

Getting started in community mission

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*'The time is coming when matters will not be measured by the talent, or the ability, or by fine clothes, or by power to speak, or by being on platforms, or by listening to those upon platforms; but the time is coming when matters will be measured by those who have the truest faith, the deepest love, and the most sincere acts of obedience to their Lord and Saviour, and most devoted and strong imitation of his blessed example.'*¹
Lord Shaftesbury, 1867

Jesus and the greatness of service

Jesus' teaching, his message and the way he lived his life will always be challenging for the religious.

Why? Because all religion has an in-built tendency to be side-tracked by the peripheral aspects of God's message to humanity: the rules and rituals, the religious culture, liturgy and music, the politics and the platforms, the status of those who speak and teach. Those things that may have been established to carry the message end up over-taking the original intentions. Maintenance begins to dominate mission. Human *preferences* dominate God's *purposes*.

This is why Jesus attacked so strongly the religious leaders and scholars of his day and exposed the hypocrisy of those who claim to speak for God. Their great learning enabled them to claim status within the community, but their lives and the institutions they served did not reflect God's mission of love and redemption. Despite their claims, they simply did not reflect who God is.

And of course, status was not just a problem for the religious elite. Even after all the teaching and example Jesus had shared with his ragamuffin bunch of disciples over the previous three years, at their very last meal together they still managed to have an argument over who was the greatest.

And Jesus said to them:

'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that.

Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves...I am among you as one who serves.'

(Luke 22:25-27)

¹ *Ragged School Union meeting, April 1867. Quoted from an unpublished paper Shaftesbury and the Ragged School Union by Richard Turnbull (April 1995)*

² *Jesus speaks of the greatness of service in Matthew 20:26 and 23:11 and in Mark 9:35 and 10:43*

In our culture today, the lure and love of status is as deep and as strong as ever, not least in so much of Church culture. It's a constant danger for Christian leaders, especially those who write books and speak at conferences, because the desire for recognition and status is corrosive; it's the opposite of the self-sacrifice and wholeness found in the kingdom of God. Jesus could not be clearer: in God's eyes true greatness is found in the service of others². And as James summarises 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless' is this: to look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world' (1:27).

This is the way of Jesus: the way of service. And it was Jesus faithfulness to this way that meant 'God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above all other names' (Philippians 2:9).

Integrating words and actions

Micah's famous challenge to Israel in the 8th century was for the people of God not to indulge in meaningless sacrifices and offerings to God but to 'act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (6:8). Micah was talking to religious people but he wants to strip off the religious baggage of ritualism and return to the core of what God wanted.

- To *act* justly
- To *love* mercy
- To *walk* humbly with God

All of these phrases describe actions that require intentional and conscious steps – they are not merely nice thoughts or good intentions – they are purposeful actions. They speak of a faith that shows itself in deeds. They speak of a God who wants to change the way we act.

The gap between rhetoric and action is a major theme throughout the Bible. As well as Micah, other prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos condemn religious activity that fails to change the way people act³.

And into the New Testament, there is a constant emphasis on producing 'fruit' in the teachings of John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and John. After teaching that his true followers would be recognised by the fruit their lives produced, Jesus said 'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my father who is in heaven' (Matthew 7:21). And as James bluntly puts it: 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says' (1:22).

So the challenge of Jesus calls us to be people of action: activists for the kingdom of God. As we have seen in this book, he calls our church communities to be places of love and compassion, who publicly embody a different way of life and invites others to join. When our words and actions are integrated it produces a powerful witness.

³ Isaiah 1:13-17, Jeremiah &:2-8, Micah 3:1-2, Amos 5:11-15, 21-25

It will be through activism for compassion and justice that an unbelieving world can most clearly hear our message.

So how do we go about putting God's heart for justice and compassion into action? We should be sceptical about books and programmes that seem to offer blueprints for success. There is no guide that is going to give you all the answers. Your response to the challenge of Jesus will be unique, based on your experiences, passion, skills and the context in which you live and work, and the community of Christians you are part of.

