



PARISH COUNCIL MISSION

At the end of a master's degree in Missional Leadership in 2010 I began a personal journey that set up unique opportunities for engagement with society, including a landslide result in local elections, and raised and answered some fundamental questions about mission.

A key question became: what does full-on Christian engagement with society look like? My arena of operations was the old mining village of Peasedown St John in Somerset, near the city of Bath, which has 7000 residents. The answers to my questions were more profound than I might have anticipated. The *Together in Mission* Master's in Missional Leadership^[1] threw up an enormous number of fundamental theoretical, theological and operational issues, most of which boiled down to a single

question framed by a phrase from Alan Hirsch's writing: what is *missional insertion*?^[2] He suggests that in a given locality a would-be mission-maker forms caring relationships with likeminded people and establishes a community that lives openly towards society and effects 'missional insertion'; but he did not say what that would look like in my village.

In 2010 the vicar of the parish church was using a strap line for a set of society touching initiatives generated at a PCC (Parochial Church Council) away-day. It was taken from Nehemiah's writing, and it was: 'rebuilding the spiritual walls of Peasedown'. It was on the away-day that I first suggested the need to engage fully with the formal institutions of the village. I found myself asking what the community would look like if Christian mission were successful in every way. You would expect many aspects of personal and public life to flow more easily, for there to be an abundance of respect for people and for their aspirations and dreams; and for resources to be put where they were fundamentally most effective.

I formed a wish list for many aspects of community life. I attended the first meeting of a community association that was aiming at supporting all aspects of human flourishing and at fielding candidates in local parish council elections. They called themselves Peasedown 1st. In a whirlwind turn of events I found myself elected as chair. I felt like someone who went into a shop to buy an apple and came out with a Mercedes.

The community group members agreed on many things: that governance at parish council level is not about party politics, but good management; that communication with residents should be excellent: the listening should be considerate and thorough, and the flow of information should be accurate and timely; that motives should be straightforward, honest and impartial; that public funds should flow toward the most strategic needs; and that shortfalls in resources could potentially be made up from caring cooperation. When I visited the home of one of them I found pinned up around his workspace the counterpart of all the lists that I had been generating, the agencies, the businesses, the clubs and associations. I had met someone with the same wish list.

Many of the group were strategic players and various ones carried the pivotal initiative at significant points. Every house was visited, a series of high quality newsletters were distributed and a good quality website was established and kept up to date. We registered as a minor political party to allow residents to see our logo and understand the seriousness of what we were trying to do. Over six months we prepared for the ballot box and fielded seventeen candidates for all the seventeen seats that were the parish council.

There was a very high turn out because of the unitary authority election on the same day and the national referendum on proportional representation. We could not claim responsibility for the turn out, but the election result did have something to do with us. The Peasedown 1st candidate with the lowest number of votes was significantly ahead of the highest scoring candidate who was not among our group. We had witnessed a landslide; and had a clear popular mandate to do the job.

There was enormous "under the belt" opposition from a faction among the outgoing councillors; and in

this climate, one informal meeting of the newly elected councillors stands out in my mind. In the unfortunate absence of a meeting properly convened by the appropriate person, we had nevertheless decided to sign the necessary papers, and we intended to prepare for the statutory first formal meeting. People were deflated, cross and quiet. I apologised to the non-religious members of the group and read the story from Nehemiah's account of taking up the governance of Jerusalem in. The opposition of the outgoing vested interest leaders quite obviously mirrored our story in tiny detail. It was at that meeting that I recommended that an able ex-councillor with more skill in day to day management than I, take up the chairmanship. From that point in the story, everyone got on with the obvious tasks, each in her or his own way.

My wife was at a conference about community support and told the parish council's story. A visiting specialist privately asked her what would make us different to our predecessors. In their discussion they noted on a scrap of paper the three words 'identity, values and culture' and she gave it to me when she got home. I carried it in my pocket for three months until my fellow councillors were fed up with hearing me talk about these three foundational concepts.

Our *identity* is as a group of ordinary people, which, for a number of reasons, has chosen to serve its fellow residents by making life better in its community. Our values are friendliness, cooperation, inclusion, enthusiasm, a can-do attitude, informality, open communication and provision of quality information, generosity with skills, talents and hospitality, taking advice, owning up to flaws and failures, celebration, and kind of British quirkiness that shows itself in an optimistic sense of humour. *Culture* is longer in the forming. Its key feature among us is responsiveness to one another and to residents, many of whom we do not know well. Two years after coming together I notice that a second feature is an ongoing individual readiness to probe, prod at issues, think creatively, and make things happen. Where we neglect our foundational identity, values and culture we are likely to get things wrong; or at least, keep success superficial.

I am a backroom thinker. Some of the thoughts that have come to me about this unusual turn of events follow below; and the first is that it is a responsibility of leaders to model the liveable life, because if the leaders cannot cope, no one else stands a chance.

