“ASK ANYTHING”: DEVELOPING A RELATIONAL PLATFORM TO MOBILISE CHRISTIANS TO SHARE THEIR FAITH THROUGH EXPLORING QUESTIONS

Dale Stephenson and Darren Cronshaw

Abstract: There is a pressing need for locally produced resources to help Christians overcome a crisis of confidence or blind spot about evangelism. “Ask Anything” was designed by Dale Stephenson and trialled at Crossway Baptist Church as a relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith through exploring questions. This 5-session DVD-based course follows a question-based format with content that is intentionally pre-Alpha. It is relational and designed to be accessible and transferable in format so that it can be put in the hands of the people of God and go viral in spreading the gospel. The short DVDs and lots of time for further questions ensure sessions are interactive and dialogical. The content is simple but not simplistic, and assumes people are on a journey of exploring faith. “Ask Anything” is a resource that helps Christians authentically accompany their pre-Christian friends on that journey and encourage them towards faith. The course was successfully trialled at Crossway with 1500 people in small groups. It has also spread as a resource to a website and radio spots, but its facilitating of question-driven faith-sharing in small groups remains its most strategic use.

Introduction

A Christian facilitator at Crossway Baptist Church, Ken, said that running one of the new “Ask Anything” groups had redefined evangelism for him. Said Ken: “I am having conversations that I never thought that I would be able to have with my friends.” Ken discovered that faith conversations could become a natural way of life for him. He observed that it was as a result of the group that he was now able to have more open conversations

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1 Dale Stephenson is Senior Pastor of Crossway Baptist Church (<www.crossway.org.au>) and designer of the “Ask Anything” resources (<askanything.com.au>). He has a Master of Arts (Leadership) from Australian College of Ministries, which included a research project developing “Ask Anything” on which this article is based.

Darren Cronshaw is Pastor of AuburnLife (<www.auburn.org.au>) and Mission Catalyst – Researcher with Baptist Union of Victoria (<www.buv.com.au>). He teaches evangelism and mission as Associate Professor with Australian College of Ministries (SCD) and as adjunct faculty and Honorary Research Associate with Whitley College (University of Divinity).
with his friends about his faith in Jesus Christ. It is as if Ken has been liberated through an initial facilitated situation that was accessible to him. From a simple beginning Ken is now having more frequent faith conversations with his network of friends. This is what “Ask Anything” was designed for: to be a relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith through exploring questions.

It is well documented that Christianity in Australia has been in decline for a number of years. The *Transforming Melbourne* research report indicates that in Melbourne alone the Christian worshipping community declines by 4500 people per year. This is equivalent to closing an average sized Church in Melbourne every week. Christian Research Association projections for the city of Melbourne worship attendance across the denominations through 2026 demonstrate that with current trends the majority of denominations will witness significant decline.² The ways that the Australian Church generally is conducting itself is not connecting well with average Australians. This is a fair critique across much of the Western world. Reggie McNeil notes that, “The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists.”³ The church needs to recapture its mission identity, not just to arrest the decline but to reflect the heart of God.

**Where Goes Evangelism?**

The church is called to cooperate with God in helping people to be restored to all that God has for them. This will include acts of compassionate service, advocacy for justice and caring for creation; but it will also include verbally sharing about what really is good news. Some churches in the past were so preoccupied with wanting to announce the gospel with their words that they seemed to do little or nothing to demonstrate the gospel with deeds. Other churches focused on wanting to demonstrate the gospel and were hesitant to
create opportunities to talk about it. We see this second trend in Australian churches from National Church Life Survey statistics. Australian churches on average, including our own tribe of Baptist churches, are tending to get quantitatively and qualitatively better at demonstrating the gospel with compassionate acts and community involvement. This is a good sign. At the same time the preparedness of believers to share their faith is declining. The gospel needs expressing in both deeds and words. Michael Frost stresses how they are intertwined: “We feed the hungry because in the world to come there will be no such thing as starvation. We share Christ because in the world to come there will be no such thing as unbelief.”

The Lausanne Covenant definition of Evangelism is a well-regarded definition of evangelism, at least in the evangelical world:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.

This broad description – encompassing presence, dialogue and listening; with proclamation and persuasion at the centre; and leading to discipleship, church and service – captures our imagination. Key phrases like “spread the good news”, “Christian presence in the world” and “evangelism itself is the proclamation of the [Gospel]” bring Christian participation in the relational
and verbal sharing of the good news of Jesus to the forefront. Evangelism is not social justice or interfaith dialogue, important as these issues are to the Christian and the Kingdom of God, and as much as they are partners with evangelism in expressing the mission of God.

