

# *"Insights"*

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

## WAS I TO BE THE GRINCH WHO STOLE CHRISTMAS?

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STEPHEN WORSLEY

**MY KIDS LOVE CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM.** It's a three day interactive community outreach event that Petone Baptist Church do every year in early December. We set up our church like Bethlehem village – there's an Inn, a Stable (where you can have your photo taken with Mary and Joseph), there are Shepherds and Wise Men hanging about, an Angel Choir singing four part harmony carols and loads of activities for kids. The village has a Baker, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Spinner and others, and each of these has a gazebo area where kids can come and learn their particular art. We hire animals too – what could be more fun for kids than a donkey ride?

Over a thousand people come through Christmas in Bethlehem each year and it takes around 100 volunteers to make it run. As people leave the event a Roman Guard insists that they fill out a census form. That form asks people how they found the event. We have had a load of positive feedback over the years. All of this makes us feel great.

**BUT WHEN YOU'VE DONE SOMETHING FOR NINE YEARS, VOLUNTEERS START TO GET TIRED.** It can feel like you are just churning something out; doing it for the sake of doing it. The event itself can lose some shape and it's easy to lose touch with *why* you are doing it. Getting 100 volunteers for this event every year may be no problem for a large church, but for Petone Baptist it's a big call. Last year volunteer numbers were down and the general feel was '*This event has run its course.*' So it was that someone approached me and my eldership with some hard questions about this event.

**WE DECIDED TO DO A THOROUGH REVIEW OF CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM** with input from our congregation. The questions asked were:

- In what ways is it 'missional'? Is it missional enough?
- Does it need a new look or focus?
- Should we rethink it from the ground up or do something else?
- Does it challenge people or just entertain them?
- Is it about making us feel good about ourselves or is it achieving significant things in our community?

Those last two were particularly important to us. If it is just community entertainment with no challenge then is it worth the 100 person volunteer effort every year?

It's important to note here that Christmas in Bethlehem hasn't been run by PBC Staff over the years, but by a team of committed lay people. But at this decisive point, it was important for church leadership and elders to be involved. We didn't want our excellent volunteer team to feel they had to keep it running every year if general interest was flagging. And if the church were to continue with it, then our leadership really needed to wrestle with the why and how.

We invited input from people who had been involved with Christmas in Bethlehem in the past and ran a couple of forums where anyone could add their thoughts.

The conclusion we came to as leadership, is that Christmas in Bethlehem had been missional in a number of significant ways over the years, but if we were to continue with it from here we wanted to sharpen up three areas:

1. Telling the Story
2. Evangelism
3. Follow Up

TELLING THE *REAL* STORY OF CHRISTMAS HAD ALWAYS BEEN THE OVERRIDING PURPOSE OF THIS EVENT. But we felt we could do it a lot better. Evangelism at the event had really been limited to a few tracts on a table on the way out that we hoped people would pick up but largely didn't. Follow up had been good some years but other years not so. The fact is, it can become such a big deal just making events like this happen that there is no energy left to do these three things well.

The strong feeling at our meeting was for a reworking of Christmas in Bethlehem rather than stopping it and doing something different. That surprised me. I had been quite happy to look at doing something totally different. But there was a whole new energy in the church for Christmas in Bethlehem as a result of this process. And that is the fuel you need for any community ministry.

These months later we have just tidied up from our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary Christmas in Bethlehem. We had even greater numbers than before and increased our volunteer pool thanks to the enthusiastic support of another Petone church. But most pleasing of all was that we really did sharpen up the three things mentioned above.

[WHEN THE KIDS CAME TO 'BETHLEHEM' THIS YEAR THEY WERE SURPRISED TO FIND OUR FOYER SET UP LIKE AN OLD-TIME NEWSROOM](#), with old typewriters and curly corded phones. A newsroom worker would approach them and say a big story was about to break and they (ie. the kids) were being hired as reporters to interview people and come back to the newsroom once they were done, in time to get the story printed. As they entered our auditorium it was clearly 'Bethlehem' again, but the kids had to find various characters and ask them who they thought Jesus was. The Inn Keeper said Jesus was 'a pain' (they had to write that down!). The Rabbis in the Rabbi tent were 'not sure' who Jesus was. The kids went on to interview shepherds, wise men, the Angel Gabriel and a Stable boy to piece together the varying responses to the question.

Something delightful happened when one kid finished the activity having got the right answer from the Stable boy. He went back to the Rabbi who had been 'not sure', and said 'Duh... He's the Son of God, don't you guys know anything?!' The 'Rabbi' who happened to be the pastor of the church that was helping us out, laughed himself silly!

How we 'sharpened up' the areas of evangelism and follow up would be material for another article. But suffice to say this event now has a new lease of life, a new clarity of purpose and the support of not one but two congregations to carry it into the future.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED THROUGH ALL OF THIS, AND WHAT PRINCIPLES COULD BE APPLIED

ELSEWHERE? No doubt you will have thoughts of your own having read this far, but here are my conclusions:

1. It's crucial to ask the hard questions of our outreach events/ministries periodically.
2. There are times in the life of a community ministry or event where church leadership need to fully engage with the issues that are being faced
3. To sustain an event over a long term you need to constantly bring new people in to roles so the baton is passed, rather than expect the same people to do them year after year, on a lessening tank of enthusiasm.
4. Over time the focus of an event or ministry can easily be lost. The re-envisioning process however can be very energising when it's done well.
5. While church people can get bored running the same ministry over many years, that doesn't mean it is ineffective, or not missional. It just means you need different people to drive it into the future.
6. We should partner with other local churches a whole lot more than we do. There's so much to be gained, and the local community (and local newspaper reporters!) seem fascinated at the idea of two churches working together. Interesting huh!
7. Passion, energy, vision ... these are the fuel that community ministries run on.

My kids would've been gutted if we'd stopped running Christmas in Bethlehem. In their eyes I would be the 'Grinch', along with all other PBC leaders implicated in the decision! But there is a right time to admit that an event or ministry has run its course, and that you no longer have the people or energy to drive it. Happily for us, and for our local community that time is not now. We're excited about how we can continue to influence and challenge our community with the real story of Christmas in the years to come.



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