



The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

Lausanne Occasional Paper 23 Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Protestants

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Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Protestants

Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization

Mini-Consultation on Reaching Nominal Christians Among Protestants

held in Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June 1980

Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

Prefatory Note

This report, *Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Protestants*, is one of a series of Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) emerging from the historic Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) held in Pattaya, Thailand, in June 1980. The report was drafted by members of the "Mini-Consultation on Reaching Nominal Christians Among Protestants," under the chairmanship of Dr. Ulrich Betz, who also served as International Co-ordinator of the pre-COWE study groups on Reaching Nominal Christians Among Protestants.

The major part of this report went through a draft and a revised draft, which involved all members of the mini-consultation. It was also submitted to a wider "sub-plenary" group for comment, but the responsibility for the final text rests with the mini-consultation and its chairman.

The report is released with the prayer and hope that it will stimulate the church and individual members in reaching this large segment of the population.

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There could be hundreds of millions of nominal¹ Christians among Protestants around the world. It is impossible to get a precise figure; and in this matter, we are aware of the danger of appearing proud or judgemental. As we considered our task, two things became clear. First, we are dealing with a major task in world evangelization. Second, we were challenged by our own incipient nominality and were compelled to examine the level of our own Christian commitment.

1. Defining Nominal Christians

A nominal Protestant Christian is one who, within the Protestant tradition, would call himself a Christian, or be so regarded by others, but who has no authentic commitment to Christ based on personal faith. Such commitment involves a transforming personal relationship with Christ, characterised by such qualities as love, joy, peace, a desire to study the Bible, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, a determination to witness faithfully, a deep concern for God's will to be done on earth, and a living hope of heaven to come. (1 Corinthians 10:1-12; Romans 2:28,29; Revelation 2:4, 5; 3:1; Matthew 15:8, 9; Hebrews 10:25).

The size and complexity of nominality is apparent in all Protestant countries. It is to be found wherever the church is more than one generation old. All general statements about nominality are, therefore, to some degree, inaccurate. From the point of view of a nominal Christian's relationship to a congregation, five types of nominality² may be identified:

- a. One who attends church regularly and worships devoutly, but who has no vital personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord.
- b. One who attends church regularly but for cultural reasons only.
- c. One who attends church only for major church festivals (Christmas, Easter, etc.) and ceremonies (weddings, baptisms, funerals).
- d. One who hardly ever attends church but maintains a church relationship for reasons of security, emotional or family ties, or tradition.
- e. One who has no relationship to any specific church and who never attends but yet considers himself a believer in God (in a Protestant traditional sense).

We are challenged to reach each of these types with the gospel of Christ. Our approach must be suited to the type of nominal Christian with whom we are dealing.

2. The Causes of Nominality

Nominality starts from man's heart. It is a manifestation of the basic rebellion of men against their Creator. This is the ultimate reason. All other reasons are less fundamental.

It is possible to discern a number of factors which have assisted the growth of nominality.

A. Philosophical

The Enlightenment created an atmosphere hostile to the acceptance of revealed truth. This has progressively undermined personal conviction and singular commitment. Pluralism, with its evenhanded tolerance of rational alternatives, has sapped the enthusiasm for the demands of total commitment. It has become acceptable thinking to say that all religions are equally valid paths to God. Materialism has also played a part in increasing the level of nominality; growth of material prosperity has affected the level of commitment in church life.

B. Sociological

Such factors as industrialisation, with the development of cities and the breakdown of traditional communities, have brought shock changes in people's behaviour. The multiple choices and anonymity of city life have conspired with the intellectual atmosphere of post-enlightenment thought in a way that reinforces the drift into nominality. The high rate of mobility in many countries also leads to breakdowns of old loyalties and affiliations and must be considered to be a factor.

