

# *Insights*

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

## UNSERIOUS CHURCH

ONLY CHURCHES SERIOUS ABOUT CHANGING BEHAVIOUR  
MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY HOWARD WEBB, DIRECTOR LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR TRUST

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HOWARD WEBB

**MY DAD USED TO LOVE TELLING THIS JOKE.** He was a great raconteur and he knew how to spin it out, but it never failed to raise a laugh.

The new minister preaches his first sermon and it is a doozy! His new parishioners congratulate him on an excellent message and it is all they can talk about that week. They can hardly wait to hear him preach again. The next Sunday he climbs into the pulpit and preaches the identical message. His parishioners find this odd, but it was such a very good sermon that they forgive him. However, when he preaches it a third time consternation ensues and they buttonhole him about it. “When you start putting this message into practice I will preach another!” he tells them.

What makes this tale amusing? It’s the absurdity of both knowing that the minister has a point – and knowing that there is no way this radical notion would wash in your church or in mine!

In the west there is acquiescence in the fact that, whatever is preached or taught, changing behaviour in consequence is entirely optional for good churchgoers. And that makes being and doing church fundamentally unserious.

Imagine a Weightwatchers group where week after week the trainer lectures about the effects of obesity and how dieting will change your life but there is no requirement that the members actually diet or ever step on the scales. Would you believe that club was serious about losing weight?

## FOCUSING ON VITAL BEHAVIOUR WORKS

**IN MY EXAMPLE ABOVE, THERE MAY BE A LOT OF GOOD, HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR HAPPENING.** The group might be welcoming and friendly. Lifelong friendships are possibly being made. It is a safe place. They are well-informed and know the latest nutritional

information. They might be making their payments promptly and being very encouraging of their trainer.

What this group is not doing is focusing on the critical behaviours necessary to help them meet their big picture goal of losing weight. In this easy example we all know what the needed behaviours are: they need to set weight goals, adopt an eating plan and measure progress by regularly weighing themselves. Additionally, they need to encourage each other and hold each other accountable for those right behaviours.

Every spiritual and social movement in history has identified the critical behaviours needed to achieve the specific outcome they dreamed of and held their followers accountable for doing them. These behaviours are the practices and the disciplines at the core of the movement.

### A present-day example

A campus movement that I am well acquainted with follows a certain pathway each year. Everyone is crystal clear on the process and on the behaviours expected of them to achieve their goal:

1. At orientation week they reach out to students in a fun way and gather contact cards. Required behaviour for missionaries is: be there, join in the fun, have conversations, get cards filled out. Those that have done it before model it for newbies.
2. The next step is calling back the contacts to make an appointment for a meeting. Required behaviour for missionaries is: go together, watch making calls being modelled, make calls, follow the script and receive feedback on how you are doing.
3. Then you have to go on the appointment. Inexperienced people buddy up with someone more experienced. What will you say? What will you do? You will have received basic training and roleplaying to make this doable. You have the clear goal that you will share the gospel and ask for a decision on this appointment if possible. You will also invite them to join an exploratory bible study group.
4. Before the exploratory group you will call or text to remind your new friend of their appointment. At the exploratory group you will progress through set material that covers the basics of the faith. After a few weeks you will invite them to go out sharing with you.

5. Those that go out sharing with you will learn how to do it and will eventually model it for others. They will be challenged to lead a group and be part of the movement.

If this sounds programmed to you, as though everyone involved in this ministry must be an automaton, then you don't know university students! The point is this: at every stage there is the option (and the temptation) to behave in ways that don't help you achieve your mission. Without clarity around expected behaviours and accountability for doing them this student group would be just another club on campus. They would not be a movement seeing hundreds come to faith each year.

## SHAPING BEHAVIOUR IS WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO DO

**WHAT LIES AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION?** It is to grow God's people to spiritual maturity in life and witness. God calls us as leaders of the church to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to train our people in attitudes, behaviours and practices that help them grow more and more like Jesus every day.

Ephesians 4:11-13 says this: "Christ chose some of us to be apostles, prophets, missionaries, pastors, and teachers, so that his people would learn to serve and his body would grow strong. This will continue until we are united by our faith and by our understanding of the Son of God. Then we will be mature, just as Christ is, and we will be completely like him." (CEV)

Spiritual formation is about changing our behaviour. Spiritually mature people behave differently to spiritually immature people. The more Christ-like they grow the more they act in ways that are counter-cultural to the world around us. It is this very difference that makes us salt and light in the world!

Rather than lowering the behaviour bar in order to keep people safe and comfortable, we should be giving clarity around the practices and disciplines we agree together we will do as a witness to ourselves and to the world – and hold each other accountable for them.

