

CARNIVAL FIELD, HARVEST FIELD

MAKING A SPECTACLE OF OURSELVES

In every rural area a small hard-working group of volunteers plan from year to year for “The Carnival”, the central, summertime event at which “community” is celebrated. The pattern varies little from one year to another. Carnival Day takes place on a certain weekend. Everyone hopes the weather will be fine, but will go ahead determinedly anyway. There will be a parade of cardboard floats and costumed characters through the streets, finishing up in a field ringed by trestle tables and dominated by a large inflatable bouncy castle.

Every community organisation will be there – to raise funds and to demonstrate their presence in and commitment to the community. In any town or village the same groups will be found – the cubs and scouts, the mothers union, the drama society, the play-group, the school, the gardening club, and sundry organisations for the welfare of dogs and cats and whales. Visitors will be parted from their money by such time-honoured diversions as “bash the rat”, “soak a teacher”, bottle stalls, raffles and tombolas, and the sale of home-made produce.

Equally dependable is the support that the carnival will receive from its community. People might say, “We only come for the children’s sake” but in reality they are expressing their belonging. This is most apparent when the weather is poor, and yet many regular supporters still make the effort to turn out.

The local churches are always there on the carnival field. They witness to a Christian presence in the community, and they give good, honest value as they sell their cakes and jams. There is no doubting either their sincerity or the value of their contribution. But is it right that the public witness of the church should be so little different from that of every other organisation?

If the church really has something unique to share, and if it believes that it is under divine command to share it, should it not be making a specifically Christian contribution to the carnival? Should it not be offering support, instead of asking for it?

OUR GREAT COMMISSION.

We know that we should be more active. Our Lord instructed us: “Go in my Name, and make disciples.” (Mt.28:18); “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt.10:8); “Night is coming, when no-one can work” (Jn.9:4). Paul says, “Make the most of every opportunity” (Col.4:5); “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season” (2 Tim.4:2); “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor.9:16). James tells us, “He who knows the good he ought to do, but does not do it, sins” (Jas.4:17) Someone else said, “Preach the Gospel at every opportunity – if necessary, use words”.

A DOOR HAS BEEN OPENED.

The local carnival presents the local church with a chance to preach the Gospel in its own Jerusalem, and this opportunity should be taken. People are open and receptive at such events – the very fact that they are free to walk away at any time gives them the confidence to stay and listen.

In a prosperous area, many are isolated from contact with their neighbours by the trappings of wealth. Their annual visit to the carnival provides a chance for the church to begin dialogue with them. Young people are really curious about the Gospel, but do not want to lose face with their peers by being seen attending a Christian event. On a carnival field they can listen from a distance, without appearing to be too interested.

Inclement weather can be an advantage – a muddy field is a great equaliser, and the sight of Christians persevering in adverse circumstances is a powerful witness. It is also a powerful witness to give and to ask nothing in return - the only stall on a carnival field that is not raising money will be noticed, and will challenge many people. Sometimes people will be so challenged that they will try to offer money; and the refusing of it will provide a further opportunity for witness.

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OUR WITNESS - GOOD OR BAD

It is easy to give bad witness on such occasions. Some would-be evangelists are so committed to one strand of belief that they will preach it publicly, in spite of any offence they may give or damage they may cause. Whether they promote a particular denomination or a particular Bible translation, by denying the validity of others they propagate division in the Body, crucifying Christ over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace. Others indulge in public haranguing - it cannot be called preaching - of the "You are all going to Hell" variety. This antagonises people, gives all Christians a bad name, and can cause formal complaints to be made that result in the loss of venues.

These mistakes can be avoided if the work is undertaken ecumenically by those who believe the saving of souls is the duty of all believers of every denomination, and who recognise God's plan of salvation as being the same for everybody.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. ORGANISATION.

When plans are being made for this kind of mission - for that indeed is what it is - a person of wisdom and experience should be appointed on behalf of all participating churches to give spiritual oversight to the work. Every team member should be asked to accept this authority in all matters pertaining to the mission.

Consideration should be given to the appointment of an artistic director, responsible for ensuring "cringe-free drama".

There are to be no stars in this show; it is a team effort. Nobody is more or less important than anybody else. Everyone has a vital part to play.

If several different "acts" are being presented, a Stage Manager will be needed, responsible for knowing the running order and for organising performers and props to keep everything flowing.

The SM will probably need an assistant, to act as a runner.

