

"Insights"

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

MONEY CAN'T BUY YOU VISION

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GINNY LARSEN

WHAT PREVENTS YOU FROM FULFILLING YOUR DREAMS? Talking with many organisations, you would think it is simply a matter of money. In my experience, this is seldom the case. In this article I'd like to explore our relationship to money and share with you a personal journey.

Growing up I was curious about different world views. Even at a young age I wondered about the values we held and whether other people around the world were the same as our family living in Christchurch, New Zealand.

SHAPING AN ATTITUDE TOWARDS WORLDLY WEALTH

AT AGE NINE I READ MARX AND TROTSKY and found myself agreeing with Marx that 'all property is theft.' After all, how could anyone own land or a stream? It didn't make sense. At age ten, I started reading the Bible and found a similar point of view. Land was divided between the tribes and every seven years it reverted back and all debts were cancelled; the aim was, 'there will be no poor among you'. Imagine the freedom it would bring if we lived out that Biblical commandment. But we cherry pick the Bible; say 'yes' to this and forget about that. I got a bit bogged down in Numbers and didn't reach the New Testament at that stage.

As a teenager, I was a fan of Pink Floyd and listened avidly as they sang, 'Money, so they say, is the root of all evil today.' I had to wait for a Youth for Christ camp to realise they'd missed out three important little words – 'the love of'. I'd finally reached the New Testament and found out that the early disciples sold their personal goods and held all things in common, that Jesus confirmed that it was difficult for a rich person to enter Heaven and that Jesus himself had no place to call home and very few possessions. But the Christians I met seemed very different from those early followers of Christ. The question I asked myself was, 'How to be in the world, but not of the world' in our consumerist, capitalist society?

Jesus said, 'Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.' Perhaps turning that around helps us work out what we regard as our 'treasure'. We can say we don't love money, but if we spend much of our time thinking about it and planning how to get it, then maybe it has become our treasure. We justify this - after all, don't most things benefit from having a bit of money around them. Where does this leave us in ministry? Has money become the main thing for us?

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH MONEY AND MINISTRY

WHEN I BECAME THE FIRST MANAGER OF NEIGHBOURHOOD TRUST (the community arm of St Albans Baptist Church), in April 2007, I had very little experience in gaining funds. It was a steep learning curve and that first year we made a loss. I swore it would never happen again. I've spent a large portion of my time each year writing funding applications and accountabilities and the Trust has grown rapidly, but over that time I've also come to believe that understanding where God is calling me and holding fast to the vision of what he is asking me to do is the key.

As most of you will be aware, in 2010 and 2011, Christchurch was struck by a series of major earthquakes that shattered our city centre and shook up the very fabric of our community. The earthquakes also exposed us to some brilliant minds sent to help us. In the early days after the February 2011 earthquake, the Shirley/Papanui Community Board initiated a series of 'Towards Recovery' forums pulling together around 70 leaders of various community groups. These were facilitated by Chris Mene, with assistance from Phil Driver, a New Zealander who mainly resides in England, working with the UK Government in strategy and planning. He was invited to lead us in a process of discovering where to best use our energies. Most likely you've done the exercise where you write down what you'd do if money was no object. You come up with dreams, then put them in the 'maybe in the future when we have money' basket. This was different. Phil not only helped us identify the main issues facing our community, but also helped us see what we could do right now without help from external agencies. It made us think outside the box. We all came up with ideas and realised it was not money that held us back, it was our own mindset. We could

run games in the park with the help of a few volunteers and borrowing some equipment. We could open our doors on a cold winters' night and provide a warm atmosphere and hot drinks and movies for the kiddies. We could make our venue available for a drop-in and simple soup lunch. The strange thing was that once we started putting this into action, people began to offer us money to keep it going; food arrived from nowhere and people got on-board and offered their time.

VISION AND ACTION BEFORE MONEY

THIS EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME that it is vision and action that comes first – the resources follow. At that time God showed me clearly that the community we served was his community; that he loved each and every one of them and that he had a plan for them individually and for the community as a whole. He invited me and Neighbourhood Trust (NHT) to be part of fulfilling that plan. He asked, 'Will you trust me enough to be part of this work? Will you catch hold of my coat-tails and come for a ride?'

In the years that have followed I've been stretched and pulled and challenged and overwhelmed, but I've never been bored. I've been scared and worried and felt very small, but he's never let me down. And we've never been short of the funds or resources to do the work he's called us to. Many times the NHT Board have had to take a step in faith. The main thing has been to be sure that we are following where God is leading, then we put in the work to the best of our ability and let him do the rest. I've learned to say 'not my problem' when we hit a wall. We give it back to God and he finds the other way or provides the people or the extra funds. I've learned to stop thinking about 'funding' and begin thinking about 'financing'. It might sound the same, but it involves a different thought process. Instead of the begging-bowl, poverty mentality, it's recognising that there is value in what we are doing and working out how best to resource it.

So many times God has shown me that we need to start before the resources come around a project; to put a toe in the water. The Pay It Forward community development and social enterprise project was a prime example of this. For months, God had been whispering in my ear, asking me to open my eyes and look at what was around me. Being quite blind, I ended

up asking him to please show me what it was he wanted me to see. Then I saw vacant shops attracting graffiti, and wondered out loud if I was on the right track. The next question was 'what sort of shop should it be?'

