

## **A fresh way to share good ideas**

Church Times, 8 June 2012

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2012/8-june/comment/a-fresh-way-to-share-good-ideas>

MENTION TED, and although some people's eyes will light up, while others will look perplexed. It started out, in 1984, as a conference that brought together people from three worlds: technology, entertainment, and design. A TED conference now takes place every year in Long Beach, California; and a sister conference, TEDGlobal, is held in Edinburgh.

TED was formed to spread ideas. Its mission statement begins: "We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives, and, ultimately, the world." The format is a suite of short, carefully prepared talks, demonstrations, and performances, on a wide range of subjects, to foster learning, inspire, and to provoke conversations.

Talks now range across subject areas far beyond the original TED three, and include the environment, psychology, sociology, law, aid, history, mathematics, exploration, economics, and so on. No talk should exceed 18 minutes, and some are as short as six minutes. The aim is to leave the audience with one idea to ponder, and, if possible, one step to take. It is better to leave the audience with their souls stirred, their brains engaged, and their bodies prepared to act.

The speakers are often researchers or engineers, but can equally be a boy from Malawi who has built a windmill. The talks are (mostly) devoid of self-promotion, and there are no podiums. Speakers may often share a personal story, but the focus is on the idea, and on humans' connecting to humans in a direct and almost vulnerable way.

TED has shown that people love the opportunity to sit down and listen to others say something that really matters, and then talk about it themselves. There is no question-and-answer session after the talks, and the conference curator will only occasionally interview the speaker. The connections are made during the breaks, as speakers and delegates mingle, and in the conversations after the event.

TED has been accused of élitism, and it is true that delegate places are at a premium. But, in 2006, TED made the decision to share videos of the talks freely online, and so took the first step in opening this inspiration to a wider audience.

There are now more than 1100 presentations available, and they have been viewed millions of times. The possibility of commenting on each talk has generated an online community. And the possibility of downloading the videos has taken TED talks into many classrooms.

TED took the second step in opening to a wider audience in 2009, when, in the spirit of "ideas worth spreading", it started the TEDx initiative — independently organised TED events. TED has maintained a tight control over these. To hold a TEDx event for more than 100 delegates, the

licensee must have attended a TED event. All licencees must follow a series of rules. Talks must be videoed, and shared online.

Despite — or perhaps because of — the constraints, TEDx is mushrooming across the world. There have already been more than 4000 events in 130 countries. They have been organised in cities, universities, and companies. The first TEDxHousesofParliament is on 22 June, on the theme of democracy.

IN APRIL, I was part of the team running the inaugural TEDxExeter, which focused on sustainability and the interconnected world. We had an audience of 460, 13 main speakers, five performances, three short talks, and two screenings of TED talks. The breaks allowed the delegates to make connections. We utilised blogging and other social media to start the conversations beforehand, and to encourage them to continue afterwards.

Most of the outcomes of the day are hidden to the organisers: the countless connections between people, and the actions that they have taken. One of the ideas that is spreading from TEDxExeter came from a talk by Andy Robertson about video games and meaning (Comment, 1 June); another came from Bandi Mbubi.

Mr Mbubi spoke about the trail of suffering that is left in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by the mining of coltan for mobile phones. As he says: “It is time to demand Fairtrade phones.” His talk has led to a group getting together to launch “Congo Calling”, to do just that.

AT PENTECOST, the disciples were sent out from the upper room to spread the idea most worth spreading. Peter’s first address to the crowd and, later, Paul’s sermon to the Athenians were archetypal TED talks: short, passionate, full of vision, and focused on the idea rather than the speaker.

I wonder whether it would be possible to reimagine the sermon slot in a church service as a TED talk. The length is similar, but, too often, the preacher talks down from the pulpit to the congregation beneath, and tries to cram in too much.

There is no blueprint to a TED talk. It may have slides and a script, or it may not; it may be presented from a piano, or from within the audience. But a sermon that listens to the Spirit, to the readings, and to the world, and fulfils the TED aims of clarity, a single idea, and a single step to take, would be worth hearing, and spreading.

In addition, too often it is assumed that only the clergy have the ideas worth spreading. The Early Church struggled to keep the focus away from the personalities — “I belong to Paul/Apollos/Cephas” (1 Corinthians 3.18-23). Members of congregations have ideas worth spreading, too, as have others from outside the Church. A few months ago, it would have been interesting to hear a member of Occupy on a Sunday morning.

Even if not in the sermon slot, perhaps churches could run small events similar to TEDx. Some potential speakers may need coaching, others may need auditioning. Most of them need preparation. But, just as people need ideas, so do ideas need people.

This is my idea that I offer to you as being worth spreading.

<http://TED.com>; <http://TEDxExeter.com>