The role of a council is not to manage everything the community needs, but to provide a framework in which flourishing flourishes, and to smile on every worthy venture. Reaching the grass roots is impossible for governors. Connection with the lived life can only be delivered by personal relationship; and therefore the compassionate governor must measure success at a step *beyond* her or his immediate actions.

While many worldwide communities are harassed by foolishly overbearing governance born out of vested interest, an opportunity exists in Peasedown St John to treat each resident with dignity, both face to face and in policy choices. In our early days it does not appear to be necessary to create an 'officer class' or 'leadership guild'. And clearly the limiting factor is not money. It relates more to good perspective, vision for a liveable life, honest motives, willingness to serve, and buy-in from a reasonably

large number of people.

My school teacher's experience tells me that the thoughts a person wakes with in the morning are important, for in them are their best shot at imagining a better future. I think they should be honoured; and within a family they often are. In the civic arena a small revolution will be needed for that to happen, but why would those without vested interest not try to find a way to tap this unlimited source of energy?

The three active zones seem to me to be: those areas where a parish council does its job poorly (in our case because we are playing catch up); those where there are powers to act, but few councils explore the possibilities because money is limited; and the area that excites me most: where a person's waking idea has or could have started a project that will raise the sense of flourishing in the community, but which lies beyond what a council can finance, yet which it can smile on in so many ways. This could be an artists' group, a local gym, a self financing youth service or a bereavement support group. The infrastructure for gathering this wispy crop of dreams is not well developed, but the potential benefit is so desirable that I know it will continue to be one of the areas that draw my attention, since it carries its own resources with it; and such an enormous potential for wellbeing.

Theology in the minds of we who were reared in the West is in short supply. We lack its ideas-base and its vocabulary, and like the person who doesn't 'do sport' we avoid conversations about it. Several theological issues arose for me as my thinking about community building tiptoed forward.

First comes a point from my MA thinking. Jesus actively maintained a psychological and theoretical *safe space* into which others sensed they could step. Once there, they realised that they were part of the company of the inheritors of the universe; and once that had dawned on them, they had no particular need to be grasping or stingy since they were the heirs of all things. They also realised that even death could not touch them. I came also to the conclusion that a common reduced view of Evangelicalism was such an oversimplification that it ceased to represent reality. It had become no more than the promotion of a message, and the message was no more than a formula; and so a more connected worldview and theory base was needed.

The most significant theological issue for me, and this will seem absurd to my friends of the last two years, is whether it is legitimate, in God's eyes, to make common cause with those for whom serving God is not a quest; yet this is an ongoing concern for many church communities. I conclude that to make common cause is appropriate; and I tell myself that these fellow workers and friends are his offspring too; and many of them wiser than me.

The second principle is even more theologically fundamental, and is that God has always been on a mission to form a family among humankind and that this mission pre-dates his pressing of the start button of the creation project. His intentions, I conclude, have never changed.

Next comes a view of the mission of the church. The word 'mission' has the force of 'sending' rather

than 'adventurous task' as it does in the movies. However, within the story of Peasedown St John, I suggest that mission is really God's summons to join Him in his ongoing *self-sending* to do as much good to people as they are humanly able to receive at any point in time, and in the most proactive way.

I must emphasise that if my theological view of reality is valid it is not about trying to knobble individuals as potential converts to a religious point of view. If a Creator is a reality, he is speaking loudly for himself. I am embarrassed to think that my colleagues and friends among the councillors and residents should think me as on a *mission to knobble*. As a believer I am on a much more devastating mission: to define reality in such a way that life works for everyone.

My final point may be described by a pictorial metaphor. A while ago I imagined members of my church group engaged in various community improvement projects near a bus stop in my village. I imagined that when passers-by asked what we were doing, we told them about the practical tasks that we were engaged in, but when they asked why we were doing them, we directed them to a sheet of paper tied to the bus stop that gave a written account of our motivation. The simple idea was that the church should serve society in ways that society considers helpful and offer an explanation only as a secondary objective.

The point of telling the story is that it occurred to me that the community improvement activities, the bus stop, the sheet of paper and its message were also metaphors for the many elements from which communities and individuals may select if their wish is to *insert themselves missionally* into society.

Summing it all up, every personal or communal missional journey should lead us uniquely to find allies and engage with society, raise and answer pivotal questions and ask new ones; and should always result in us holding up the sky so that there is space in which people can say that they really are alive. The health warning for the would-be mission-maker is that you might set out to buy an apple and end up with a Mercedes.

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1. Now renamed *Springdale College: Together in Mission*.
<http://springdalecollege.org.uk/courses/accredited-courses/ma-in-missional-leadership> ¹
 2. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) ¹



Andrew Fraser

Andrew Fraser is a Biology and primary school teacher with educational qualifications and a Master degree in Missional Leadership. He is actively involved in interpreting the church's message for well being of grass roots local communities.