C. Ecclesiastical

We can also see ecclesiastical factors that have encouraged nominality. Post-enlightenment thought has pervaded much theology and created the intellectual atmospheres that affect the thinking of Christians and non-Christians alike. In many churches, the preaching and teaching does not come from an understanding of the Bible as "God's Word written." All too often, in the Protestant tradition, there has been an emphasis on grace without the counterbalancing message of costly discipleship. While our salvation can never be earned, but only received by faith as God's gracious gift, it must be worked out through lives dedicated to God (Ephesians 2:8-10). In some situations, nominality has been tolerated, if not encouraged, by pastors for reasons of prestige and even financial advantage. In some churches, an undisguised message of justification by works is preached, leading either to pride or a sense of hopeless inadequacy in the hearers. Too often, churches have failed to give help and support to those who have professed conversion. Too often, there has been an undue emphasis on uniformity in non-essential matters. Too often, there has been a lack of concern for those without Christ. Too often, prayer has been crowded out in the life of individuals and of fellowships.

Many nominals once had an apparently live and active faith but have "dechurched" themselves as a result of some injury (imagined or real) to their pride or their feelings, or some legitimate grievance against the church or its members. Others have been put off by the failure of the church to answer their most pressing questions with regard to their living in this world. Some young people have disowned their parents' faith because it lacks a social awareness, or is barricaded by rigidly observed taboos. A major cause of nominality may be lack of discipline over admissions to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

A dead orthodoxy can put people off as much as a lifeless heresy. The right words need the confirming presence of the right Spirit.

We recognise our complicity in these causes of nominality, and seek to repent of it, and also of any misplaced sense of superiority we may feel. We need a new consciousness of God and a new openness to his Holy Spirit, who alone is able to break through to nominal Christians, and who alone can revive and renew our churches so that they can become instruments of such a breakthrough.

3. The Need for Renewed Churches

Any strategy for reaching nominal Protestants must start with the earnest prayer that God's people will themselves be blessed and become a blessing. If the churches are one of the main causes of nominality, then they must seek forgiveness. If they are, as we believe, the main means of reaching nominals, then they must be equipped and empowered by God's Holy Spirit for the task.

Our prayer for churches should not only be that they be better at talking, but that they should be more Christlike in their living. The church that is described in Acts 2 was one to which new members were added daily. It was also a church which was marked by a confidence in, and experience of, God at work, a sense of awe, close fellowship, sacrificial sharing, a constant readiness to praise God, and an attitude toward those outside its membership which gave rise to much goodwill in return.

The Lord Jesus Christ has set the pattern. We are called to be his imitators. He came from the presence of his Father to live alongside the men and women he so deeply longed to save. Today's churches must develop patterns of organisation that both gather their members together into the presence of their heavenly Father, and also release them to be the salt of the earth.

Worship will therefore be a high priority that we need in the churches. We need a worship that is scriptural in principle and truly indigenous in its expression. We need a worship that is for joyous participants rather than admiring spectators (1 Corinthians 14:26). Our God must be allowed to make his presence felt.

The ministry of the Word will be equally important, both in terms of balanced scriptural preaching and of imaginative teaching through groups and private reading. We acknowledge the valuable role that has been and can be played here by Christian publishers and para-church organisations in the field of adult, youth and children's Christian education. And the Word that is so ministered must be seen as a Word to be obeyed, not least in daily life. The Word of God pre-supposes an obedient people, and there can be no breaking up of life into a religious compartment and an everyday compartment. Our life-style must be a simple one, consonant with the demands of the gospel.

The churches we need will be churches where prayer is central. They will recognise that all plans and programmes must be discussed through waiting upon God. These will be communities who pray for their leaders, for their fellow church members, for the community in which they live, for the growth of the Kingdom of God throughout the world and for victory in the constant spiritual warfare in which we are involved.

The churches we need will not allow a passion for the lost to be relegated to an article of faith, but rather to become the motivating force that leads God's people out to evangelize expectantly. We need to recapture a sense of the Father's longing that all his children will come home.

The churches we need will have to be led by pastors who believe in the ministry of every member and are prepared to recognise and deploy the gifts God gives to all members (Ephesians 4:11,12). The training of such pastors will obviously be crucial. It will require a closer link between the local church and the training college or organisation. Theology needs to be taught in relation to the cultures and religions of the area in which people will serve.

The churches we need will be so organised that their members will receive the pastoral help and the training that is appropriate to their needs and gifts.

