

Reaching Out – Some Ideas and Principles

"The Christian church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of its non-members."

Archbishop William Temple

The following article contains some thoughts on the reasons why the church is so often isolated from its local community, some guidelines and principles for more involvement with the community and some stories about how different churches or groups have sought to reach their community.

Have you ever sat in a pew and been exhorted by a well-meaning preacher to "reach out", "get involved", "plan a mission strategy", "share the message". You look around the large but empty old church and see thirty or so other people, mostly over 60, who look tired and whom you know have tried very hard to "reach out" for the last 10 maybe 20 years without seeing much change? Let me tell you some of the thoughts and feelings I've had in this situation:—

Who is going to do it?

What have we got to bring people to?

How will we do it — coffee shop?

— get a good speaker?

— start a youth club?

Feelings of guilt about our/your inadequacies, frustration of not knowing what to do, and despair at the diminishing congregation all tumble about inside. A recent survey of inner city ministers carried out by Scaffolding showed that these thoughts and questions were common to most and were almost crippling for some.

We know "why" but what about "how"?

As Christians we hold very close to our hearts the great commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself" and the great commission "Go into all the world and preach the good news". We are to be an outward focused people. So whether it be for a particular project of evangelism or for meeting a need in the local area or for sharing our love and faith with our neighbours, we all need to become involved in our community and the people who make it up.

Sometimes it is called "outreach", sometimes "mission" sometimes "serving the community" and each term has a different emphasis yet all

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have some elements in common. They all require us to step outside our churches, to get some understanding of what/who our community is and how it works and to repeatedly reflect on how we should carry out our tasks as we learn from people in the community.

In most cases I will be using the term "community involvement" in a broad sense, covering the various types of mission and service.

Some Problems With Our Traditional Forms of Community Involvement

In order to understand how to break down the barriers between church and community we need to look at the factors that have contributed to the existence and strengthening of those barriers.

1. The "village" church in 1980's?

I was brought up in a church which provided me with Fancy Dress Nights when I was 8, Sunday School Picnic races when I was 10, my first camp as a young teenager, chances to meet boys as an older teenager and an opportunity to develop personal skills as a leader in a Youth Fellowship. As well as all these important events it gave me a spiritual foundation for my commitment to God. For many of us the local church has functioned well as a centre for our own lives and for the life of our suburb in a similar way to the village church in England on which it was modelled. However, today this is not automatically true.

Eighty-two percent of Australians do not attend church in 1985. What was an accepted social norm, "the done thing", even a boost to one's status, is now the abnormal and to most, irrelevant.

Other community agencies have taken up the roles many churches used to fulfill. Welfare organizations provide counselling, support and practical help, service groups and clubs are important social meeting places and entertainment options for children are popping up everywhere.

Today the church is not always the centre for community life. Furthermore the community is changing from the village pattern. The community we live in may not be an easily defined group of people with clear social networks but rather a multi-racial, anonymous environment with a variety of values, belief systems and lifestyles. People have different or no expectations of the church, so often it is seen as irrelevant or archaic. Ministry then must involve starting again by getting a better understanding of our communities.

2. Overemphasis on Youth?

When the church had a major part in the socialization process for members of the village there was an extensive array of children's activities, Sunday schools, clubs, teenage youth groups. All of these things play a valuable part today in nurturing children in the faith. However where they are seen as the major form of mission and where they take more energy

than the resources established for adults we must ask ourselves serious questions.

Why do children leave the church in droves when they hit teenage years and again in their early twenties when they join the workforce? How can we sustain their interest without the support of their parents? How do we help the 20 year olds meet the challenge of a secular world after we have nurtured them in the cosy atmosphere of youth fellowship?

Perhaps there has been a tendency to focus on the young because it is easier and we may not have our position challenged as much as we would by meeting with adults. Sunday schools and youth outreach activities are important but not as the sole way of maintaining our church membership. In many cases our emphasis on the young leaves the community with the impression that our faith is only relevant when you are young.

3. Welfare Based Outreach

The church has had a high profile in the areas of welfare — everything from overseas aid programmes to the handout from the parsonage door. This commitment to the needy is an integral part of our faith and must always be evident in our life together as the body of Christ. However it is often carried out in such a way as to undermine our mission and distance Christians from their community. Again, many of the destructive aspects of our welfare initiatives are derived from our models of "charity to the poor" in our mother churches in England.