**Crisis of Confidence?**

We wonder does the average Christian have a crisis of confidence in being able to share the good news about Jesus with a view to bringing their friends into a relationship with God? It would seem so. According to the 2011 National Church Life Survey, 17% of Australian church attenders say they are at ease and look for opportunities to talk about their faith. Another 52% say they are mostly at ease and can discuss faith if it comes up. However, 12% say that their life and actions are sufficient for faith sharing. 18% admit it is hard to talk about their faith and express it in ordinary language. In our state denomination, the Baptist Union of Victoria, 24% say it is hard to express it in ordinary language. Moreover, NCLS research shows that younger generations of believers are more likely to experience this barrier of finding ordinary language to discuss faith.⁷

Part of the challenge is that Christianity has been part of the fabric of the West for so long that some Christians do not feel they really need to evangelise. The impacts of secularism, rationalism and material prosperity appear to have muted the voice of many Christians.

One could argue that the issue is not a crisis of confidence but rather a blind spot. Have Christians simply moved their focus away from the historic practise of proclaiming the Gospel? Have the theological institutions kept it on their radar? Back in 1989 William Abraham argued:

One of the undeniable features of modern theology is the scant attention it has given to the topic of evangelism. It is virtually impossible to find a critical, in-depth study of the subject by a
major theologian. ... I consider it nothing short of a disaster that evangelism has been relegated to the fringes of modern critical theology.  

Are we now reaping the fruit of a long-term focus on other aspects of theology rather than the foundation of sharing the good news of Jesus so that the faith moves from generation to generation in a culturally relevant way? It is easy to identify influences outside the church that are speeding its decline, but we also need to consider contributing factors within the church and what the church is failing to do. Fulton Charles and Jim Lemler make this suggestion:

It is the nature of systematic decline to deny the decline itself...Blame is directed outward as long as possible, blaming culture, the national church and enemy group...When the denial can no longer be focussed outward, blame focuses within the denomination.  

The shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity internationally from the West into the developing world is not a matter of geography or economics. It relates to the way that the gospel is being handled in the developing nations. It is also reflected in the vitality and growing influence of non-Western Christianity. One can see this in the joy of African Christian worship, the fervency of Korean church prayer life, and the dynamism of evangelism in Latin American Pentecostalism and Indian rural house churches. Parallel to this is the perceived decline of Western Christianity, in the face of powerful secularist and liberal pressures within an increasingly post-Christian milieu.

**Stimulus for a Fresh Approach**

It is in this context that I, Dale, sought to develop a new tool and process to place into the hands of average Australian Christians to embolden them towards an engaged evangelistic experimentation. Crossway Baptist
bravely supported and trialled the initiative. The words of J. Oswald Sanders were encouraging to step out and develop the resource: “A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.” Ralph Winter was also an encouragement with his words: “Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal.” The risks – finances and time outlaid, and the possibility of failure – were shadowed by the goal to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ being shared more freely in relational and adaptive environments by average Australian Christians.

For an effective and relational platform to mobilise Australian Christians to share their faith, a tool was needed that was both relational and assisted with proclamation. Such a tool needed to instil confidence in the Christian or they were unlikely to use it in the first place. Harvey Cox notes, “The main stimulus for the renewal of Christianity will come from the bottom and from the edge, from sectors of the Christian world that are on the margins.” The aim was to develop a relational tool that empowers the average Christian, from the grassroots of our churches, to share their faith. The tool, at its best, would help Christians to explore faith questions, have faith conversations and share the gospel with the aim of leading people to faith in Christ.

The genesis of the initiative came a few years ago when I, Dale, felt God put on my heart the idea to invite some businessmen friends to get together for “God conversations.” My plan was to invite them to a space of conversation, where they could literally ask anything they wanted. The men were not involved in church. But as we met we had amazing conversations about faith, life and everything. In that first group, six people put their faith in
Christ as a result of God touching them through our conversation based around their questions.

**Ask Anything**

Inspired by their response, and with the backing of Crossway, we developed an “Ask Anything” DVD resource and invited people at Crossway to give it a try. Many Crossway members invited neighbors, friends and family to get together over faith conversations and explore their questions. In that first trial, thirty-three Ask Anything groups met and more people came to faith.\(^{15}\) The remainder of this article discusses the basis and methodology of “Ask Anything”, and points to other directions it is going.

1. **“Ask Anything” uses Pre-Alpha Question-based Content**

We are advocates and users of Alpha as a terrific initiative for inviting people to explore faith in a relational context, but often people need something pre-Alpha.