In all these things we recognise that we are dreaming dreams. There has never been a perfect church and there never will be; but we pray for the Holy Spirit to do a new thing in all of our hearts, so that our churches will become communities that reveal something of the loveliness of Christ to our fellowmen.

4. Everyday Evangelism and the Local Church

While there is a continuous need for prayerfully planned evangelistic programmes and projects, all true church-based evangelism starts in natural ways through the lives of individual members. We have called this "everyday evangelism" and we have divided it into three types:

- The witness of the individual Christian
- The witness of Christian family life
- The witness of the congregation.

We shall look at these separately.

A. The witness of the individual Christian

Individual church members are likely to have good contacts with nominals. If they are to be effective in sharing their faith and commending Christ, they will be greatly helped if they can draw upon the nurture of the sort of church that we have been envisioning. People are more likely to have the confidence to witness to nominals if they have been given the opportunities in small fellowship groups to witness to fellow believers.

While we recognise that the duty to witness is not the same thing as possessing the gift of an evangelist, we believe that practical training programmes can often make people more effective in explaining their faith and in leading others to Christ. Such programmes engender confidence, provide experience, and are to be commended.

Prayer—both congregational and personal—is fundamental to this natural "everyday" ministry. With Paul, we affirm that believing prayer opens doors of opportunity for the gospel (Colossians 4:3).

Inviting nominal Christian friends to church is always a live option in this sort of evangelism. Churches need to plan services of worship which are joyful and creative celebrations, and which are sensitive to the needs of those uncommitted persons who are present and who may well be seeking Christ (1 Corinthians 14:23). Such invitations need to be wisely timed and are no substitute for personal evangelism.

All evangelism, not least at the personal level, needs to have a dual sensitivity—first, to the promptings of the Holy Spirit; and second, to the feelings and aspirations of the unconverted. (A perfect example of this dual sensitivity can be seen in the account of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8.) Some earnest Christians make the mistake of trying to hurry non-believers into commitment only to find that they fail, or that if they appear to be successful, complications arise later. We also need to be sensitive to those times when someone is on the brink of decision and where some "spiritual midwifery" is needed. It is often at this crucial point of helping someone to respond to Christ that many Christians feel themselves least well equipped.

B. The witness of Christian family life

We recognise the powerful witness of Christian family life. Christians need to see the great value of this ministry of hospitality. A Christian home is the ideal context for small group meetings. It also opens up the possibility of a ministry that is family to family, as well as one that is person to person. Christian parents understandably should be concerned to see that their own children do not suffer from insufficient time alone with their parents; but having noted this danger, we would point to the many enriching experiences that come from an open home, which invites and introduces single people in an extended Christian family life.

C. The witness of the congregation

Finally, we would point to the "everyday evangelism" that stems from the life of a witnessing and worshipping community. The regular life of a congregation through its services, organisations and pastoral care creates continuous possibilities for evangelism among the nominal Christians with whom it is in contact.

5. Planned Evangelism

In addition to everyday evangelism through individual witness, Christian homes and the outgoing life of the local congregation, we envisage the continuous need of prayerfully prepared evangelistic programmes and campaigns. The success of such a strategy is profoundly affected by the quality of the relationships that Christians build up with their nominal friends and neighbours. Such friendship must be genuine and cannot be "turned on" when required by church planning. Again, we see the local church as the main platform for this kind of evangelism, but wide-based projects and the contributions of para-church organisations will also have a part to play. At this point, we need to reassert that the category of Protestant nominal Christian is a huge one, covering many sub-types and expressing itself in a bewildering array of different social situations. Few of the approaches we shall mention in this section can be applied universally.

Visiting. Many nominal Christians will attend church, or at least do so on occasion. In many countries, an immediate visit after the first attendance has been shown to be an effective means of drawing out greater involvement. Pastoral occasions such as bereavements, marriages, baptisms, sickness (and in some cultures, birthdays), are obviously vital times for visits from church members. Often such "moments" in life give rise to a questioning spirit, and there can be many opportunities for the gospel. (In many countries the special services commemorating such events as funerals and weddings can provide ideal opportunities for the sensitive proclamation of the gospel.)