In many situations the actual services or activities we develop seem to reinforce Christians as being in a more powerful position than the recipients rather than communicating the servanthood of Christ. Where there is a "client" status attributed to one party and a volunteer status to another there is immediately a wedge driven between the two. The client begins to see himself as a failure, dependent and without value (as they are not able to give) and they see the volunteer or staff person of the programme as successful and with pride intact. With this frame of mind they will find it difficult to sit alongside each other in church. This dynamic can occur in anything from an emergency food programme to a counselling service.

Another problem with many of the initiatives Christians have taken in welfare is that it often institutionalizes our "caring" so that we only visit the sick when it's our turn on the roster or give a stranger a drink when we're helping at the soup kitchen. It can enable us to retreat to our own comfortable world, our home and families with no real effect on our lifestyle. Jesus calls us to give all of our lives to him if we are to be his disciples. Our efforts to meet human need must go beyond supporting church welfare agencies to having our lives changed by caring for those in our community around us.

Furthermore, our welfare-oriented outreach programmes can in fact do

more damage than good. Much of the poverty and need in our community is generated by the economic and social structures of our society, so change needs to be brought about at this level in order to prevent suffering, rather than providing 'bandaids' to individuals and returning them to the same oppressive situation. If we are only treating the symptoms and not dealing with the causes we could be helping to maintain the problem. Instead we need to be *changing* the situation which contributes to the person's suffering, that is, our involvement needs to be "*change-oriented*". This may involve challenging unjust systems, giving the decision-making or power to those who have none.

An Example from my Local Community

Several elderly tenants of a Housing Commission project were being badly tormented by local teenagers and receiving no help from the Commission on security matters. They required comforting and help in moving to a new area. This would have meant new people moving into their places and they too would suffer the harassment and require help. Instead a group was begun consisting of these tenants and some community workers which started to look at the causes of their anxiety. Ideas came forward as to how to deal with the teenagers and the meetings provided support and new friendships which also gave them strength to cope.

People felt stronger about their rights as tenants and began to ask for security measures and building improvements from the Housing Commission. Youthworkers were put in touch with the offending teenagers to look into their needs. The Housing Commission began to respond, a community room was established and more changes took place as the elderly tenants were less easily provoked by the teenagers, thus diffusing the conflict to a great extent. People started to feel they had a say and their environment was improved, a *change-oriented* process.

So by looking at some of the ways barriers have been created between church and community, I have started to develop guidelines or principles for effective outreach. The following are further principles that I have found useful in my work in the inner city.

Some Principles for Community Involvement

I believe I have learnt a lot from asking myself how God became 'involved in His community' or what was His way of "reaching out"? When God sent His Son He was to become one of an oppressed people. He came as a baby, helpless and dependant. Most of His life was spent simply living in the community, becoming involved in the life and culture of the people He was part of. He spent time becoming earthed in local customs and traditions. For most of his 3 years active ministry, Jesus became deeply involved in the lives of people, relating to them at their point of need,

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Other ways of getting to know your community are to walk, look and listen. Chat to shopkeepers, workmen or people at the bus stop. It is particularly important to talk to those on the fringe of community life, the minorities, the social misfits, the poor, the shut-ins, those who are hurting, as these people were the ones Jesus sought out. Your first step is to listen.

As you listen to people you will not only get a picture of your community but hints as to the barriers which may exist between your congregation and your community. Becoming aware of the barriers is the first step towards removing them. When you realize you have no single mothers in your church you may need to ponder whether we are giving a message that our church is only for two parent families. How do we inadvertently give this message? How can we change this? The ideas will start to flow.

Finding out basic information about your community is an important starting point. Yet too it is a continuing process. At all times we need to try to be aware of what is going on around us as we become more deeply involved.

Principle 1: Be "Alongside" People

Jesus had no more 'earthly' powers or status than those around Him; He had 'emptied Himself' (Philippians 2:7) when he lived amongst us. Yet so often we seek to be in a position of power or security or control when we get involved with our community. For example we plan a programme of outreach with a beginning and end and with tight limits on what it will require of us, rather than simply sharing our lives, our weekend activities or our homes as individuals.

We set up organizations to help the needy rather than take them home to have a meal with us. We sit in our church buildings using all sorts of carrots to attract people in, often because we are afraid of moving out of our own territory. Our attitude needs to be one of getting 'alongside' rather than 'standing over' or 'hiding behind' or 'keeping at an arm's distance'.