The opening session of Alpha is entitled “Who is Jesus?” and is followed by a session entitled “Why did he die on the cross?” This is an excellent entry point for those who are ready to explore Jesus Christ. Within Australia there are many who are grappling with a set of issues that come prior to this conversation. They are wrestling with whether God exists and if he exists why he allows so much suffering and evil. They are not at all convinced that the Bible is a reliable document and they may well never have considered the claims of Jesus. Jon Seeley, former National Director of Alpha Australia, noted that Alpha offices were called on a weekly basis with enquiries as to whether there is a pre-Alpha course addressing more basic issues.\(^{16}\) “Ask Anything” is deliberately placed into that pre-Alpha space.
The purpose of the Ask Anything DVD Series is to create a resource that can be used by Australian Christians as a discussion starter for faith based conversations, beginning with the primary question “Is there a God?” This comes out of a conviction that Alpha begins further down the track than many Australians are in their journey towards faith in Christ. That said, Alpha is the premier evangelistic tool internationally and it is somewhat presumptuous to seek to improve such a tool but nonetheless, there is a gap that can be filled.

There are other courses that have been developed and released since Alpha that use similar principles and methods to Alpha. Some of these (Start!, Y Course, and Essence) start earlier – with less assumptions about what people already know or are interested in exploring. In the Western world, we need more paths and processes, courses and media that invite people – at different stages – to consider and explore Christianity. Mark Ireland, a writer who investigated Alpha and other similar programs, commented that a number of writers are putting creative effort into developing new courses, and they tend to have good results and are often more fruitful than the more widely published “pre-packaged” courses. It pays to produce locally appropriate material. “Ask Anything” is not limited to Australia, but it is a local Australian resource.

Given that the Alpha series begins squarely with Jesus and an explanation of the Gospel, the “Ask Anything” series begins with some more foundational questions. These form the titles of each session:

1. Is there a God?
2. Why does God allow suffering?
3. God and Evil?
4. Is the Bible reliable?
5. Is Jesus worth considering
Through personal experience of running Alpha 12 times I was aware that these are questions that people often have. I have also encountered these questions in conversations I have had with pre-Christian Australians. Further, I checked my observations with Alpha Australia. With confirmation of the centrality of these questions coming from all quarters, I prepared the “Ask Anything” series themes accordingly.

“Ask Anything” is committed to a thoroughly question-driven format. Alpha material is presented in ten sessions, often with video-based teaching, but followed by time and space for conversation, questions and debate. Nicky Gumbel, designer of Alpha, teaches that in this small group discussion space participants are encouraged to “ask anything.”

Critics of Alpha suggest the space for questions is not broad enough. For example, Martyn Percy questions whether Alpha gives sufficient space for exploring the “paradoxes” and breadth of the gospel, and claims there is minimal space to think about and vent on concerns. Charles Freebury suggests many churches struggle to get people to come to Alpha and similar courses, and then a number of people drop out, because they do not address questions that people are asking. The breadth of the questions depends as much on the participants, and the freedom group leaders allow, as on the content. The small group space of Alpha is designed to address and explore whatever issues and questions people bring. However, it is staged after teaching, often from pre-recorded video presentations, and Ireland concedes there is sometimes the need for more open-ended space for questions at a pre-Alpha stage – to start with the agenda of the enquirer rather than the evangelist.

As a resource for Alpha, or a possible follow-up course, Nicky Gumbel has written on the seven most popular or heated questions that come up for Alpha participants. In descending order of frequency the questions are:
1. Why does God allow suffering?
2. Do all religions lead to God?
3. Is there anything wrong with sex outside of marriage?
4. What about the New Age?
5. Homosexuality
6. Science and Christianity
7. The Trinity

These have overlap with the “Ask Anything” set questions, although those five questions are more basic. Gumbel’s questions do address other religions (both in general and specifically New Age) and issues of sexuality (both sex before marriage and homosexuality), which are points of interest for many Australians. I, Dale, in retrospect believe now that I should have also done a message on “Jesus and Sexuality”. This is such a major theme in our society and was one of the points of feedback. Nevertheless, the foundational aspect of “Ask Anything” is that it is a question-based format, and starts at a pre-Alpha level with minimal assumptions about people’s awareness about Jesus.

2. “Ask Anything” is Relational

The advance of the gospel in the West will primarily be through average Christians and through open and transparent relationships. Only in this way will we begin to bring together what our culture has divided, the private and public. The lay members of the church clearly belong to the public and secular world, whereas the pastors belong to the separate, “religious” world. Trust is already low with professionals who carry a message. The credibility of personal experience and personal thought carried through relational channels, as is done in “Ask Anything”, is far more powerful.
Therefore methodology of any effective tool that is to be used by
Australian Christians must provide a relationally integrated model. Steve
Addison puts it this way, “The most reliable predictor of conversion is
relationships, especially pre-existing, positive relationships.”26 Lewis Rambo
similarly suggests:

Changing to a new religious orientation takes place through
what sociologists call kinship and friendship networks of one
sort or another. … People who convert or change religions
usually do so through personal contact, and not through
impersonal methods.27

The resource “Ask Anything” was envisioned to be facilitated in a
relationally driven model, namely, Christians clustering with their pre-
Christian friends, preferably over food.