Evangelistic visiting programmes have been found to be particularly effective among nominal Christians. Such programmes both create and call for a participative training in those who take part. In some cultures, effective evangelistic visiting may involve the need for appointments and prior explanations to be made. Discernment is needed in choosing the most appropriate people to visit. Such an approach can often lead to mutually profitable discussions and, in many cases, to genuine conversions.

We have earlier talked about the power of Christian family life. Hospitality is a vital ministry in the church with a tradition dating back to New Testament times. In our discussions, we heard of many different uses of homes such as:

- Women's coffee groups
- Simple Bible studies
- Dialogue evangelism suppers
- Use of large homes for evangelistic talks or testimonies.

Some of these uses presume the setting up of a regular meeting (e.g., regular neighbourhood group). Others, like a dialogue supper, can be held as occasional ventures. Groups can evolve in their nature, as the interests of those who attend may change. The consultation heard of a case where a group has started among women on little more than a basis of friendship and the sharing of needs. It developed into a simple Bible study with an evangelizing effect. The lesson is clear: we must be prepared to meet people "where they are" but seek, gently, to take them onwards into activities that might help them to discover a living faith in Christ.

It is natural to expect that nominals will bring up their children with a similar set of attitudes toward Jesus Christ as their own. When we add to this the secularising effects of much present-day schooling, then we can see the urgent need to reach parents *and* children. In many cases, however, nominals show concern that their children should have a religious element in their upbringing. There are obvious opportunities for child evangelism here, but the churches need to see that the "royal road" to reaching children is through their parents. (This is not to deny that God can cause parents to be reached through their children.) If a church is short of resources and has to make priority judgements, it should seek to reach adults and whole families as opposed to trying to reach children in isolation. Care should be taken in the use of the Bible among children, however, to try to avoid its being thought of in later life as merely a book for children. In some areas, this parental concern for the religious upbringing of their children means that they might accept invitations to parents' suppers or other gatherings where there can be a presentation of the gospel slanted toward family life. Here again, appropriate literature can play a valuable secondary role.

In some countries, churches have developed simplified family services aimed at all the family, to encourage parents to come with their children. These have often led to striking growth, although there is some evidence that many adults so reached do not fully integrate with the life of the church. Here, perhaps, we need to see the value of using a mixture of approaches—so that a family service, or all-age Sunday School, is backed up with sensitively conducted evangelistic visiting or home groups.

Churches which hold introduction groups, such as Christian basics classes, can often find that these have an effective evangelistic ministry. This is where the mobility of modern developed societies can assist evangelism. Newcomers to an area often seek a link with a church for social reasons. This interest can be built upon to present the gospel in a natural and friendly manner.

Holiday times and venues bring special opportunities. In some countries, it is noticeable that nominals will attend church while on holiday when they will not in their home districts. Camp and other types of holiday ministry among youth are well known to the churches, but they can also provide ideal contexts for reaching adults. In some countries, young people's teams are trained and sent to overseas holiday resorts to minister to young adults of their own nationality. Some churches run family camps and find that nominals want to come. Camping and caravanning clubs organised by churches can be an effective format for a natural sharing of the gospel.

Radio and T.V. have an important supportive and preparatory role. Audio and video cassette tapes can be used both with individuals or with groups. Dramatic presentations and films will often reach those who would express little interest in listening to a preacher. Music plays a large role in the lives of young people. And the format of the gospel concert can often reach the young adult and, at the very least, sow seeds which may ripen at a later date. We especially recommend the use of new translations of the Bible into a language more likely to be understood by nominals.

Campaigns both at a church level and on a bigger scale can often prove to be especially effective in reaching nominal Christians. The consultation is convinced about the continuing value of the preaching evangelist. Such a person often proves to be the one who brings to a conclusion a process that has included some of the activities that have been mentioned earlier in this section. The evangelist is a gift from God to the church. Pastors need evangelists, and evangelists need pastors. We commend cross-cultural evangelism as an approach which could be effective among nominals, especially where Third World evangelists visit Western countries.

