

Making The Most of the Moment

The following are Dave Andrew's notes from one of the sessions he led at the Livability/Tearfund retreat in 2008

There are two kinds of time that we can use for building bridges to people in our community ¹ - Scheduled time and Casual time.

Scheduled time involves

- *Planned meetings*, dominated by the *clock*, and are usually *formal*.

Casual time involves

- *Opportune moments* orientated to the *event* and are usually *informal*.

Both kinds of contact are essential for building bridges in the community. *Formal* contacts are a way of connecting us with representatives of groups we may not normally have access to and may give us access to the resources of the group that they represent. *Informal* contacts are a way we can turn our connections into friendships that enable us to relate to one another, not in terms of our respective roles, but as real people.

Actually many *formal* meetings build barriers rather than bridges. The very *formality* of proceedings often keeps people apart. People relate to each other on the basis of their official roles, not as long-lost relatives in the human family. If *formal* meetings are to build bridges between people as people, the *formality* of the proceedings needs to be interspersed with *informality* so people can relate to each other authentically as brothers and sisters.

We may live in a modern society characterised by *formal* meetings rather than a traditional society characterised by *informal* gatherings, but all of us are aware that it is in our *informal* encounters that the real business of relationship building takes place.

¹ Adapted from Not Religion But Love p110-114

Tragically, many of us in community organisations - including church organisations - are often so preoccupied with our programs that we cannot respond to opportunities to develop community as they arise with the ebb and flow of daily life.

The Bible warns us not to be so preoccupied with what it calls the **chronos**, or 'the time' that we miss what it calls the **kairos**, or 'the moments', when people are more *open* than *closed* and we have the *opportunity* to develop significant *relationships* with one another

These **kairos** moments often pass as quickly as they come. So it is important that we grasp these moments when they come our way - or risk losing the opportunities they present forever.

In order to grasp these moments we must be either *schedule in time for these events* - or *throw out our schedules altogether!*

Some significant **kairos** moments include - **changes, cycles, conflicts, celebrations** and **chance** encounters. These are the times when even the most *closed* people in our society are *open* to relationships; and they represent our best opportunity to build bridges to people in the community who would usually be suspicious of anyone approaching them.

Kairos moment number one - a time of change

When there is a change, people are suspicious; but they are also curious. More often than not - at least for a little while - their curiosity usually exceeds their suspicion. And that time - when their curiosity usually exceeds their suspicion - presents us with a window of opportunity to introduce ourselves to people. The window of opportunity created by change may last a day to a week - but once a person becomes used to the change their interest subsides. They tend to close off again and the moment of openness passes.

1. What are examples of times of change that are kairos moments?
2. How can we make the most of these moments to connect?

Kairos moment number two - a stage in the life cycle

The stages in the life cycle also bring with them the opportunity for new or renewed relationships. Because it is a significant stage of the life cycle - birth, marriage, and death - that we are reminded of our common humanity - we remember the similarities that transcend our differences.

Everyone loves to show off a new baby. You can stop a total stranger in church and chat with them about their toddler. When the kids first start school, it's not hard to make contact with the other parents dropping off their children at the gate.

When they finally leave school, it's easy to talk to other parents about their concerns for the future of their kids. Weddings provide plenty of opportunities to get acquainted or reacquainted with people we have not had contact with.

Funerals can bring people together again who have not even seen one another, still less spoken to each other, for years and years.

3. How can we make the most of these kinds of moments to connect?

Kairos moment number three - open crowd conflicts

In community there is a phenomenon known as an 'open crowd'. It's an event in which 'people get together in a way that naturally draws other people in'. It's the complete opposite of a 'closed meeting' - it's an 'open gathering'. The indicators of an 'open crowd' are colour, and movement - and noise, lots of noise. If the colour and movement doesn't attract the crowd, then the noise usually will. Conflicts are often 'open crowds'.

There is nothing like a fight in the church, in the factory, or in the office, to bring people together. Ironically, conflicts can often break down the walls of alienation. Having to resolve a conflict can build bridges between people who never had to relate to each other before, as long as those who join in relate to people respectfully.

4. How can we make the most of these kinds of moments to connect?

Kairos moment number four - open crowd celebrations

The indicators of an 'open crowd' are as already said, colour and movement - and noise, lots of noise. Not only conflicts but also celebrations are often 'open crowds'.

At celebrations, people are often as happy to talk to a new person as to talk to an old friend. A church potluck dinner - where everybody in the congregation is invited to bring a plate of (hopefully their best home-cooked) food and share it with everybody else - is a classic example of a celebration that is an open crowd with great opportunities to connect with one another. Christmas and Easter celebrations can also open up the crowd at church for others.

However there is probably no better way to get to know an Aussie neighbour than to invite them over for a barbecue on Australia Day.

5. How can we make the most of these kinds of moments to connect?

Kairos moment numbers five - chance encounters

There are some people that will never respond to an invitation, no matter how many times we may try to invite them. The only way we may ever meet them is by chance.

Some people only feel safe to relate to others if they meet them by accident. It's the only way they can be sure that they are not being set up. An accidental meeting is - by definition - unpremeditated.

It may be that we come late to church and the only seat left is next to somebody we have never met before. It maybe we are scheduled on to a cleaning roster working with a team of people we have only just met before we got to work. On the other hand, it may be on the way out of the parking lot, we have a minor collision with another car driven by a stranger. All these accidents are opportunities to connect!