People inspire people. As T S Elliot put it, “The greatest proof of
Christianity for others is not how far a man can logically analyse his reasons
for believing, but how far in practice he will stake his life on his belief.”28 Part
of the genius of Alpha is that the course is highly relational. Course
participants enjoy a meal together on a weekly basis and have a weekend
retreat in the middle of the course. The impact of this dynamic ought not to be
underestimated.

Ireland suggest that people are not convinced about Christianity
because someone with authority explains it, but when they can see it
demonstrated in the life of believers and a Christian community.29 In
postmodern times, the integrity of the messenger is as or more important than
the integrity of the message, at least from the perspective of most pre-
Christians. The challenge to this is that the Good news of Jesus does actually
have content not just relational demonstration. A person may well become
convinced of the potential of a changed life by seeing a different life in
community but they will only be convinced of the Gospel when they have
heard the reason for the changed life! It was Socrates who said, “The
unexamined life is not worth living." By clustering for "Ask Anything", pre-Christian people may well "see" the way that Christians treat each other and they will also engage with them in Gospel related issues.

We are convinced that the axiom "The heart is only as open as the person is socially placed" is true. If a person is able to cluster with people that they trust and can relate to, the heart invariably opens. If they are amongst a group of people with whom they do not trust or cannot particularly relate then the heart remains firmly closed to the message that is being communicated. While this principle is not erudite it is generally true. Hence the significance of the Alpha weekend too. The deepening of the relational network via a shared experience is part of the genius of Alpha and it is no surprise that the weekend away is a highlight for many and an important element for those who come to faith.

Mark Ireland explains that Alpha and other similar courses are fruitful because they understand that conversion is not an event but a process and usually takes time, and that belonging will usually precede believing.

People are hungry for community and relationship. People who are involved in spontaneous movements around the world learn the values of the Kingdom by firsthand participation. Church becomes a way of life: Discipleship and growth occur naturally, as everyone develops their gifts and learns by doing under the mentoring of spiritual fathers and mothers. Understanding this exposes the inadequacy of some older models. Herb Miller puts forward a model that seemingly ignores relationship, suggesting that evangelism is about:

1. Being the Word – the influence of the Christian’s spiritual quality and example.
2. Doing the Word – the influence of the Christian’s loving acts toward other people.
3. Saying the Word – the influence of the Christian’s verbal communication with those outside the Church.\textsuperscript{36}

Miller suggests that Christians’ spiritual quality, loving acts and verbal communication influence people, but there is no reference to relationships. We could be spiritual people, mow our neighbour’s front lawn every week, and spin the odd verbal foray in their direction about their need for Jesus, but not actually engage in a relational way. There is a profound difference between “being, doing and saying” words, and the most powerful Gospel door-opener – having a relationship! It is relationships that are by far more powerful for the advance of the Gospel because relationships open the
heart. Jesus walks into a person’s life over the bridge of relationship and the opportunity to talk about Jesus.

“Ask Anything” needs to be relational to provide a safe context for Christians to feel confident to invite their pre-Christian friends.

3. “Ask Anything” is Viral in the Hands of the People

“Ask Anything” is designed to be put into the hands of God’s people and go viral. Steve Addison has given a helpful summary of the traits that mark viral movements around the world both today and historically. The five traits are White Hot Faith, Rapid Mobilisation, Commitment to the Cause, Relational Connectedness and Ability to Adapt. These traits are true of all effective movements. Any evangelistic methodology that is not cognizant of these principles will at best empower individuals but struggle to move from person to person in a viral sense. If the “Ask Anything” resource is going to have the potential of going viral it must tap into the above criteria.

Malcolm Gladwell illustrates that viral ideas are not an exclusively religious. The phenomena of something going viral can apply to something as simple as footwear. He illustrates it with the suede shoes called Hushpuppies. By 1994-95 the sales of Hushpuppies had declined to the point where there were only 30,000 sales annually. But then some youths began to buy them second-hand and they were integrated into some fashion shows. Following this, a celebrity was wearing them. By late 1995 sales skyrocketed to 450,000 pairs and then 1.8 million pairs in 1996. It all began because some kids were wearing them because no one else would, and the idea spread from one person to the next. Hushpuppies went viral.