2. BEFOREHAND

Consider whether PA is to be used, and if so how it will be powered - battery, generator or mains supply (shock horror) via an extension lead.

Ensure all equipment and props are weatherproof. Wind proofing will be as necessary as waterproofing. Do a Risk Assessment. Check on Insurance.

Order generous quantities of give-away items; balloons or sticky badges with Christian themes, "Jesus" rock. If Gospel tracts are to be used, select them well in advance, and ensure that all the workers are familiar with the contents.

Ideally this outreach will be part of an on-going programme of witness by the churches, and there will be up-coming events, such as Coffee Mornings or Alpha Courses, to which enquirers can be invited. Or perhaps "Jesus" videos can be loaned out. The workers should be aware of all the possibilities, and should be told to not be limited by denominational boundaries when considering the most appropriate invitation.

The performers who will be in the public eye should rehearse their contributions, to make the presentations of the highest possible standard.

Each participating church should encourage prayer support from all who cannot be present in person. Each team member should of course arrive thoroughly "prayed-up" for the occasion. The team should pray together before the public arrives. Avoid public displays of prayer.

3. THE SET-UP.

Dress the pitch with colourful materials, such as balloons and streamers and praise banners. Let there be some obvious visual indication that the pitch is a place of Christian witness. Avoid any indications of denominational allegiance.

A few chairs strategically placed in front of the pitch will extend the amount of time people will spend watching the presentation. Some small chairs for the very young, and a few comfortable ones for the elderly, are very effective. This courtesy secures the attention the seated individual, plus that of the family group they are with.

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4. DURING THE PRESENTATIONS.

Make it snappy, and keep it moving. Assume that no passer-by will give their attention for more than about five minutes. Some might stay just a little longer if the presentation is very interesting, but every one will move on after a short while because they came to see all the attractions. They should be released gladly. Some that the Lord is touching will come back for more after they have circled the field, and others will remain tuned-in from some distance away.

The workers in the crowd should be ready to handle the expected and the unexpected. They should always appear keenly interested in the material being presented, as though seeing it for the very first time, even if they have seen it several dozen times already. They should be sensitive to the response of the person beside them in the crowd, quietly blessing whatever the Holy Spirit might be doing in the person's life, and getting ready to open a conversation at the right moment.

5. NECESSITIES

SM should have lots of drinks ready, hot on a cold day, and cold on a hot day, for everyone involved and especially for the presenters. Carry a repair kit.

CHOICE OF MEDIUM.

Puppetry, Drama, Dance, Clowning, Juggling, and different types of musical entertainment are all appropriate to present on a carnival field. The specialist skills of Ventriloquists, Escapologists and Magicians can all be employed to communicate a Gospel message. Storytelling is a time-honoured means of communication, which will attract more attention if the storyteller uses a Sketchboard or a Glove Puppet or Big Props. Personal testimonies should only be used if they are brief and entertaining.

Ideally several different media will be intermingled. This will add variety and interest, and will allow more people a chance to contribute to the occasion according to their different talents. Live performances should predominate, because these attract the most attention. Recorded material is rarely appropriate as a main item, although useful for backing.

Videos and slides are hardly worth the effort needed for showing them, considering all the technical difficulties that must be overcome, and the limited audiences they will attract. Material shown on a screen will not be seen clearly, due to variable ambient light, unless the screen is inside a tent. Any potential audience must then be induced to enter the tent, which itself becomes a barrier.

Amplification should be used sparingly and with sensitivity. Overuse may lead to a complaint being made by neighbouring stall-holders; this could cause the venue to be lost for the following year.

CHOICE OF MATERIAL

The Bible is the very best source of exciting stories that can be told using any of the above media. The stories may be presented in their original context, or they can be transposed into a different time and space (e.g. The Story of the Good Punk Rocker).

A huge amount of suitable material has been created already. A new team might begin by finding out what is available from the Christian bookshop or from the Internet. Very soon however, they should begin to amend it using their own God-given creativity (Deut.8:18) and to write their own material. Everything presented must be appropriate to the occasion, remembering that the carnival field is a place for family fun.

A PLACE FOR PREACHING

Good material will preach its own message. Should any additional preaching be thought necessary, only someone clearly anointed for that task should deliver a few brief words. The message should be generally confined to an invitation to anyone who has been moved by the presentation to feel free to talk to any of the Christians nearby – “They're the ones with the big happy smiles”.

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