body or soul."

As a result, even in sermons that dealt primarily with inner religion, those of a more pietistic bent, an obvious social dimension was still present. In a sermon dealing exclusively with fasting, Wesley concluded by describing the conditions necessary for that fast to be acceptable to God. The person fasting must "add alms thereto; works of mercy, after our power, both to the bodies and souls of men." He then supported this condition by quoting Isaiah 58:6: "Is this not the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to steal thy bread to the hungry?"

It is on the point of inner religion replacing the outer social expression that he disagreed with the mystics and any who physically withdrew from the world. Christians must leave the world in terms of being captive to its values and evil, but must never actually withdraw from the place that so desperately needs their loving influence. He defined this in his sermon, "In What Sense We Are to Leave the World." At another time, in no uncertain terms he condemned the practice of withdrawing from society:

“Directly opposite to this is the Gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. ‘This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also’; and that we manifest our love ‘by doing good to all men, especially to them that are of the household of faith.’ And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be ‘zealous of good works.’ He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. ‘My Father,’ will he say, ‘worketh hitherto, and I work.’ And at all possible opportunities he is, like his Master, ‘going about doing good.’”

There is perhaps no better refutation of the critique that the emphasis of evangelicals ought to be exclusively other-worldly. Wesley believed the “grand pest” of Christianity was faith without works, and works could not be done in isolation. They were related to human need. In light of his clear focus on the radical social dimension of true Christianity it is difficult to perceive how his teachings could be relegated by many of his followers to tame, self-contained and self-serving “doctrines.” His theology was expansive and full of application. It was unmistakably directed to meeting the needs of others, and enhancing the good of humankind. He had no tolerance for the kind of Christianity that was egocentrically preoccupied with one’s own spiritual state, and therefore blind to the human needs nearby. He understood and tolerated even less a Christianity that acquiesced to or endorsed slavery. That such Christians called themselves his followers or used his name would have deepened the wound!

Irv Brendlinger is professor of Church History and Theology at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. This article is an excerpt from his book, Social Justice Through the Eyes of John Wesley: John Wesley’s Theological Challenge to Slavery, published by Joshua Press, Guelph, Ontario Canada: www.sola-scriptura.ca, www.joshuapress.com. Reprinted with permission.

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RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

The Bible and Other Faiths, Christian Responsibility in a World of Religions, Ida Glaser, IVP Academic, Copyright 2006

Logic presumes, and history suggests, that not all religions can comfortably coexist: their interaction is frequently characterized by bitter conflict. Even the questions that come to mind as we consider other religions betray this bias toward competition: Is Christ the only way? Can people of other religions get to heaven? Are they worshipping God or the devil?" Even more critical is the realization that although we cannot always expect God to tell us what he thinks of others, we can expect him to tell us what he wants of us. Avoiding simplistic solutions to the dilemma of other religions in the Christian experience such as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, the author offers a guide for conducting ourselves biblically among people of other faiths, in such a way that our words and deeds will bring glory to God.

Only Human, Christian Reflections on the Journey Toward Wholeness, David P. Gushee, Jossey Bass, Copyright 2005

Using a distinctly Christian framework, Only Human addresses questions about what it means to be a human being, our makeup and nature, what is right and what is wrong with us, and our origins and destiny. Broadly ecumenical and drawing from contemporary and ancient discussions of human nature, it offers a substantive and accessible exploration of who we are, how we understand what we are "made of," what role God plays in our lives, and many other pertinent topics. Drawing from contemporary and ancient discussions of human nature, the author offers a substantive and accessible exploration of eight essential questions:

- Is there such a thing as human nature, something all humans share?
- How do we understand what we are made of?
- Why do relationships matter so much to us?
- Is it true that human beings are intrinsically sinful?
- Are human beings truly free to chart their own paths and make meaningful choices?
- How do human beings become morally good people or morally evil? What does a morally great life look like?
- What should we hope for as our ultimate goal for life's journey?

The Divine Embrace, Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life Robert E. Webber, Baker Books, Copyright 2005

In this book, which is part of the Ancient-Future series, the author lays the foundation for understanding Christian spirituality by tracing it from the ancient church to the present, showing how biblical teaching has been developed theologically and informed by changes in culture. He then explores how we can return contemporary spirituality to its biblical source, living out God's story in our individual lives and in our life together as the church. You'll be encouraged and equipped to live out your spirituality as a deeper and more delightful response to God's divine embrace. One of the most popular current views on spirituality is that there are varied paths to God. In this new Ancient-Future series book, the author evaluates this common misunderstanding of spirituality as separated from God's story, extremely self-focused, and shaped by our surrounding culture. This challenging work offers a corrective, calling us to an alternative Christian spirituality, one that reveals two sides-that of God's "divine embrace" of us and our passionate response. The Divine Embrace is a fresh, grounded look at true spirituality that will be embraced by pastors, thinking Christians, and anyone looking for an engaging and thorough treatment of this topic.

Evangelical Renewal Fellowship

16 Church St.

Lancaster, NH 03584

603-788-2734

Web site: www.RenewNE.org

E-mail: tbentum@clergy.net

Purpose Statement

Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, the Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ

ERF Executive Team (1 July 2007-30 June 2009)

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Communications Coordinator: **Walter Ciesluk**

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Reform Coordinator: **Pastor Brian Wood**

RENEWAL Conference Director: **Pastor Tom Bentum**

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