Frederick Buechner writes about the potential of spreading influence through one person touching another and passing it on: “The life I touch for
good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows
where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt?\textsuperscript{38}

We want to put the gospel and tools for sharing it into the hands of
the people. There is nothing new in a vision for empowering the whole
people of God for mission. Roland Allen stated back in the 1920s that if
China was to be reached:

The first Christians who were converted by our labours
understood clearly that they could by themselves, without any
further assistance from us, not only convert their neighbours,
but establish churches. That meant that the very first groups of
converts must be so fully equipped with all spiritual authority
that they could multiply themselves without any necessary
reference to us.\textsuperscript{39}

For the good news of Jesus to go viral it needs to reach a tipping point in
the minds of Christians so that they can believe that they too can be
involved in the spread of the Gospel.

These sorts of conversations are best hosted by everyday Christians
rather than professional pastors. Julia Victoria posted a comment about the
“Ask Anything” website pages:

The first sentence of the page ‘Why Ask Anything?’ is this:
‘Have you ever found yourself sitting next to a priest or a
pastor at a social event and wanted to ask them about faith, life,
the universe or anything?’ Well, now that you ask...no. But, I
have sat with friends (some of whom are pastors) and wanted
to hear their perspective on God, life, the universe and
everything...The time of people seeing priests as people who
they can trust and who they wish to discuss their big life
questions with is slowly dying in the West. People want to take
their questions to their friends, family or just anyone they trust.
And that usually ain’t the pastor.

If we were relying on pastors to host these groups, that would place a
significant limitation on their potential to spread. In the hands of everyday
Christians, they have the capacity to spread virally.
Inasmuch as the good news of Jesus travels virally and through relational networks, by putting an easily accessible tool into the hands of Christians, hubs can be formed in the homes via relational networks.

There are several “ifs” associated with this type of viral transfer.

- If there is confidence that the good news about Jesus is worth sharing
- If there is a commitment to the cause of Jesus
- If there is a relational network in which to share the good news
- If there is rapid mobilisation of those who have enjoyed an “Ask Anything” group
- If the product can be used in an adaptable way.

These are the core issues that will determine whether “Ask Anything” has the capacity to go viral in Australia.

Accessibility and cultural connection are essential. If a tool is going to be put into the hands of Australian Christians for their use in spreading the gospel then it must evoke confidence in the Christian. If there is no confidence then there will be no spread. If it touches the heart and captivates the mind and is easily transferrable then the concept may well spread.

“There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world: and that is an idea whose time has come,” said Victor Hugo.\(^{40}\) For an idea to take off it has to go viral. This is exactly what happened with the news about Jesus in the first century. It was an idea that had the capacity to be taken up by anyone, anywhere, anytime. For the good news of Jesus to go viral in Australia there will need to be a break from the traditional facility-based church evangelism model. The gospel needs to be placed into the hands of the people of God, and resources that are simple, transferable and accessible will help its spread.

4. “Ask Anything” is a Simple and Transferrable Format

Martin Robinson states that where the gospel goes viral communities form that “are small, fluid, organic, reproducible and most of all
simple; so simple that any believer would respond by saying ‘I could do that.’” Christians who hear about the concept of the “Ask Anything” series need to feel that they could do it. It is within their reach and capacity.

In contrast to the present day Western world, where Christianity is often highly intellectualized and dispensed by professional clergy to a constituency increasingly confined to the middle class, in the early days of the church the faith was spontaneously spread by informal evangelists, and had its greatest appeal among the working class. Through “Ask Anything” Christians are encouraged to cluster with interested friends to have “God Conversations.” The invitation is to be up front, “Would you be interested in getting together with a few of us for some food and God conversations?” Those that choose to gather are with their own relational network. The gathering happens along with food. The tool to get the ball rolling in the conversation is a brief session from the “Ask Anything” DVD. This format is not accidental nor is it an attempt to be minimalist. It is far more pragmatic and strategic than that.

Based on the earlier stated axiom, “The heart is only as open as the individual feels socially placed,” the format for an “Ask Anything” group is designed to reduce barriers to open conversation. Alpha has very successfully employed such a model. Any venue or environment that will therefore allow for free-flow of relationship and conversation is a suitable venue for an “Ask Anything” group.

5. “Ask Anything” is Accessible

Jesus issues a revolutionary call to fight for the hearts and imagination of people. Our weapons of faith, hope and love also embrace reason and relationship. For those of us who embrace the cause of Christ, the cost to participate in the mission of God is nothing short of all that we are and
everything we have.\textsuperscript{43} However, it is important to make space for communicating the invitation of the gospel in accessible ways. The gospel is costly, but hearing about it should not be.

