

"Insights"

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

TOO BUSY FOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH?

BY HOWARD WEBB, DIRECTOR LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR TRUST

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AS I HAVE SAT WITH PASTORS TALKING TO THEM ABOUT COMMUNITY OUTREACH, most really resonate with what I'm saying but some still reflect to me, "the people in my church are so busy, we are having a harder and harder time finding volunteers. I'm just not sure we will have a lot of people willing to take this on."

Just the other day I was chatting to a successful Christian businessman and his words were "there are people who drive past my church going to work at 7 in the morning and again going home at 7 that night. Where are they going to find the time to volunteer and still spend time with their family?" He even made the point that he believed that we should be concentrating on workplace ministry rather than the wider community because we all spend more time in the workplace.

Now, I do hear what these people are saying. But is community outreach really optional? Should churches abandon trying to be salt and light in their local community because their people are too busy? Here is why I think we as Christian leaders need to push back against this notion.

WITHOUT COMMUNITY OUTREACH YOUR CHURCH WILL BE SICKER AND POORER

YOU CANNOT REPLACE COMMUNITY OUTREACH WITH ANYTHING ELSE without being poorer as a church.

Firstly, God cares about the city and the welfare of the people living in it and as His followers we should care about it too. Three poignant Scripture passages that spring to mind are Jonah 4:11 where God tells how deeply he cares for Nineveh; Jeremiah 29:7 in which we are enjoined to seek the peace and prosperity of our city; and Jesus is moved to tears by the predicament of Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44.

And it is no accident that your church finds itself planted in a particular local, grounded community. It's a curious passage, but I read Acts 17:26-28 to say that God marked out the times and places we would live so that we would be there for those wanting to reach out and find God. Ask yourself this: if your church isn't going to be a conduit of blessing to your neighbours, then who is?

Secondly, the local body of Christ, your church, is intended to be a witness to its neighbours as you worship and serve together. Matthew 5:14-16 says "You are the light of the word... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." In this verse 'you' and 'your' are plural – together we are the light of the world. Jesus also said that the watching world would know that we are His disciples because they will observe our love for them and for each other (John 13:35) – which implies we together need to be visible to them.

This witnessing church is the whole church in all its wonderful diversity – young, old, rich, poor, the greatest and the least – demonstrating unity in Christ. What other than the community context provides such rich opportunities for the church to demonstrate this unity and to serve inter-generationally and cross-culturally?

Not only is being seen serving together a powerful testimony to the love of Jesus; serving together is more fun, it's team-building and it creates a pool of common experience and common language that only makes the church stronger.

Thirdly, Scripture teaches that we ignore at our peril those at the margins of society.

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 makes heaven and hell the stark rewards for either embracing or ignoring the poor and disadvantaged. We will find these people in our community, not in the boardroom.

Lastly, everyone in church needs to find their God-given place to serve for their own spiritual growth and fulfilment – we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Surveys have found that those who are serving others are far more likely to be satisfied with their spiritual life than those who are not.

Of course it is true that God brings opportunities to serve across our path as individuals, but by facing into our community and by multiplying the opportunities for our people to serve we help ground their faith and enhance their appreciation and enjoyment of their Christian

walk. Community outreach goes hand in hand with spiritual formation.

PLAYING THE MOVIE FORWARD

[IF OUR PEOPLE REALLY ARE TOO BUSY TO VOLUNTEER](#) for community outreach then we need to accept that:

We will shrink our influence. Our influence is directly related to the number of relationships our church nurtures in the community. With fewer relationships our role in our community will be non-transformative and peripheral.

We also will grow smaller. Even if we are encouraging outreach in spheres other than our local community, these places are hidden from the congregation at large and don't form part of our common experience.

Church was never meant to be just church on Sunday. Christianity on such terms feels empty and inauthentic. Young people especially, tiring of words, words, words will leave. Evangelistic fruit will be rare.

ARE VOLUNTEERS REALLY THAT HARD TO FIND?

[IF YOU ASK GOOGLE](#) whether it's true that people are too busy to volunteer you get some interesting results.

I did find some articles about how the local chapter of Boy Scouts or Rotary were finding it hard to replace volunteers because 'people are so busy these days', but I couldn't help notice that the complainers are 'traditional' service providers that might perhaps be... a little boring?

It is interesting that animal shelters keep lists of potential volunteers because more people volunteer than they can use, and aid organisations meeting emergency needs around the world have no problem raising volunteers. It seems people are willing to re-order their lives to take advantage of inspiring opportunities to serve.

AS A CULTURE WE HAVE NEVER HAD MORE DISCRETIONARY TIME

ACCORDING TO [Quartz magazine](#), we spend more than 8 hours a day consuming media in all its forms. Obviously some of this consumption must be happening during work hours. Three of those hours are spent watching television. The average U.S. consumer spends 40 minutes a day on Facebook, [according to Mark Zuckerberg](#).