When we put the focus on right behaviour we can no longer be a club! We will be a church with a serious purpose. We will be a missional church.

## YOU CAN'T DO EVERYTHING. BUT WHAT WILL YOU DO?

**AT THIS POINT YOU MAY BE THINKING:** I get the simple Weightwatchers example. But helping people to look and behave like Jesus in every aspect of their lives is so huge and vague a task, where do I begin? Won't this be an exercise in frustration?

And you would be right. At the church, ministry and personal level you can't go after everything at once. You need to identify one area where a breakthrough would make the most difference and then discern what vital behaviours are needed to get there.

In their excellent book '*Influencer*' the authors reference a lot of research around this question and say this: "...You don't have to identify thousands of behaviours... Typically one or two vital behaviours, well executed, will yield a big difference. This is true because.. there are moments of disproportionate influence. These are times when someone's choices either lead towards great results or set up a cascade of negative behaviours that create and perpetuate problems" (1).

The good news is, these critical moments are easy to spot. Replay what is happening and spot the moment when a particular behaviour would have taken events down a different, more positive path – and then go after that behaviour.

### A church example

Perhaps you have identified that your church is not welcoming of newcomers. Your people would deny it because of how friendly they are and how long they stand and chat after church, but they are spending their time in cliques. Newcomers are not staying long and are telling you as a leader that they are leaving because they feel shut out.

This goes to the core of your mission. If you are not welcoming of strangers this is a roadblock on the journey towards being more and more like Jesus.

Chip and Dan Heath in their book '*Switch*' (2) propose this pathway for bedding in a new behaviour:

**Find someone who is doing it right.** Is there someone who has an eye out for strangers and who makes a point of talking to them and including them? Make an example of them - let

everyone see and understand what they are doing. Explain the gap between this ideal behaviour and what newcomers are saying about the church.

Help everyone *understand why imitating this behaviour is strategic to the outcome you all want*. You need to regularly talk about your goals.

You need to *engage not just their minds but their emotions too*. Right now your people find their current behaviour very rewarding emotionally. They are loving connecting with their friends. Our impulses are to meet our emotional needs, not our strategic needs. How can you make this new behaviour emotionally rewarding?

- Perhaps the newcomer and the person introducing them to others both get a free coffee (this would work for me!).
- Do I have to forsake my regular friendship circle in order to meet strangers, or can I introduce them to my friends so we make their acquaintance together?
- Remove embarrassment. Instead of saying 'Welcome, newcomer!' (only to discover they are a regular) you could say 'Hi, my name is ..., I don't think we have chatted before' and then find out how long they have been attending. If this is their first few times, go introduce them to some friends.

*What can you change in your physical environment that will reinforce/remove obstacles to the right behaviour you have chosen?*

- Can you do something about the space to make newcomers feel less conspicuous and uncomfortable?
- If all newcomers received a free, brightly coloured folder with information about your church it would make them easier to spot!

*Keep the change going*. Tell the stories of change you are seeing, give feedback on what newcomers are saying since the change, keep reinforcing that this new behaviour reflects who we are as a church.

RIGHT BEHAVIOUR IS CAUGHT, NOT JUST TAUGHT

UNSERIOUS CHURCH believes that their people will somehow work out appropriate behaviour for themselves.

Serious church builds accountability around right behaviour, inspired by the words of Scripture and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This is the model of church we find in the Bible. Jesus begins his ministry with 'Follow Me', a call to watch and imitate His work. He sends out his disciples on a mission trip to put what they have learned into practice and then does a debrief with them afterwards (Luke 10:1-23). In the course of his ministry Jesus emphasizes "You are truly my disciples if you live as I tell you to" (Jn 8:31) and "You are my friends if you obey me" (Jn 15:14).

Paul in 1 Cor.11:1 says 'Imitate me, as I imitate Christ!' He is saying 'watch me, do what I do and see how I do it'.

This process of modelling and shaping right behaviour with the support and mutual accountability of the whole group has been the model for church right up until the modern era.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

### HERE'S A SUMMARY OF THIS ARTICLE:

- How we behave and what we do is so central to our witness and discipleship that we need to focus on it just as the New Testament church did
- Research shows that focusing on a few key vital behaviours dramatically enhances outcomes
- To change behaviour we need to involve the eyes, the mind, the emotions, the environment and establish mutual accountability
- As leaders it is part of our calling to lead change

1. *Influencer – The New Science of Leading Change*. Grenny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, Switzler. McGrawHill. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2013 pg 35ff
2. *Switch – How to change things when change is hard*. Chip & Dan Heath. Broadway Books 2010



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](http://WWW.LOVEYOURNEIGHBOUR.NZ)