Hospital work has been seen to be an effective area for evangelistic ministry among those who claim to have some sort of belief. Those countries which have church hospitals have special advantages here, but the fact is universal that many people are forced to reflect on spiritual issues when they are ill or in the hospital. A readiness to talk about Christ on the part of someone who is ready to help and comfort in any other way often results in valuable discussions about the gospel.

Traditional approaches to people by such well-established means as church-related schools, kindergartens, old peoples' homes, and so on, are not to be despised and often lead to valuable contacts.

While this report has concentrated mainly on the responsibility of the local church (because the nominal Christian usually has some church connection, however tenuous) we gladly recognise the help that has been given in this whole area of evangelism by para-church organisations. They have had a particularly effective ministry in the following ways:

- 1) Some organisations have reached people in particular groups such as universities, high schools, business and professional groups, youth outreach programmes, camps and similar outlets.
- 2) Other organisations have dealt with particular forms of ministry across denominational barriers, such as Bible reading and teaching materials, training in personal evangelism and meeting the specialised needs of sub-cultures in our societies—especially in areas where the church lacks the will or the ability to undertake such programmes itself.

6. Integrating Converts

The task of integrating Christians newly converted from nominality into the worshipping community should be no problem to the church that patterns itself on the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47). The requirements of such a church have already been noted: vital patterns of worship, regular Bible teaching, fellowship and caring groups, every-member ministry utilising all the gifts of the Spirit, a sense of God-consciousness, expectancy that God will work, and a constant measure of joy.

Unfortunately, the situation that some individual Christians find is that when they have led a friend to Christ, they are perplexed about introducing the new convert to the local church. In our consultation, this problem came up from Christians in many countries.

Nor is the option of "changing churches" always open. In some countries, another church might be many miles distant. The problem is especially painful. On the one hand, there are those who advise that all Christians should support their local church. They hold that if the ministry is defective there is more chance of improvement if there are concerned Christians regularly present, praying for God's blessing, and seeking to exercise what influence they can. On the other hand, there are others who remind us that a new convert is a babe in Christ and can suffer if not nurtured carefully.

The most satisfactory solution to this dilemma will probably be for strong, mature Christians to take responsibility for the nurturing of new converts, and to do this through regular mid-week sessions while still encouraging loyal support for the Sunday worship of the local church. Such sessions could be on a one-to-one basis, or in the setting of a small group meeting.

Once again, there are para-church organisations with course materials that may well help in the task of nurturing. Many countries are richly served also with suitable Christian literature. Joint attendance at appropriate weekend or holiday conferences has often proved invaluable in such cases.

7. Our Resolve

We gladly acknowledge Christ's Great Commission to preach the gospel to all peoples, and we are grateful to have such immediate access to the huge "people group" of nominal Protestants. We believe that the local church, as the body of Christ to which God has given varying gifts, can be the main means by which the reconciling and transforming love of God is offered to these people. To that task we set our hands and invite all those in similar situations to join us in unity and expectation.

Postscript

We are conscious that there are many issues involved in the problem of nominality with which we have not had time to grapple. We list here some of them in the hope that others as well as ourselves may take them up:

1. More study is needed to explore what causes nominality, not only among Protestants—and to understand more clearly current philosophical and sociological trends which influence nominals.
2. The issue of nominality seems so important to us that we would like consideration given to its inclusion in theological college curricula, and much greater prominence in the general evangelization debate.
3. We identify a number of specific problems associated with nominality which require urgent study:
 - a. Tensions resulting from alleged sheep-stealing by vital churches from nominal ones.
 - b. The reactions to evangelization of nominals from church leaders who may themselves be nominals.
 - c. What kind of ministry to isolated Christian groups in nominal churches is required?
 - d. The accumulative effects of a largely secularized education on young people in terms of their nominality.
 - e. The role of a pastor in reaching nominals through the normal Sunday worship services
 - f. What is the effect upon a nominal Christian when he attends a vital church?
4. In view of the importance of communications, we would value the insights of our leading communicators being brought to bear upon our paper.

Notes:

1. "Nominal" is used in this document to mean "in name or form only, as distinct from real or actual."
2. For the sake of brevity, we shall use the word nominals throughout this report. It is being used to describe people who are deeply loved by God, and no disdain is intended.