A [survey in the UK](#) found that the average Briton spends 8 hours every week on shopping – 2 hours of that just on clothes.

We all have 24 hours in a day, and right now each of us are using that time somehow. To that extent all of us are 'busy'. However it appears that the average person probably does have time to volunteer if they were motivated enough to reprioritise how they spend their time.

WE COULD DO A BETTER JOB OF MOBILISING AND INSPIRING OUR VOLUNTEERS

I HAVE ALREADY HINTED AT IT. I wonder if the lion's share of the problem lies not with the unmotivated potential volunteer, but with whoever it was who failed to motivate them.

Be inspiring. Too many churches use clipboards to make conscripts instead of taking the time to shape the opportunity to the individual. We need to enchant potential volunteers with the inspiring story of how they can help change the world. If what you are asking them to do connects their personal story (their giftings, talents and spiritual journey) to God's big picture story for the world they will be motivated to join you. As a leader, one can be boring or one can be inspiring. Boring is really easy and requires no prior preparation; being inspiring requires us to dig deeper.

Be flexible. Consider if the opportunity can be at a time and place and of a duration convenient to your volunteers as a first priority, rather than your paid staff.

Don't waste their time. Know exactly what you need them to do and be fully prepared for them when they arrive. This also communicates that you value their contribution.

Don't just give them the grunt work your paid staff don't want to do. Think of your volunteers as extra staff who are capable of performing complex tasks that take advantage

of their experience and skills. Provide leadership opportunities to those volunteers who are willing and have the time to shoulder more responsibility.

Appreciate them privately and publicly. Tell the world how what they did helped make the world a better place. They need to hear it and believe it! Such affirmation will not only encourage them to volunteer again, but it will inspire a new raft of recruits from the audience.

IF WE DO HAVE A PROBLEM, AT BASE IT'S SPIRITUAL

DESPITE ALL I HAVE SAID, LET'S BE HONEST. The values of our society run counter to the values of the Kingdom of which Jesus is the king. The hallmarks of our culture are not contentment, simple living, contemplation of God or making time for family, friends and neighbours. These values should be in evidence everywhere in the church, but to the extent that they are absent we should be insisting upon them as the mark of true discipleship.

This is not unreasonable. I meet people all the time who have chosen to work fewer hours, live more humbly and trust God more about their security in their old age in order to be salt and light in their community now. These are real disciples who have chosen to take Jesus at his word when he exhorts us stop worrying about tomorrow, our food and our clothes and instead seek His kingdom.

You can't build God's kingdom on a foundation of hedonism and consumerism. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is quoted as saying (tongue in cheek, no doubt): "If you start your buttons from the wrong hole, you won't have a hole for your last button". As leaders in the church, we need to help our people get their buttons right.

WE MUST CALL OUT THE IDOLATRIES THAT ROB US OF TIME

WHEN LAST DID YOU PREACH AGAINST BUSYNESS? J.D. Greear says "busyess isn't just uncomfortable; it's dangerous. There are few things as damaging—and potentially soul-destroying, as busyess." As Blaise Pascal once noted, "busyess sends more people to hell than unbelief."

Why is this so? It's because busyness gives us no time for nurturing the soul, for hearing the still voice of God. We fill our lives with what we see as urgent and neglect what is important.

Spiritual formation takes the eternal perspective. Our foundation is Christ – not philosophy, self-reliance, human morality, ethics, financial security, power, self-interest or self-empowerment. The kingdom mindset focuses on what will last, not on what passes away.

If your people are chasing the wind and not finding time to build the kingdom, it is your duty to call it out.

WE MUST SPEAK OUT AGAINST THE SYSTEMIC EVIL THAT ROBS US OF TIME

NOT EVERYONE IN OUR CONGREGATION IS WORKING THEMSELVES TO DEATH BY CHOICE. There are families having to work long hours at more than one job just to get by. There are principles of greed and inequality built into our society that favour the rich and disadvantage the poor. Someone who has to work weekends and holidays just to support their family are probably not spending quality time with God, family or their neighbours. In short, they are being forced to live a life that is not as God intended.

For the church, acquiescing in this evil system may be a dereliction of duty. Rather than merely lamenting at how the world has changed I believe we should be speaking out for things like a living wage and reasonable work hours. This is not just 'political'; this impacts the fabric of our society both inside and outside the church and shapes our lives and our future.



HOWARD WEBB IS A DIRECTOR OF LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR TRUST AND HAS BEEN HELPING NZ CHURCHES ENGAGE WITH THEIR COMMUNITY FOR 20 YEARS. SEE MORE AT WWW.LOVEYOURNEIGHBOUR.NZ