We can get alongside people by mixing with people at the local school or playgroup, joining a community club or residents' group. It is impossible to be alongside people if we are so busy with church commitments that we never meet anyone outside the church.

Perhaps a good model for us here is the little Brothers of Jesus, an order of Catholic priests working amongst the poor in various cities of the world. They always take jobs in the factories "alongside" the poor of their parish, and live in similar conditions to them. This is the form their mission takes. They then share the same frustrations and pressures, and can speak about the concerns of their parishioners with real understanding.

Part of being alongside is:

Principle 2: Allow Ourselves to be Vulnerable

Whether it be preparing your group to set up a community service or

challenging them at crucial points in their own pilgrimages and pointing them towards hope, salvation and the spirit of God at work in their lives.

The life of Jesus points us beyond simply setting up *programmes* for people and towards a deep and committed *involvement* with them. Jesus became "incarnate" in a particular culture at a particular time in history.

There are many principles we can glean from the gospel accounts of Jesus' life amongst His community. I have been guided by these principles in my involvement with a long term working-class community in the inner city area. In our situation many of those within the church are culturally quite different to those in the community.

A Preliminary Step: Find out about the Community

Some people in your congregation may have valuable experience of the community from their work, friendships or a lifetime of residing in the area. You can also get yourself some statistics on ages, income, nationalities, length of residence and so on from your local Council or central church offices. Match these up against your congregation. Are all nationalities of your area represented in your church? Is the age profile of your church like that in your community?



Fairs and children's activities can provide entry points into the life of a community.

Photo: Horizons

preparing yourself for welcoming neighbours into your home, don't assume you must 'always put on the best show' in order to reach people with your message or your caring.

If we only allow people to see our strengths we will prevent sharing about struggles; people will think Christians don't have problems and that they never fail. This can be very alienating and dishonest. In fact we need to go further than this if people in the community have little education or few material resources. It is important then to actively seek out and affirm their other gifts and talents and to consult them on ideas. Our valuing of what they have to offer may be the first step for them in experiencing that God values them.

Sometimes it is only when we are stripped of earthly resources such as money, church buildings or a talented team that we are forced to rely on our God. This kind of vulnerability often helps us discover spiritual and other resources we did not know existed in ourselves or in the community around us.

One of the most encouraging churches I have visited was in a very poor housing estate in Liverpool, England. The physical environment was so bad the Council was razing it to the ground and starting again. Yet in that place where many ministers had said there was no hope for a congregation, after only 6 years I found a vibrant, gutsy and committed church where almost everyone was a tenant of the low-income housing estate. The minister had gone in with only his wife and 7 children (including 3 who were adopted) and from the start called on the local people for help. The minister and his wife cried on their neighbours' shoulders when they had problems with the kids; they called on them to help start playgroups for mothers and they even employed a long-term unemployed young man as a youth worker. Barriers were instantly broken down, there was no "them" and "us" and in the process their message was communicated and many joined the church. That story has a happy ending, as the minister has a long-term commitment and as the leadership of the church is continually being handed over to new local Christians.

This brings us to another principle for community involvement:—

Principle 3: Involve Local Leadership

(This is particularly important in a context where the majority of church-goers are from different backgrounds to the majority of residents).

Just as Jesus entrusted the often doubting disciples with His message the church must trust people from the local community wherever it is appropriate in our community outreach. A very good starting point is to ask locals about the community. You will get valuable feedback and you will start building links and opportunities for dialogue about faith.

From the beginning of your outreach have ideas on how you will hand over more and more decision making to *locals*. It will mean your outreach

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*A Laundromat sponsored by a church organization:
A great contact point in an inner city suburb*

Photo: Uniting

is different from the way you may have planned it. That's good, it will probably be more effective too!

I spent time with a growing church amongst very poor uneducated Hispanic people in Chicago. As I listened to a stirring but rather jumbled teaching session from one of the Hispanic leaders I watched as a young white couple, schoolteachers, listened eagerly. They could have said it much more clearly and with more polish, but they said nothing. When I asked the reason they simply said "It is much more important to everyone here that their own people learn to be the leaders than for the teaching to be more sophisticated".

Principle 4: Remember the Number One Resource for Becoming Involved in Your Community is YOU!

When God wanted to reveal Himself to the world it was through a person, Jesus.

Often when we sit down and think about outreach the first ideas we have are of programmes. Beware! Programmes often end up coming before people. They demand meetings and often money and so on and in the process we cut ourselves off from the neighbour who is lonely, or the playgroup which needs childcare or the friend at work who is always asking questions about life.