6. How can we make the most of these kinds of moments?

Critical levels in community networking

There are four levels at which we can build bridges to people².

1. **Critical Level One - at the level of our feet**
where we stand - in our locality
as compatriots - with a sense of *shared history*.
2. **Critical Level Two - at the level of our hands**
what we do - in our activity
as colleagues - with a sense of *shared industry*.
3. **Critical Level Three - at the level of our heads**
how we think - in our ideology
as comrades - with a sense of *shared solidarity*.
4. **Critical Level Four - at the level of our hearts**
how we feel - in our personality
as companions - with a sense of *shared intimacy*.
 - Who were Christ's compatriots? (The crowds)
 - Who were Christ's colleagues? (The disciples)
 - Who were Christ's comrades? (Peter, James, and John)
 - Who was Christ's companion? (John - 'the disciple Jesus loved')

² Adapted from D. Andrews et al [Building Better Communities](#)

1. Who do we think are, or could be, our compatriots?
2. Who do we think are, or could be, our colleagues?
3. Who do we think are, or could be, our comrades?
4. Who do we think is, or could be, our companion?

We need to recognise these four different levels of relationships and relate to people accordingly.

- We can expect *acceptance* from level one *compatriots*.
- We can expect *help* from our level two *colleagues*.
- We can expect *support* from our level three *comrades*.
- We can expect *sympathy* from our level four *companion(s)*.

Problems come from expecting too little or too much from people.

Note - If we are anything like Jesus we will be able to build bridges with hundreds of people at level one (the crowds), scores of people at level two (the disciples), a dozen people at level three (Peter, James and John) and one person at level four (John). This means that *at best* we can expect some degree of *acceptance* from hundreds of people, some degree of *support* from scores of people, some degree of *help* from a dozen or so people, and some degree of *sympathy* from one or two along the way.

For Jesus, it was enough to start his DIY community revolution.

5. Why is it unreasonable to expect *intimacy* with everybody?
6. What are the dangers of expecting *sympathy* from everybody?
7. What is it reasonable to expect from our compatriots?
8. What is it reasonable to expect from our colleagues?
9. What is it reasonable to expect from our comrades?
10. What is it reasonable to expect from our companion?

Crucial phases in community networking

If your experience of this long, slow process is anything like ours, no doubt you will discover you can go through four very distinct phases.

Not every group will go through these phases in exactly the same way we do. Your group may skip one or two or go forward a couple of steps and then go back a step before making any progress. However, I think the following phases are typical of the experience of most churches that try to *mix* with their communities

1. Crucial Phase One - the 'Angel Phase'

The 'Angel Phase' involves such *superficial connection* with people that everyone seems like an absolute 'Angel'. People reach out to one another, but keep one another at arm's length. They are *very pleasant, very polite, and very superficial*. Therefore, *the dream of real connectedness remains an unrealised dream*.

This phase lasts for as long as people can suppress their real thoughts and feelings. Once our deeply held thoughts and feelings erupt we move to the next phase.

2. Crucial Phase Two - the 'Devil Phase'

The 'Devil Phase' usually involves a *critical disconnection* from people when the ones who acted like 'Angels' start to act like 'Devils'. People are no longer so superficial. They act from deep within. *The reality emerges, or rather, erupts. Discussions turn into disputes and arguments turn into fights. The cosy dream of connectedness becomes a scary nightmare.*

This phase lasts as long as people can cope with the crisis that has erupted. Once we decide we can't cope with the crisis any longer, we can either try to deal with it by imposing law and order on the situation, or try to deal with it by exploring the issues in terms of love and understanding.

If we opt to impose law and order on the situation to deal with the chaos, chances are the relationships we have built will move back to the previous phase of *superficial - but comfortable - connection*. If we opt to explore love and understanding of the situation as a way to deal with the chaos, we can move on to the next phase.

3. Crucial Phase Three - the 'Human Phase'

The 'Human Phase' usually involves a *careful reconnection* with one another as people realize that others are not *Angels*, or *Devils*, but *Humans* - with good points and bad points - just like themselves. Therefore, *they no longer keep one another at a distance but embrace one another, sharing their hopes and their despair including the despair they share about not being able to make their dreams of real human connectedness come true.*

This phase lasts as long as people can cope with the discomfort associated with affirming those with whom we have unresolved conflict without resolving the conflict. Once we decide we can't cope with the discomfort any longer, we will either resume the conflict or resolve the conflict. If we decide to resume the conflict, people will either give up and go home or move back to *superficial - but comfortable - connection*. If we decide to resolve the conflict, we can move on to the next phase.

4. Crucial Phase Four - the 'Family Phase'

The 'Family Phase' involves a meaningful connection with people in the light of the realization that - 'They are Family!' People realize that regardless of whether they are friends or enemies, they are beautiful, but fallible, brothers and sisters who need one another and need to resolve their conflicts with one another in order to meet one another's needs. Only then can their dreams of real human connectedness come true.

Note In the light of this perspective, it's not surprising many churches end up with superficial connections rather than meaningful connections. Few are willing to endure the chaos and extend the care that is required to develop meaningful mutual connections with people.

If we are to create meaningful connections rather than superficial connections, then we need to encourage one another to endure the chaos and extend the care that is required. For there is no other way that we can ever hope to make our dream of community come true.

1. What are the four crucial phases in building bridges to people?
2. Which phase do we think we are up to our in community now?
3. What is the evidence we have that we are in a particular phase?
4. How can we progress towards the final phase or strengthen it?