



LEAVING EDEN

It was early September 1997, and as Britain was mourning the loss of its favourite Princess, I was moving into a far-from-palatial council house on a rather unsavoury street in south Manchester. At 24 years old I was actually one of the older members within a team of young adults who together had conspired to follow the example of Christ and ‘move into the neighbourhood’. Our missional initiative was given the name Eden, and though we didn’t know it at the time, we were joining the vanguard of a new movement of incarnational ministry in Britain’s most challenging urban communities. We were simultaneously discovering in the UK what Neil Cole was discovering in the USA, that ‘bad people make good soil - there’s a lot of fertilizer in their lives!’^[1]In the years that followed, our project spawned numerous offshoots and eventually became a national network - the Eden Network - made up of teams of missional activists forming in Manchester, Bradford, Sheffield, Hull, Middlesbrough, Liverpool and numerous locations around London.

My own role within the network turned out to be quite different from the way I originally envisaged it.

When we started out we were jacked up on stories of 19th century Sally Army missionaries heading off to India with all their worldly goods packed in a coffin. We prayed naive yet earnest prayers that we might pour out our lives, give our very best years, the rest of our days if called for, to see the redemption of the desolate community around us. The reality was that I wasn't very good at staying put and building long-term relationships. After 3 years I was getting itchy feet and ready to have a go at something else, and so the year 2000 marked my first exit from Eden... but not my last. It turned out that God planned to harness my restless, wandering spirit and transfigure it into a pioneering vocation, in order to extend gospel frontiers.

By 2003 the contagious missional energy present in the first Eden team had led to the planting of half a dozen related works around the city. However, like many fledgling ventures there was a lack of co-ordination and a trajectory towards burnout. Some of the leaders involved in Eden behind the scenes were smart enough to acknowledge this and in one of those peculiar twists shot through with divine comedy I was invited back to put a hand to the tiller and steer the emerging network into the future God had in store. I recall returning from a trip to India with my wife and the first assignment of my new role was to clear up the fallout from an awful documentary that the BBC broadcast about our work in East Manchester. It was something of a baptism of fire for me as a young leader, and yet it turned out to be a blessing in disguise as it leached to the surface a whole host of issues that would otherwise have gone unaddressed.

So from 2003 to 2013 I was privileged to serve the Eden Network as its Director, which I understood to mean giving my attention to two related things: the health and the growth of the network. With a name like 'Eden' it will come as no surprise that we began to borrow organic language in order to describe our organisational life. As teams serving young people and families in a variety of different urban contexts we would get together and speak of cultivating an Eden culture. As we extended around the nation it became apparent that sustaining our growth required giving attention to an ecosystem of interconnected resources including specialist roles such as fundraising, recruitment, training, administration and marketing. And of course over time the organic language also became very much embedded in our thinking around discipleship too. If you visit the Eden Network website today you'll see that the tagline displayed there is 'growing urban heroes'. It is a distillation of the Eden's core mission - to reach out to young people and their families and to journey alongside them offering them the opportunity to discover Christ and to begin to grow in Him for their own good and the good of the wider world around them.

As I reflect now on what might be the most significant lessons learnt over that decade of stewarding the Eden vision four things stand out.

1. Faith is concrete, not abstract
2. Proximity is essential
3. Neighbourhood is different to network

4. Formation and transformation are connected

For the remainder of this paper I'll unpack these themes, before wrapping up by sharing a little about why I eventually moved on.

Concrete Faith

Over its 17 year history 400+ people have been part of Eden teams, serving in almost 30 different locations. The majority (but certainly not all) tend to join whilst in their twenties, having been nurtured in the Christian tradition from childhood. This heritage is both a help and a hindrance, as along with many good things a church background offers, there are aspects of mainstream-style faith that need to be unlearned in an edgy missional context. Perhaps the hardest to shift is a tendency toward abstraction. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word Abstract as '*Existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence.*' Years of singing songs and listening to sermons can produce a sort of secular-sacred dualism, with the secular being the concrete world of mess and disorder, and the sacred being an abstract realm of pure ideas and ideals. Thus, one of the hardest but most vital lessons for us was to learn to find God in the ordinary, and indeed the profane.