In Christchurch, with the loss of so many buildings including the Arts Centre, artisan crafts' people only had the option of displaying their goods at craft markets. A young woman in our Mairehau community had initiated several of these and talking with her it seemed the time was right for a more permanent venue. She asked the question on Facebook and immediately got back two dozen positive replies.



A customer in the Pay it Forward shop

At the same time, people in the community also told me about a second-hand book shop that was owned by an older man who fell ill and closed it down. They said they missed it. Next thing Richard from Rotary rang out of the blue and offered us 30 boxes of books that needed to be cleared from the Addington stables before cup day. On the way back with my colleague, Kim Button, I said, 'we'd better pray that God sends a sign of some sort that this is what we should be doing, or we may be chasing rainbows.' Within 15 minutes of being back in the office a funding broker rang and asked if I'd thought anything about doing a social enterprise in Mairehau/Shirley – he had a funder interested in supporting something of this nature and asked me to send my business plan. This was the nudge I needed to start writing up some of the ideas around a community hub of life-long learning and creativity; part retail/gallery space and part teaching rooms.

That particular funder didn't work out for that project, but now I had a plan and a vision of what God was leading us into. I started sharing that vision with a number of different people. Every time I let them know that I believed it to be God-breathed, whether they were believers or not, and every time I got positive feedback. I didn't have a clue how it

would all come together. In fact, I sat in amazement as others took up the vision and got excited about it.

That was over two years' ago now. In the meantime the NHT Board took out a three year lease on a shop. They were prepared to take a risk and stepped out believing that this was the right pathway for us. SeniorNet Canterbury came on-board as a partner, taking over the back part of the shop and supplying two-thirds of the lease cost. Fifteen crafts people met together to form the Pay It Forward co-op,



which has now more than doubled to 33 artisans. The Christchurch City Council granted \$130,000 from their Endowment Fund to purchase a shop to become a community development project and The Canterbury Community Trust has approved a further maximum of \$180,000 to repair, alter and fit out the shop from their Social Enterprise Fund. The string of coincidences, strange happenings, and out of the ordinary ways things have happened assures me God has had his hand on every part of the development. The shop we leased isn't the one we eventually bought. The new space is much bigger and cost us less, but it wasn't on the market to lease or purchase when we were first looking.

My point in sharing all this with you is that if we had not held on to the vision God implanted in us, we would not have taken the risk of investing in something that appeared to need a lot of money, time and resources to even get it started. And then, it wasn't just having the vision, it was being prepared to act on it. When I was feeling overwhelmed and terrified of being in the middle of something, but I could see no way through, I was given the verses from Joshua 1:1-8. Twice in these verses encouraging Joshua to take the land he is told to 'Be strong and courageous'. God asks, 'Have I not commanded you?' then, 'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

For me this project has been part of a move towards sustainability – to being not so dependent on outside financing. We know there is no quick answer to this. And it has many faces. It's not just about finances, but also resources and setting up a programme for longevity – so it is not dependent on us as an organisation to keep it going, but that the community has a sense of ownership and takes responsibility for ensuring the projects they hold dear are able to continue. I believe that this is what is happening with this project. Fifty people have given 1731 hours of their time to the Pay It Forward project in 2014 and 38 of these are people from our community. When God breathes a project and the community embraces it, good things happen and while conscious of our need to be good stewards of what we have been given, we know deep in our hearts that it is not money that is the main thing. To tell the whole story would be a short book, so I will leave it there, but have a look at www.facebook.com/payitforwardmairehau if you'd like to see what is happening in this continuing journey. We hope to open the new shop in February.

WHAT WILL YOUR FIRST STEP BE?

IN SHARING THIS STORY, THERE IS A NOTE OF CAUTION. Many churches and church trusts have got themselves into difficulty believing God is telling them to do something and then getting into debt. At each stage of this adventure we went step-by-step, prayerfully feeling our way and asking time and again for reassurance from our Lord. We laid out the fleece several times and each time were prepared to give it back, to let go. We counted the cost before going forward – we worked out how much could we afford, what help we needed, who else should be involved, how would we do this – and once we had committed did not look back. We considered worst case scenarios and decided we could manage. We did our homework and spent time over figures and plans. And at every opportunity, when asked to talk about this journey, God has been glorified.

If you have a dream, a vision you believe God has planted in you, what will your first step be? You can be sure whatever it is, he will honour it. A Biblical principal is looking at what is in your hand and using for God's purposes. And he has a way of helping us see we need the different parts of the body. Ask him for people to do the things you can't and you may be

amazed by who is around you waiting to help. Ask him for courage, for one or two others who will be 'dream-catchers'; those who will be inspired by this vision and will encourage and support you through the tough times. Ask him for an open mind to see where the resources might be to make this vision become a reality. Ask him for the next step, and the next step and see how he opens the way up for you. See miracles happen in your life and be amazed at what God can do when given permission to act. And most of all, have fun with it all (amongst the scary stuff) and see what our huge, unfathomable God can do with a small seed of faith when money is not the main thing.



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