"Ask Anything" is designed to be accessible for Christians and their pre-Christian friends to cluster together for food and a God conversation. The formation of these hubs was not too difficult. The trial program showed there was a "believability" in the minds of Christians that they can do it. The simplicity of the model was intrinsic to this outcome. Part of the encouragement to Christians to use this resource is its accessibility. It is promoted by saying:

If you are willing to cluster your friends with an upfront invitation to a gathering around food for 'God conversations' and are willing to play the DVD, then your task is to simply ask, 'Well what do you think?' Then put some food in your mouth and smile.

People believed that they could do that and they embarked on some of the most powerful God conversations that they have ever had with their friends.

The length of each presentation is also deliberately short, about ten minutes. This enhances the adaptability of the tool. A lunchtime group at a school or workplace can also manage a short DVD and conversation in a 30-45 minute break. This allows for conversation to be maximised since the group does not need to sit through a 30-45 minute presentation, as is the case with the standard Alpha talks. It also allows for flexibility of timing because people do not need a significant amount of time to be available to facilitate such a conversation. Some feedback has asked for the sessions to be longer, for example: "I reckon you can easily expand the talks to 20 minutes and still keep the audience engaged."\textsuperscript{44} But others were very encouraged by the shortness of the DVD and indicated that there was enough in the short presentation to precipitate lively conversation.
6. “Ask Anything” is Interactive

“Ask Anything” starts with a question, which a short DVD explores, and then makes space for interactive discussion. We are convinced that questions and dialogue are among the most powerful tools for evangelism.

Jesus was a master at using questions. When asked about how one could find eternal life, he responded with, “Why do you call me good?” (Mark 10:17-18). When asked about the payment of taxes, he responded with “Whose portrait is this?” (Matt 22:17-20). When asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, he responded with “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt 12:9-12). Answering a question with a question was normal for Jesus. In fact a clear, concise, direct answer was a rarity. Jesus used questions extensively to draw people in and cause open engagement.

The Apostle Paul demonstrated a verbal dexterity that was clearly interactive. In Acts 17 we read of his activities in Thessalonica:

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said (Acts 17:2-3).

Here we see the Apostle reasoning, explaining and proving. While the nature of a first century Jewish dialogue would look different to a twenty-first century Western dialogue, the point remains that he was interacting with the people over gospel issues.

The intent with “Ask Anything” is to provoke conversation with a combination of rational thought, biblical revelation and emotive nuance. It is hoped that conversation will be provoked by each presentation. The feedback from the sample group of 1500 participants was overwhelmingly supportive of the capacity of this concept to provoke conversation. One participant gave the following feedback:
There was certainly no worries re discussion ‘firing’ up as we had to stop your 10 minute, excellently produced, DVD a few times due to questions and ‘interesting’ points being quite ‘noisily’ raised! ... It was amazing how this opened up people.46

“Ask Anything” not only promotes the asking of questions but creates an environment of interactive open dialogue around faith issues.

7. “Ask Anything” offers a Simple but not Simplistic Message

The design of “Ask Anything” is careful to communicate the gospel in simple but not simplistic terms. Moltmann comments, “What cannot be said simply does not need to be written at all. Simplicity is the highest challenge to Christian theology.”47 The good news of Jesus is not complicated but neither is it simplistic. It does, however, need to be communicated in such a way that the hearer understands. Paul declared: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Romans 10:17). Faith does not come from an unintelligible message but one that the mind grasps and the heart can embrace. “Ask Anything” seeks to provide enough to provoke the mind and stir the heart but it is not designed to be conclusive. Nor is it designed to be used without relational group interaction.

In session one of “Ask Anything,” the content is a mixture of a philosophical and apologetic interaction with science. This will appeal to a certain mindset. Sessions two and three are an entirely different approach and are likely to be more accessible to a broader group of people. It is likely that sessions four and five introduce new information to the pre-Christian person. Feedback certainly affirmed this. The topic of “Why does God allow suffering?” caused release of emotion in many groups and caused a binding effect in the group dynamic early in the formation of group dynamics. This was perceived as a very positive thing by leaders that provided verbal feedback.
Authenticity is a crucial factor for postmodern communication of the gospel. Robert Warren points out that there is a shift from “authority to authenticity” as one of the enriching trends in evangelism. Ask Anything is designed to foster space for authentic exploration of faith questions.

The DVDs are not designed to be definitive on such topics as “Does God Exist?” or “Why does God allow suffering?” These topics have challenged humanity since time began. What they are designed to do is to authentically open the conversation. They are not without substance nor are they without opinion. But neither are they designed to offer simplistic ultimate answer to complex questions.