When I first got involved in Eden it was because I found it easy to get fired up by a big idea. What I had to learn, the hard way, was that ideas don't change the world, people do. Ideas can be powerful motivators, but until people translate them into *concrete* actions, they remain utterly impotent. That's why the bible isn't a book of sublime truths, but a story of faith being worked out in gardens, in cities, on battlefields, on hillsides and lakesides; with bread and fish, with waves and boats, with swords and ears, and with crosses and nails. It's also why James says 'Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.' James 2:18

One important way that this idea of concrete faith became embedded is in the way that every Eden team member pledged to flesh out five 'distinctives'.^[2] There's a very intentional point about language here; as in the life of the network the word 'values' was perceived to be too abstract, and therefore was deliberately avoided as a descriptor of the things at the heart of the movement's shared self-concept. Less ethereal than values, or even than beliefs, the 'distinctives' are understood to be concepts bearing shape and form in time and space. For instance, when we talked about 'Being Incarnational' we did so as residents of specific streets, on specific estates, with distinctive histories and distinctive issues. Generalisation and abstraction simply don't cut it. Similarly, when we talked about 'Being Purposeful' we could say 'these are our objectives for the next term and here's what we're doing to fulfil them.' Thus, the five distinctives form a framework within which innovative and impactful ministry can be developed within the uniqueness of varied community contexts.

The Proximity Principle

I've always loved '*The Far Side*' cartoons by Gary Larson. One of my favourites portrays a village of straw huts with a crowd of scantily clad natives staring anxiously as a fellow villager writhes on the

floor in the throes of a slow death. The caption reads: 'Crossing the village Mowaka is overpowered by army ants. Later, bystanders were quoted as saying they were horrified but didn't want to get involved.'

Larson's humour works because he takes recognisable social mores and then stretches them to absurdity. In this example he's lampooning the social phenomenon known as the 'bystander effect'. Anyone who lives in a big city is likely to be familiar with that feeling of witnessing an unpleasant situation unfolding and hoping that someone else will deal with it, someone closer, someone better equipped, anyone but you! And so nobody helps at all. The strange thing about the bystander effect is that it is an inverse law - the more people there are around, the less likely it is that there will be any intervention. If you're alone in the park walking by the duck pond and see a child drowning you'll try to do something about it yourself, but if there are lots of people around each one will be hoping that another will intervene.

Let me just stretch this point a bit more, and describe how I found it to have direct application to urban mission. Firstly we need to understand the two kinds of proximity, or closeness. There's straightforward *physical* distance - the first one who wades into the duck pond to save the child is likely to be the closest. Then there's *relational* distance - nobody would hesitate to jump in if it were their own son or daughter drowning in the pond! In missional terms, physical proximity is a good thing - being someone's next-door neighbour is a great platform from which to grow a bond of empathy and respect. And relational proximity is great too - after all, you don't need to live on someone's street to have a significant role in their life. Through Eden we learned that when the two proximities intersect the potential for transformation increases exponentially. We would deliberately seek to get 'too close for comfort', choosing a life of proximity, in both meanings of the word, to those living without hope and without God.

There are factors that work against the proximity principle however, such as the way we naturally seek to defend our lives, the 'Englishman's home is his castle', after all. Moving into the neighbourhood is the easy part - anybody can rent a house in a dodgy street. The hard bit is becoming part of the community because this involves the removal of our layers of relational insulation. Even for our veteran team members, there's the temptation to gradually allow the door to close over time - literally and metaphorically. That's why we need to be in teams rather than flying solo, in order to support one another and hold one another accountable to the way of life that we've agreed to flesh out. Frequent time together with our teammates praying, worshipping and bible-reading will also serve as a healthy friction, working like a pumice on the sole of a hiker's foot, restoring sensitivity and feeling.

Network and Neighbourhood

During my time with Eden I would often be asked to give lectures and seminars to various groups, and one of the questions that I found provoked good discussion wherever I went was the question 'what is local'? Typically what one person means by 'local' is very different to what another means, despite using the very same word. The phrase 'local church' is a perfect case in point. To some this would mean a Christian community with roots in a very tightly bounded geography. Others would apply the same

phrase to refer to a body of believers drawn from a wide catchment area who gather in a place that could be half an hour's drive from where they actually live. Whilst wrestling with the question 'What is local in the 21st Century?' I found myself helped by Bishop Graham Cray who says that local has become two things: *neighbourhood*, and *network*[3]. Being part of Eden brought some interesting insights into the complexity of the relationship between neighbourhood and network.

By way of defining the terms, let's first take the idea of neighbourhood. This is our domestic location, where the basic stuff of life happens such as washing, sleeping, watching TV. It's our residential address, although it may or may not feel like 'home' in the emotional sense. Secondly, the idea of network. This would be our social and/or vocational location; the places our work takes us, or the places where we meet and make friends. These days this could even be an online location, such as Facebook. The thing to understand about neighbourhood and network is that they coexist to greater or lesser degrees in all our lives. And in fact the degree to which network or neighbourhood are significant to us will change over time. This has huge implications for the way we engage in mission.

Take for example one of our family friends, Rachel. She's of mixed ethnic heritage, multilingual, well educated and highly mobile. She's currently living in Venezuela and who knows where she'll end up next? Contrast her life with that of Danny from one of the Eden youth clubs. Danny's a school dropout, a sofa-surfer, his ankle fitted with an electronic tag the last time I saw him. The magistrate has laid out clear restrictions on where he can and can't go, at what times of day. He's literally stuck on his estate. Rachel is the epitome of a network lifestyle, and Danny a classic example of neighbourhood.

