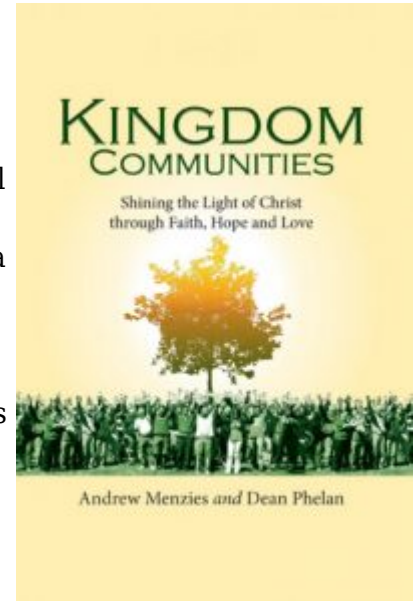




KINGDOM COMMUNITIES IN QUEENSLAND

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At the beginning of this story Queensland Church of Christ was barely viable. The book *Kingdom Communities*^[1] tells the story of its transformation. Authors Dean Phelan and Andrew Menzies discuss the turnaround in this video with Alan Roxburgh.^[2] The authors begin by introducing one another. Dean Phelan has a background in Organisational Psychology and in regional governance within the Church of Christ. He became CEO of the Queensland Church of Christ about ten years ago, at a time when the seventy or so churches, many small and many insular, had become disconnected from a large Church of Christ care sector. And around one hundred and twenty well developed institutions in various aspects of social care had lost any sense of theological purpose. Andrew is Principal of Stirling College for the Church of Christ and Deputy Chancellor of the University of Divinity in Australia. He became the dialogue partner for Dean and the Queensland team as they sought to move towards healing. Andrew and Dean agree that finding a new language was the key to this transition.



Video to 6 min

Andrew describes a dialogical loop, where he was able to learn from intuitive innovation on the ground in Queensland and suggest and clarify a theological language to describe it. When he approached the book, he began with Newbigin's question about how to win the west; how to understand the gospel in a western context where people are not going to come to church. As he wrestled with the New Testament two themes emerged. The one was 'harvest' and the other 'ecclesia'. Leonardo Boff's work on liberation theology and the base communities of Brazil helped to provide a way to understand 'ecclesia'. A case study on [Urban Neighborhoods of Hope](#) brought more clarity, where small groups of people move into very poor neighbourhoods, to seek, alongside their neighbours, kingdom life in these contexts. For Andrew something comparable was happening in Queensland but on the scale of an entire denominational system.

Video 6 min to 13 min

Dean remembers the story of the early days of his work in Queensland. He gives an account of a gathering of leaders, where church planting was proposed as the solution to the church's fragility. He was able to challenge this. What purpose would be served by planting new churches? A different starting place emerged: 'how might we have more of the light of Christ shining in this area?' An exploration of areas of darkness on this Australian Sunshine Coast revealed an issue with men's health: high suicide rates, loneliness and isolation. From this a successful Men's Shed project emerged, which thrived, with two hundred attending per week, and eventually prayer groups and baptisms. However among the Queensland Church of Christ leadership some were still captive to the familiar language of repentance and conversion, 'the foot of the cross'. It became apparent to Dean and others that a fresh theological framework, language and practices were needed.

Video 13 min to 23 min.

Alan encourages Andrew to describe more fully how Boff's insights shed a light on these developments. Andrew observes that a clergy-laity dualism has professionalised Christian work away from ordinary Christians. The changes in Queensland made room for grassroots initiatives, often outside the skill set of clergy. Boff helpfully clarifies that clergy do have a role in ecclesial, sacramental support, but ministry more broadly can be taken up by the Christians on the ground, listening and responding. Andrew also explains that a new language of 'kingdom access points' or 'kingdom communities' empowered the vast network of Church of Christ social care institutions in Queensland.

Video 23 min to 28 min.

Here Alan asks Dean and Andrew to unpack this further. Talk of empowering the laity has been commonplace for many decades. Andrew reflects that across the church 'the house has been divided.' Different sectors within the church, operating within and outside traditional structures, have been in reaction to one another, competing with one another. In Queensland there has been a unified response. Christians have been empowered to innovate and experiment on the ground. The denominational system has listened and learned under an overall aim for the light of Christ to shine more brightly across the area. Exponential growth has occurred in the churches and in the care sector (kingdom communities) but this wasn't the aim. Kingdom and 'shining light' were the aims.

Video 28 min to 36 min.

Alan asks Dean how it was made possible for people to be enabled to become a unified kingdom people. Dean explains that they celebrated many stories of 'kingdom access points', 'kingdom communities', which may be church or care home, through which communities connected with God. This new language was important. Andrew explains; a 'language house' is a phrase which describes the way in which language creates a social imaginary. A typical Christian language house, for example, sets Christians over against the world. God lives inside our systems and our buildings. The language house which was emphasised in Queensland was one which saw that people were invited to join in mission with God who is active in the wider world.

Video 36 min to 44 min.

Andrew and Dean share a story which illustrates how limiting a language house may be. A pastor expressed the intention to plant a new church in a poor area of Northern Queensland. But this was resented by churches already present, and unwelcome to the locals. Again the challenge was articulated: why plant another church? According to Andrew, for the pastor, this 'rocked his world.' Instead the Church of Christ executive sought to discover, from the community, what the community needed. What would it look like for this community to access the Kingdom of God. With this insight they created a café orientated towards young mums. For Dean, 'God showed up'. Many local people collaborated to create a thriving community centre.

Video 44 min to 50 min.

The Church of Christ in Queensland encouraged small groups of local leaders across Queensland to ask the question: 'what would it look like to have more of the light of Christ shining in this place?' As they explored for an answer, in an action-learning manner, they had encouragement and support from the

denomination. Corporately their approach is neither hub and spoke, which tends to be controlling, nor a radical distributed network, which can leave initiatives floundering. Andrew describes their modified distributed network, where the emphasis is on the local node but with back-room governance support. In conclusion Alan draws out that the *Kingdom Communities* approach is never binary, but tends to take a both/and stance with a theology which emerges from stories.

Video 50 min to 56 min.

[1] Andrew Menzies and Dean Phelan. *Kingdom Communities: Shining the Light of Christ through Faith, Hope and Love*. Reservoir, Victoria: Morning Star Publishing, 2018. Available <https://wipfandstock.com/kingdom-communities.html> or via kindle.

[2] Dean Phelan shared the story in this journal at an earlier stage. See 'The Light of Christ in Queensland' Journal of Missional Practice, Issue 7, Spring 2016. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/light-of-christ-in-queensland/>