Truthfully, “Ask Anything” addresses huge questions that can be explored form multiple angles. Often the best way to respond to these big questions, when pre-Christian seekers ask them, is with another question. As mentioned above, this was Jesus’ interactive style. Socrates used it too. And it is popular with Quakers and spiritual directors. Youth Dimension (YD) trains volunteers and staff who are running outreach programs in schools and school holiday programs to always respond to someone who asks a question, “That’s an interesting question, what makes you ask that?” Julia Rhyder explains that what YD understand is that faith questions call for a pastoral response, and do not always look for a facts to download from “the expert.” In response to questions about issues such as suffering sometimes people long for a shoulder to cry on, not just a head to give them an intellectual response.

To avoid being simplistic, and to maintain authenticity, sometimes it is appropriate for Christians to admit that they too struggle with questions and do not always know the answers. Darrell Guder quotes the Stuttgart Statement to underline the importance of listening to where people are coming from, and sharing authentically from one’s own experience:

It has to be emphasized that we can only communicate the gospel to people if we open ourselves to them and enable them.
to open themselves to us. This means that listening to them is crucial in the sharing of the gospel with them; we cannot share the gospel without sharing ourselves. ... Does not the credibility of our evangelism, to some extent at least, depend on the authenticity of our own lives? Can we evangelize others without becoming vulnerable ourselves?²⁰

On a similar theme, campus evangelist Rick Richardson comments, “In the past, being an expert and having the answers were what built credibility and a hearing. Today, having the same questions, struggles and hurts is what builds credibility and gains a hearing.” Sincere seekers are often curious to explore answers to their questions. Nevertheless, it is also crucial for Christians to declare and empathise with pre-Christian seekers that we are all on a journey of seeking and understanding faith together, albeit perhaps at different stages.

8. “Ask Anything” is Part of a Journey

The journey metaphor is much used these days to describe the process or pathway for a person to develop his or her personal convictions. It has also been effectively picked up by Christians to describe their own stories. There are many good things about the journey metaphor. It encourages allowing a person time and space to process his or her thinking and feelings about the gospel, Jesus and himself or herself. It validates the reality of people’s experience. It is less confrontational and possibly a little more socially sensitive than a “decide now” event.

The weakness, however, of a journey metaphor is that it may never precipitate a decision at all. Especially in postmodern times, we need to allow grace and space for people to explore questions, to see the reality and influence of faith in the lives of Christians and church community, and to process their thinking and response to Jesus. This takes time. But the gospel also invites and calls people to a place of faith commitment or decision to follow Christ. In acknowledging the importance of “journey,” we do want to acknowledge that
some of the journey that has "been secured;" hence the significance of a
decision for Christ or witnessing to that fact by being baptised. It is at these
clear points of decision that a person is able to note that they have secured a
portion of their journey and they are able to move forward from that point. The
"Ask Anything" series is designed to help people along their journey towards
faith in Jesus Christ, but it is aiming for the destination of coming to and
growing in faith.

This article outlines the methodology of "Ask Anything" but does not
detail the leadership training that accompanied it at Crossway. Training in
small group dynamics and evangelism were important for the success of the
groups, but the church largely used Alpha training for the purposes of
equipping Ask Anything group leaders.52 Group leader training is part of the
DVD resource.

Christians were encouraged to invite their pre-Christian friends
together for food and "God conversations." Over 300 people were trained in
Alpha-like group dynamics and 65 new groups were planted where Christians
invited their pre-Christian friends. A further 100 Christian groups used the
materials as an effective tool for up-skilling their thinking patterns on the
themes addressed. Over 1500 people participated through this initiative.

When Crossway trialled "Ask Anything" groups with the DVD
resource, a number of people reported that there were first time commitments
to Christ in their groups. For example, one group facilitator wrote: "It is with
great excitement that I share with you the news that two ladies we know had
made a personal commitment to follow Christ. For one of these ladies it was
during the Ask Anything series. Each week the topics were so relevant to her
and then one evening at church she accepted Christ."53 For some it assisted
with their journey towards Christ, for example: "One of the husbands who is
actually a pre-Christian… expressed that the series really made him think

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about his journey and that it cleared up some of the issues he was thinking about.”

The purpose of the series was to empower Christians to have faith conversations with their pre-Christian friends, but there were some that simply used it to improve their knowledge base. This was not the purpose but it is important for believers who are not ready to gather with their pre-Christian friends to have an opportunity to be exposed to the materials; for their own discipleship’s sake and in the hope that they might gather more purposefully in the future with their friends who do not yet know Jesus.

Moreover, Alpha participation at Crossway jumped after the “Ask Anything” series. Key facilitator, Fiona Hall, commented that she believed something shifted in the attitude of the Christians towards inviting their pre-Christian friends as a result of the series.

