

Volunteers or Disciples?

A case study of missional engagement in Morecombe Bay

BY MICHAEL KOHL

Context

My wife Tracy and I started Morecambe Community Church [1] and West End Impact[2] 20 years ago as our missional attempt to live out God's calling on our lives.

Morecambe is a typical northern coastal community; tourism has gone, unemployment, low wages and substandard accommodation. The wards around our centre are among the 1% most deprived areas in England, with major health inequalities, below average life expectancy, low educational attainment and high levels of crime - with substance abuse problems and anti-social behaviour.[3]

We take faith and life seriously, which lands us in strange, interesting and wonderful places, but our ministry can be summed up under two headings: *Reacting to crisis* and *Rebuilding lives*.

Most people come to us in crisis with multiple needs - poverty, housing issues[4], substance abuse, poor mental health or a combination of them all. We help them react to their crises, and rebuild their lives through running a food bank, advice and guidance sessions, mental health support groups, counselling, Sunday services, prayer, therapeutic art and volunteering at our centre and two shops.

[1] www.mcc.uk.com.

[2] www.westendimpact.org.uk.

[3] Indices of Deprivation 2019 & West End Millions Community Profile 2015; Statistics for Sandyland Parish: Church Urban Fund.

[4] For various (political) reasons, a lot of effort goes into keeping the official headcount of homelessness as low as possible. The true figures of homelessness, including temporary accommodation and 'sofa surfers', is much higher.



It is through our volunteering programme that God took us by surprise. We didn't look for non-Christian volunteers, but they came. God's missional work is attractive, even to people who do not necessarily share our faith, who wanted to be part of it. The Job Centre sent people for work placement, because they wouldn't be welcome anywhere else. They clean, drum, make 'brews'[5], run the shop, stack the foodbank, produce art and more. For many it is part of their recovery from crisis and rebuilding their lives.[6]

Theological reflection

We needed to make sense of what was evolving: Is it theologically Ok, or were we veering off track? *Short answer?* It's been a blessing to them. It has often been a journey (back) to faith.

It's been a blessing to them, because we gave people, whom others had written off, a chance to meaningfully contribute. When they had been led to believe they had been a drain on society, we showed them they are of value and their contributions matter.

It's been a blessing to us. Non-Christian volunteers bring a fresh and authentic approach. They keep us real and challenge our easy answers.

Lives changed

Jack, an ex-serviceman with tattoos, a bushy beard, struggling with alcoholism and civilian life after suffering a stroke, was grumpy and lonely. Henry, a former martial

arts champion and on methadone, was invited by Jack to help on our building project. Neither would have said they had an active faith. They volunteered tirelessly and developed great friendships.

Jack prayed during our morning prayers; one of the most honest prayers I have heard. He attended our service one Sunday, because "I never invited him" (his words)! He's now part of the team, married, sober and loving life!

I prayed with Henry, helped him move and get started to become a drug counsellor. Sadly, after a short relapse, he took his own life. He couldn't cope with going through all that again. I was privileged to conduct his funeral. His estranged family was delighted to hear about the kind-hearted man he had become.

Sarah, a retired nurse, was shocked to walk into our morning prayer meeting. She hadn't realised we were Christians. Later a client told her his spiritual transformation story, as he picked up a food parcel, and then she attended our volunteer induction training, which covers our ethos of being Christ-Centred. We thought we'd never see her again. Wrong. She is now heavily involved, prays out loud and her faith is being rekindled.

Biblical reflection

Zacchaeus showed a peculiar interest in Jesus, and then Jesus 'volunteered' him to host a dinner with presumably many guests. His commitment to life change came at the end of the dinner. I wonder how a conversation about life change would have gone at the bottom of the tree?

[5] Cups of tea and even more coffee!

[6] Annually we intensively help 500-600 individuals with 45+ volunteers. We usually have 10-15 non-Christian volunteers at any one time. Some move on after finding employment or training, most stay on and become part of our community.

The disciples followed Jesus – called or otherwise – but arguably with as little understanding about what it entailed as some of our non-Christian volunteers. If your bottom-line evaluative question is, “do they come to church?” What a strange question! Then we might question this in light of Matthew 25.31ff and 28.16ff, asking where does church and missional work start and end? Our Sunday services are just 10% of our face-to-face interaction with our community. Could God’s mission be contained in (and evaluated by) just 10% of your missional efforts? These people don’t come to church; they are (becoming) the church. (Cook, 1979, p. 8)

Conclusion

In “Mission With”, Paul Keeble describes mission as evangelism as ‘mission to’, and service or social action as ‘mission for’ (Keeble, 2017, p. 29) and advocates ‘mission with’ the community. What if our mission to, and for, and with the community was carried out WITH the community? It would be quite “arrogant to think we [Christians] had some sort of monopoly on caring and commitment to help people”. (Keeble, 2017:93)

In practice, this goes beyond a tick-box exercise, or involving people with lived experience. Instead, it is a generous opening of God’s mission for people of all faiths and none, to get involved in bringing shalom to our community. Let them “taste and see that the Lord is good[7]”, by rubbing shoulders with those who try to do the same, but from a position of faith. As Bosch notes: “Where people are experiencing and working for justice, freedom, community, reconciliation, unity, and truth, in a spirit of love and selflessness, we may dare to see God at work.” (Bosch, 1991:441)

Will you dare to give people opportunity to experience God at work first hand?

[7] Psalm 34.8.

Bibliography

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