Getting practical

But as you embark on the journey, we would recommend you think about the following...

Start where you are

Look at where God has put you day to day. Cherish the friends and contacts and opportunities that you already have. Explore what mission you live out in the places you know best and among the people you know. If you are busy at work, think about the opportunities that you have to make your workplace a more just place – for example could you introduce fair-trade coffee and explain why? If you are busy with young children, how can you witness to your friends the compassion and love of God – could you offer support to another parent who is struggling? Where ever you are the important thing is to start from there.

Remember the power of the ordinary

It is important to remember that its ordinary people who get things started. So many of the best initiatives have emerged from humble beginnings where one or two people get together to start something to make the world a better place. As Margaret Mead said, 'Never believe that a small group of dedicated people can't change the world. It's the only thing that ever has.'

Some of my heroes are ordinary people like Paul Burson, a Bank Manager who left his job to work as a Community Worker for Shaftesbury (Livability's former name) on a tough estate on the South Coast. He recently retired after 12 years work on the estate where his work has touched thousands and made a huge difference to that community. Paul is an ordinary Christian who has achieved the extra-ordinary for God⁴.

Journey with others

God calls us to his mission but he does not want us to be Lone Rangers. We are built for inter-dependence and community and it is so important to have friends who you can explore these issues with and together commit to pray, act and reflect together. If you are part of a small group at your church, could you run some sessions to discuss social justice? Or could you establish a group specifically to look at these issues for a set period? If you do not have these options, think about who would be a good person to ask to travel with you: to meet with regularly, to learn, pray and reflect together. It will make a huge difference to journey with others.

⁴ You can read more about Paul's work in the booklet *Mystery in the Ordinary: the story of the Shaftesbury Centre in Eastbourne*. It is available from the Livability Community Mission team by phoning 020 7452 2018.

Grow strong roots

Too often Christian social activism can depend too much on the overuse of certain popular passages (like the Good Samaritan or the Sheep and the Goats). These are great passages of scripture but there is so much more. It's important to root our activism in strong theology; to see how social justice is at the core of the biblical message not confined to a few isolated stories. Like the root of a tree, good theology will nourish and sustain our activism, especially when winds of opposition blow. We need to remember that responding to the challenge of poverty and injustice is about being more biblical and more faithful, not less so.

Try to take your church with you

Often if you are fired up with a passion for social justice, it is easy and understandable to get frustrated with those who do not share your passion. Disputes and debates will always be part of church life and this is good because we are talking about things that matter. But obviously it is not good when disputes lead to bitterness and broken relationships. It is important to try to communicate your passion in a way that others can engage with and grasp. Even if others are not in the same place as you now, they might be in the future and they might be your allies.

Often wise tactics can help others hear what you are saying and help them understand your passion. Involving your church in a national event such as the *Make Poverty History* or the *Micah Challenge* campaign, or something more community based such as *Soul in the City* or *HOPE 08* can sometimes help people connect with the message. Remember that action is a vital part of the reflection process so the best time to reflect theologically is often following attendance at a rally or a community project. Getting involved personally is often the best way that people are convinced of the importance of social justice.

Find common cause with other Christians and congregations

Activism for social justice is a great way to unite the Church around a common purpose. This is because it focuses outward on an issue, or on the local community, rather than looking inward, and experience shows how effective this is in bringing congregations to a united purpose. So it's good to ask what justice groups or community projects are already operating in your local area. Is there an opportunity for you to collaborate with them rather than start up something new?

Use the resources available!

Always remember that there are a lot of resources to help congregations engage with issues of justice and compassion. The Community Mission partnership exists to provide resources to help you develop your mission in your local area. Many of our resources are either free or available at very good value.

If you want more information about *Just People?* or if you want any advice about resources to help your church engage with these issues, please see www.communitymission.org.uk

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