

# *"Insights"*

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

## BEING THE EXPERT IS HARMING YOUR TEAM

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AS MINISTRY AND TEAM LEADERS we feel a compelling need to always have the answers. Always having the answers though turns us into 'experts' and isolates us from the wisdom of our team.

Let's explore how asking questions as a leader can be a tipping point toward greater collaboration and team work. We will discuss how *asking a well framed question* can be strategic within your team, and how some robust questions can tap the collective energies of a team.

## EMBRACE THE PAIN

IT CAN BE UNNERVING AND IRRITATING when as the leader you're the one put in the undesirable position of having to respond to questions that probe clichés and take aim at shared but hidden assumptions. We can find such situations threatening and often feel the urge to shut-down the annoying discomfort. We may even feel the need to justify our leadership by filling every space with an answer. But what if those uncomfortable questions that are sometimes asked by colleagues and team members are actually good? What if they are Spirit/God-filled moments, despite feelings of discomfort and irritation?

I can remember a number of years ago a discussion with my spiritual director concerning the place of questions. At the time, I was leading an urban congregation who were exploring some innovative approaches to mission, around church/neighbourhood engagement. I can remember at one point in the journey experiencing a period of haunting uncertainty where I began to doubt myself. Fear began to bite into my thinking. A murmuring thought prodded - "Graeme you ask too many questions!" This had been a line I'd heard from others and had let fester under the surface. My spiritual director responded

to my fumbling thoughts: "Asking questions, he said, "is a gift from God. Nurture what God has given you!" It wasn't a lot but his words resonated. It was one of those decisive God-encountering-moments which have since been life-giving as well as freeing. I am not suggesting for a moment that we all go around asking questions but I am suggesting we make space for thoughtful and well-formed questions in the context of working together as a team.

## LEARNING AND GROWING IS ABOUT QUESTIONS, NOT ANSWERS

**AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST, WE ARE LEARNERS.** The word "disciple" means learner. And yes ...an important aspect of leadership is learning. And that means finding answers to the obstacles that lie between us, and the vision that beckons. I really like how Tim Keel – author of *Intuitive leadership* – names a facet of leadership that speaks to this area. He states that "leaders trade in answers" and therefore by default become the experts. He goes on to question this proposition by arguing that the mantle of the expert only places distance between the leader and his or her community. He states, "It's not that I have grown past the satisfaction of having my ego massaged. ... It's just that I am no longer sure an answer is always what is called for."

Keel makes a good point about our need to engage more deeply. Simple answers no longer cut it. The complexities of urban life mean we need to engage more thoughtfully and more deeply. This means robust conversations are needed between team members.

## QUESTIONS, NOT ANSWERS, BUILD YOUR TEAM

**MICHAEL MARQUARDT OBSERVES** that "when we ask questions of others and invite them to search for answers with us, we are not just sharing information; we are also sharing responsibility." It follows that when responsibility is shared, ideas are also shared; problems are shared (that is this problem is not yours or mine, but ours). Sharing at this level leads to greater ownership. And ownership is about finding a common voice – a voice that is clear

and easily heard when engaging our neighbourhoods. It is a voice that says, “We are here for you! How can we serve you in the name of Christ?”

If we are looking for an example, we need not look far for inspiration. Take a look at Jesus in the Gospels and the way he engaged those about him. We discover he often responded to a question *with a question*, not an answer. This is expressed in the account of Jesus when interrogated by temple leaders (Luke 20:1-6). Jesus responds in turn with a question. The conversation immediately deepens. It is an interaction that uncovers assumptions and rightly exposes their incongruence.

## IT'S HOW JESUS DID IT

**ANOTHER STORY OF INTEREST** is the account of Jesus with his disciples feeding a hungry crowd on a grassy outcrop (John 6:1-15). It's a ministry story. The passage is full of questions that prime the moment. Jesus asks Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” The question exposes some discomfort, not just for Philip but for the wider group. You can almost hear their misgivings; “Buy food ... with what and where??” It's an awkward moment. We've all had these. Without wanting to read too much into the text, there is a simmering anxiety which lies in close proximity to our own nervous disquiet when things are not clear. It whispers, “Hey, let's not go there.” The question Jesus asks, however, opens up a liminal space – a space of uncertainty yet one full of adventure and possibilities. A conversation follows between Jesus and the disciples, which culminates in a miracle. We discover God is present, and the kingdom of God is at hand. It is mysterious and yet earthed in a tangible moment of team ministry where feeding mouths and tempering crowd-hunger are realised.

## GOOD LEADERS RENEGOTIATE QUESTIONS

**LET'S STEP BACK A MOMENT** and consider the dynamics that might be involved in such a process. If you accept a question on the terms it is asked, then only certain answers are available. But what if you don't agree with the premise of the question? Keel reflects on this

impasse and offers a response. He states, "I spend a lot of time renegotiating questions. Why? You can often learn more from a well-informed question than a glibly offered answer." This suggests questions require more work. And they do! As Keel puts it, "It takes a lot more *depth, presence, and creativity* on the part of the leader to ask a well-informed, sensitive, and sincere question that engages the person on the other end of the relationship."

## ASKING QUESTIONS REQUIRES REAL LISTENING

**ASKING A WELL-INFORMED QUESTION IS A PROCESS** where listening is crucial. At one level this means listening to those around us, to what's happening in our neighbourhoods, and to the concerns, issues and challenges that are voiced through various channels. At another, it is listening to others in our congregations who may feel prompted by an idea, an urge.

One story that comes to mind is that of a talented but mildly spoken woman in her late forties. She was a member of the church congregation I lead. She wanted to use her writing talents and had this urge to start a neighbourhood newspaper. At the time she didn't have much thought on what such a venture might look like. Nor did she have the financial resources to realise her idea. A team of people would be needed. All sorts of questions came to mind but rather than launch into a line of questions that might undermine her enthusiasm, a group of individuals (including myself) gathered, asked questions and patiently listen to her dream. Others got involved, listened intently, asked questions and within six months a quarterly newsletter was distributed to 3,000 homes around the area, a ministry that continued for 8 years.

Listening well within a team is a pre-requisite if we want to cultivate a team environment of depth, presence and creativity. Lynne Baab, in a book called *The Power of Listening* suggests that "with decreasing resources, congregations need to be very sure they are engaging in exactly what God is calling them to do instead of committing themselves to scattered activities that don't accomplish their central purpose." It's a candid comment that draws attention to the role of discernment. While discernment is rooted in listening to God,

it is not just a “me and God” activity but one that involves more widely those within the community of faith.

Within the context of team ministry, this means taking the time to draw one another out. It means asking specific questions about where God is at work? How do we participate in what God is doing? What resources has God given us? What do each of us bring to the table? These are questions that call for a robust level of conversation, where listening is not simply debate or dialogue but rather being present to each other in the moment. It is an activity that helps a team to imagine the future together. Yet this practice requires time and thought be given to the place of questions. It requires of a team to give permission and develop a culture where well-thought out questions are fostered.

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