When it comes to the missional significance of network vs neighbourhood many so-called 'cutting edge' thinkers and writers make grand claims about the diminishing significance of neighbourhood as we have moved into a *network society*. My experience conflicted with that and I became convinced that the sort of people who write books are likely to inhabit network society, and rarely visit a council estate, so of course they think that neighbourhood has diminished in significance - because they are simply describing their own network world. People like Danny don't write books, but if they did, network society would not feature in them, because the dominant reality of their lives remains, for better or worse, their neighbourhood.

During the years of Eden's growth and development arguments emerged in the wider missional discourse about whether churches ought to be *attractional* or *incarnational*. I naturally sided with the champions of incarnational ministry, until I eventually realised that the binary distinction between the two was overly simplistic. In particular my experience of spending a couple of years living in London in order to launch a network of Eden teams there convinced me that the 'good of the city' requires a mixed economy of both network and neighbourhood churches. The so-called 'attractional' churches are best suited to reach people living network lives; 'incarnational' churches are best suited to reach people more rooted in and defined by neighbourhood.

A connected challenge, that I always felt quite acutely, especially given the amount of travelling that my role involved, was the calling to prioritise the local. In order to bear faithful witness to our

neighbourhood, we have to be visible to and available for our neighbours. There's a bit of theology embedded in this challenge because, in part, the way we express what it means to be incarnational is by accepting a degree of self-limitation. We may not have a great deal of control over the hours we work but we may choose to limit the number of weekends we travel away from the neighbourhood - in order to invest ourselves locally. We may choose not to travel to the out-of-town supermarket once a week but to support shops closer to home, getting to know the staff and other customers there as we become 'regulars'.

Formation and Transformation

Looking back to the person I was when I first joined Eden makes me cringe a little. Yet in all the years of the Eden network we haven't found anyone who was ready to join a team as 'the finished article'. The norm is to spend the first year wrestling with feelings of being unprepared and inadequate. Therefore, even as we're taking our first tentative steps outward toward our neighbours we must also start to address our inner state by getting intentional about the nurture of our soul and the growth of our character. During my time at Eden we adopted the word 'formation' to describe this process. Unlike the information-based approaches to learning that many of us were familiar with, formation can't be a solo pursuit; rather, we grow in community with others. Formation isn't about easy answers but is about a generative wrestling with the complex questions that arise as we pursue the mission of God amongst the people he sends us to. A certain confidence is needed, to trust that as we obey, Christ's image will be formed in us, and will become more and more apparent to those around us.

Our own commitment then to personal formation becomes an integral part of the process of community transformation. As a coffee lover I've often noted that transformation is rather like percolation - it involves heat and pressure, and there's a generally quite a lot of coughing and spluttering before anything good appears. However, the process is reliable, and eventually a flow comes, with every drip and every trickle being worth it in the end. Now, lest I allow metaphor to obscure reality, let me say that when I talk about heat and pressure I mean that life at the frontier of urban mission can be pretty visceral. I believe that there has been divine protection of our team over the years as we have often been right in the thick of some very scary situations. We encounter violence, threat, injustice and tragedy in the neighbourhood, often involving those we know and care about, and it brings with it hurt and angst. In this context, formation means learning how to prevent the onset of spiritual calcification, or an emotional death by a thousand cuts. It means to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15).

Moving on

So why did I eventually move on from Eden? There are probably two main reasons for that. Firstly, I felt that it was time for the network to have the benefit of new leadership with fresh ideas. Secondly, it had become apparent to me over time that I'm at my best when I'm pioneering new ventures. After leading Eden into a series of new contexts, I sensed the Lord inviting me and my family through a very different door. Both in my head and my heart I was becoming convinced about the need for getting upstream and

offering a different kind of intervention and support to children and families on the edge of chaos. And so I'm now settling into a new role in a new city, running a Christian charity in the Tyneside area called Safe Families for Children. I have no worries about Eden because I'm totally convinced of the calling and commitment of all those who continue living out that vision. They will always be my heroes.

[1]Neil Cole, *Organic Church*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2007) 175.

[2]The five distinctives are: we are incarnational; we are relational; we are purposeful; we are countercultural; we are holistic. See <http://eden-network.org/about-eden/values/>

[3]Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council working group, *Mission Shaped Church*, (London: Church House, 2004) 4.



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Matt is married to Grace and they have two young sons. In his spare time he is an avid reader and writer holding Master's degrees in Management, and in Theology & Politics, and having authored 3 books the most recent titled *Concrete Faith*.