Another thing worthy of note is that in the subsequent 3 years after running “Ask Anything” Crossway Baptist Church witnessed nearly 1000 people make a first time commitment to Christ. We also saw 477 people baptised over 3 years (compared to 62 baptisms in the full year before). These were not all converts from the “Ask Anything” series but some were. Others who had become Christians along the way somehow felt that it was time for them to witness to their faith in Christ at this time. It could be purely coincidental that Crossway experienced its largest baptism response in history within six months of the series concluding with ninety-three people being baptised on Easter Sunday, but it could also be connected to the Church demonstrating missional intent and faith too.

The majority of participants were impressed with the content of the videos, for example: “The five 10-minute [DVDs] are excellent in content – I believe your talks are very insightful, concise, yet powerful enough to cause all
viewers to think carefully about why they believe what they believe (or why they have not yet considered Jesus seriously).”

Additional resources were placed online on the Crossway website under “watch sermons” where there is a button for “Ask Anything.” Both sermons and discussion panels on the five themes are freely available there. Pastors who have chosen to preach the series were also offered free access to the original sermon notes developed at Crossway.

**Further Development of “Ask Anything”**

“Ask Anything” quickly spread and has been trialled in other churches. School chaplains have also trialled it as a potential tool. As well as other churches using the resource, the idea has spread to a website and radio. For radio, there is a series of one-minute radio spots with me, Dale, speaking in response to common questions. Focus on the Family Australia has run a series of interviews with Dale too. The website <www.askanything.com.au> has space for people to send their questions and vote for what questions they feel are most important. The site then posts answers to the questions most commonly asked. The DVDs can be ordered online there too.

Radio spots and the website are helpful resources to invite a broader “audience” to engage with their questions. But the main hope is that these extra platforms will promote more “Ask Anything” groups. The ultimate use of the resources is not reliant on the wisdom and erudition of the DVD speaker, but on the conversations in workplace and home “Hubs” where Christians can invite their pre-Christian friends to explore questions about faith authentically. “Ask Anything” has been fruitful and will hopefully continue to foster fruitful evangelism, and its development shows the importance of good quality and thoughtful *locally* produced evangelistic resources.
1 Conversation with Dale Stephenson.
2 Philip Hughes and Stephen Reid (eds.), All Melbourne Matters: Research of the Whole Church in Melbourne for the Future of the Church and the City (Melbourne: Christian Research Association and Transforming Melbourne, 2009), 30. stable.
5 Michael Frost, The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 28.
8 Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, Sandra Moore, Ruth Powell, Keith Castle, and Merilyn Correy, Mission under the Microscope: Keys to Effective Sustainable Mission (Sydney: Openbook, 1995), 61.
19 Another interesting way of addressing this is to ask the open-ended questions “What makes you think on a good day that there might be a God?” and “What makes you think on a bad day that can’t be a God?” Suggested in Ireland, “Other Courses”, 58.
22 Charles Freebury, Alpha or Ennmas?: Assessing Today’s Top Evangelistic Courses (Somerset: Higher Severalls House, 2005, 22, 32-34, available from the author by email Charles.freebury@tesco.net, discussed in Ireland, “Other Courses”, 59.
23 Ireland, “Other Courses”, 61.
26 Steve Addison, Movements that Change the World (Smyrna, DE: Missional Press, 2009) 75.
27 Lewis Rambo, quoted in Gortner, Transforming Evangelism, 13.
31 This has been a personal mantra for many years for me (Dale).
32 Fiona Hall, Asia Pacific Director of Training for Alpha, conversation with Dale Stephenson, 2011.
36 Herb Miller, Evangelism’s Open Secrets (St. Louis, Missouri: Bethany, 1977) 12.
38 Cole, Organic Church, 159.
42 Michael Green, Evangelism in the Early Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 172.
44 Email to Dale Stephenson, 23/6/11
45 Randy Newman, Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did (Grand Rapids, MI Kregel, 2004), 27.
46 This feedback was emailed through by the leader of an “Ask Anything” Seeker Group held in his home and facilitated through Crossway Baptist Church.
49 Julia Rhyder, Facebook message to Darren Cronshaw, 31/12/2013
51 Rick Richardson, Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 48; discussed in Kim Hammond and Darren

32 Training in outreach and evangelism is important if Australian churches are going to become more evangelistically active. NCLS shows that only 13% of all Australian local churches who participated in the survey provided training in outreach/evangelism in the two years prior to 2011, and for BUV churches the figure was less at 9%. Darren and Powell et. al, "Churches who share their Faith".

33 Email to Dale Stephenson, 22/11/10.

34 Email to Dale Stephenson, 17/11/10.

35 Fiona Hall, conversation with Dale Stephenson, 2011.

36 Email to Dale Stephenson, 23/6/11.