

"Insights"

A SERIES OF THOUGHT-PROVOKING ARTICLES
ADDRESSING THE KEY ISSUES OF COMMUNITY OUTREACH
IN NEW ZEALAND IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THE NEEDS-BASED EVANGELISM TRAP

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HOWARD WEBB

TIME AND AGAIN in my pursuit of stories of ordinary New Zealand churches doing extraordinary things in their community, I hear this story. A church sees a community need and meets it well. In time they might even become a contracted service provider with government funding. But several years down the track they are perplexed by how hard it is to bridge from their social service to the gospel. "We're a church, for goodness sake," they say. "How is what we offer different from any other provider of this service?"

I would like to suggest that the seeds of success or failure in bridging to the gospel from your community outreach were right there in your ministry plan from day one. The biggest mistake? Prioritising meeting needs over building relationships.

Let me begin by giving you an overview of how I have personally seen community outreach evolve over the past 40 years or so.

A BROAD-STROKES HISTORY OF COMMUNITY OUTREACH

I GREW UP IN A CORNER of the evangelical church that was leery of anything that smacked of the 'social' gospel, based in works and not in faith. What people needed was the message of the gospel so they could be saved; what was the point of good works? What value in trying to make people more comfortable on their journey to hell?

But that was not the viewpoint that prevailed. Few evangelical churches in New Zealand today would disagree that the gospel is a matter of both demonstration and proclamation, that good news and good deeds need to go hand in hand. And our eschatology is changing too; the teaching that this world will be renewed rather than destroyed makes sense of our efforts to pray and work for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done in our communities - starting today.

Somewhere along the way the concept of 'Needs-based Evangelism' arose. The basic idea is that you discover a felt need in the community you are targeting with your evangelistic

efforts, so that in meeting that need you create opportunities for the gospel.

A common example of what I mean might be a soup kitchen. Your target community might be the homeless or out-of-work; their felt need is a warm meal; and you can introduce the gospel into this situation by requiring that the recipients of the soup hear a gospel presentation as a precondition of receiving the soup.

For some there is an element of discomfort in the sketch I have just given. Should we really compel unwilling listeners to listen to our message just to get the help we offer? Shouldn't



we be offering warm bowls of soup to the hungry just because it's the right thing to do and not because we have an evangelistic agenda?

A new wave of thinking emerged. A good example is Steve Sjogren of the Vineyard Church in Cincinnati with what he termed

'servant evangelism'. He believes that small things done with great love can change the world. Acts of kindness help build bridges to the gospel by giving a taste of what the kingdom is like and creating opportunities for conversations about faith. The phenomenon of 'random acts of kindness' arose at a similar time. Whether it is giving away free cans of cola at the traffic lights or cleaning toilets in the mall, the examples of servant evangelism reinforce a simple formula: find a need and meet it in God's name.

What this new thinking did was to uncouple the demonstration of the gospel from its proclamation. 'Good deeds' become part of a longer game, evangelistically. Their purpose is to create a climate more conducive to receiving the proclaimed gospel, but it is no longer urgent (or even appropriate) that the message be proclaimed at every encounter. This is still the ruling paradigm I think for most community outreach work.

There are two problems with this, however. One is that the focus has remained on meeting felt needs. The other is that, having removed the proclamation aspect of the gospel from the event itself, where, when and how should proclamation happen? Let's consider these two problems for a moment.

THE NEEDS-BASED EVANGELISM TRAP

I AM NOT FOR A MOMENT SUGGESTING that it is wrong for churches to meet practical needs in ministering to their community, but it is building relationships rather than meeting needs that should be the guiding principle of our community engagement.

When our mantra is 'see a need, meet a need' we naturally begin thinking of the most efficient and cost-effective ways of meeting the need at hand. Too many churches are effectively meeting needs in ways that are unlikely to ever lead to conversations about Christ because they are centred in service-delivery rather than relationship.

I know of a church that cancelled the morning service in order to serve at a local school. That Sunday they did a wonderful job of cleaning, repairs and gardening and



even enjoyed a time of worship together. The job got done – but there wasn't a single not-yet-Christian on site. While this did create a platform for later school relationships, what a missed opportunity on the day!

As I write this it is the time of year for churches up and down the country to put on alternative Halloween events. Some will do this well, but many of these events will consist of people standing in queues for a free sausage, ice-cream or jump on the bouncy castle and personal conversations will not just be difficult; they will be impossible.

Of course it is possible for these 'goodwill touches' to be part of a broader strategy that may lead to relationships and gospel-drenched conversations. All I know is that I seldom hear churches articulate an intentional, credible plan for bringing it about.

THE ALTERNATIVE: RELATIONSHIP-BASED EVANGELISM

THERE'S ANOTHER MANTRA WE ALL USE - 'It's all about relationships'. We say it and believe it and it is self-evidently true; yet we often still gravitate towards the opportunities that are

obvious or big or somehow inspiring, even if they are relationally poor.

Let me tell you another story that illustrates relationally-rich community outreach. I shall keep this story anonymous too because the church in question has asked me to.

This church, for a number of years, offered the solo mums in their community a free oil and filter change for their cars. This opportunity was advertised in the local paper and happened six times a year.

The week before the event a flyer was circulated to a few hundred homes around the church with a message like: 'Can you wield a spanner? We're doing a free oil and filter change for solo moms in our neighbourhood on Saturday. If you want to help, put on your overalls and come on down!'



The church saw three to ten men from the community come to work on the cars every time. They would make a fuss of them, do a thank-you barbecue for them and promise to personally invite them next time.

Every man that came out for a third time was invited to accompany the men from the church to the Alpha course they ran twice a year, and 80% of those invited attended at least the first dinner.

After 4 years this church had 20 men from the community sitting in church with their wives and children because they had been invited to help on the cars and they had ended up being saved on Alpha.

I love this story because the church involved kept their eye on the ball. They built relationships around a felt need and created runways to the gospel.

A FEW REFLECTIONS

A WEALTH OF INSIGHT can be gleaned from this simple story. Here are my top three takeaways:

- Focus on relationships and you will still meet needs.
- The prime relationships to foster may be with those that come to help, rather than the beneficiaries of our good deeds. This means we should be inviting our not-yet-Christian neighbours to volunteer alongside us as we do good in the 'hood.
- Having an intentional plan for how, when and where you will articulate the gospel message makes it far more likely that it will actually happen.



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