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attitudes, some fears about loneliness and a great deal about faith as much of the packaging I was brought up with has been gradually stripped away in a different culture and community. At times it has been unnerving to hear how people in the community view the church and its message. A common perception is expressed here by a local teenager who left school at 15. When asked about commitment to God he replied "I'm not good enough". How could this be, our whole message has been about forgiveness? What this kid saw was that the Christians relating to them were on their best behaviour, didn't swear or drink, were always giving never taking, and were going to University. Of course the strongest message he had received had been that Christians were different from him, "well behaved" and he could never make it. This same reaction has happened to me several times and I have learnt as a result to be more open about my own struggles and failings.

This is just one example of the need for two-way communication. How is your message being received? What do people see as most important about faith from the activities you run? How does your plan for meeting community needs affect them, if it does at all?

We must continually be open to change or even to drop our plans for a particular project when members of the community give us feedback. Often we don't seek this feedback as we have a vested interest in running that second-hand clothes shop or that kids club for preschoolers. It may make us feel needed, worthwhile and it may look good that the church is doing something in the community. These may be the right things to do but don't hide from the heavy questions: — who is really being served, church members or community? Talk to local social workers, teachers, shopkeepers and find out where there are needs not being met. Make sure you are not duplicating an idea just because it is easy to do, maybe there is room for co-operation with another church.

This process of listening should be the first step as well as the attitude we have throughout our work, listening to God and to the needs, wishes, hopes and fears of the community — a two-way process.

Principle 6: Think Creatively about Resource Possibilities

Make a list of all the resources you have that may be relevant. These will include buildings, finances, the congregation's experiences of life and faith and their skills, their employment circumstances, their homes. Add to it a list of community resources you can use — Neighbourhood Centres, parks, the locals' expertise and energy, government grants etc. Start to use what you need for your project rather than gear your project solely to what you have. We are called upon to take risks in our giving — personal risks as we venture into things we haven't done before and group risks as we surrender ourselves to the Lordship of Christ.

By taking risks, you may find you have more resources than you listed.

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You and your story of faith are always available and a good place to start is simple hospitality. Invite people you meet in your life home for a meal, someone from a nursing home or from your child's school or from around the corner. One of the most encouraging examples I have seen of this "open door to the community" is in the inner city where a Christian family (and their dog) spend much of their time eating with, laughing, or crying with neighbours, rushing people to hospital, or answering the door at all hours to the poor and to people who have been forgotten by family, or are living one step away from skid row, or those who have been hurt again and again in the course of their life. Yet this is a place of peace as this family have found the joy in being with those on the edge of our community.

Principle 5: Community Involvement Must be a Two-Way Process

Most people working in their community in urban areas will say they have gained more than they have given. This is true from my experience as I have discovered a bigger God who goes beyond the limits I had lived with before. God has become real in the encounters I have with people, in the struggles about direction, in the lives of so many who are well outside of the church that gathers on Sunday.

I have also learnt new things about myself discovered some patronizing



*Mothers' groups can be key places
for involvement*

Photo: H.M.S.

By working together you may discover new ways of creating resources. For the past 6 years I have been involved in a Christian community development organization in Glebe called Horizons. We have employed up to 4 part-time workers at times running children's clubs, holiday programmes, family outings, working with teenagers on the street, providing elderly shut-in people with a weekly visit and bag of fruit, as well as financially supporting a local minister in a role as a pioneer pastor. This may appear to some to be an impressive list considering the main supporters have numbered not more than 20 people. Yet it has all been possible because a few people took their faith seriously enough to work for low incomes in the context of a 'family' who also made financial and personal commitments to support them. Many groups are now discovering how to free up people to care for their communities by sharing incomes in household groups, or tithing money to provide a wage or offering cheap board and accommodation. The possibilities are endless and the joys of being part of such a commitment enrich our faith.

I have tried to look at some of the reasons why our churches are now so cut off from their communities, to offer principles which can guide us to rediscovering our links with the community and to include some practical ways to get involved. Whether it be for a particular project of evangelism, or meeting a need in your area or just as a process of getting to know people outside your church, we all need to become involved in our community. There is a wide range of ways to do this from simple hospitality, to specific church-run activities to forming organizations which have that role. All are valid when carried out sensitively and in the spirit of God, all bring us closer to the kingdom of God and strengthen our faith.

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