



REPLY TO ALAN ROXBURGH'S RAPID RESPONSE

I so appreciate that someone of Alan's standing in the missional world would read and respond to my thoughts on community building. Quite thrilled actually. I respond here after re-reading my article with his thoughts in mind, but also in the light of two significant events that took place between receiving his responses and this follow up. The first event was that after over 20 years of founding and leading the UNOH community I gave in my resignation. The second was a two night intentional community building experience I led with the global leaders of Mesa <http://mesa-friends.org> in the fields of Lop Buri, Thailand, to bond and prepare the group in solidarity together to ready them for their 5 days of deliberations. The later included the likes of Brian McLaren, Steve Chalke and over forty other key missional leaders from both Majority and Western Worlds. Given these further experiences and insights

I offer five responses.

First, we can dismiss too easily as utopian what is attempted on the margins and the edges of power. This is so often where change and innovations come from. Whether in intentional Christian communities, New Monastics, New Friars or even Jesus of Nazareth, marginalised insights in sharing life are too often at first ignored, then vilified and then finally adopted. I hope the Christian church will be more open to the experiments on the edge, for the sources of renewal and revitalising may well be found there. That what we learnt in UNOH could help facilitate such a high profile group coming together to bond and create amazing collaborations confirmed this for me.

Second, defining community simply as 'a sense of belonging that is the fruit of common commitments and personal investment' does not make this idealised and out of reach for ordinary people. Indeed, this definition follows Jean Vanier's notions of community and invites all Christians to take seriously the love of our particular God with particular neighbours in a particular place. That this tri-dimensional way of sharing life is not far away from any one of us is what I learnt both from UNOH experiences as well as sharing with Mesa friends as we shared life in solidarity with rural Thai labourers.

Third, taking seriously the role of inviting and facilitating liminal space as a crucial dimension in community building is radical, but only in the sense of calling us to the roots of our faith and what makes us human. That I could experience this sense facilitated intentional liminal space with the Mesa Friends, Richard Rohr inspired Men's Rites of Passage (in Perth, Scotland in July 2012) and our own UNOH community and neighbours, with varieties of diverse people creating real senses of belonging and purpose confirmed for me the importance of the lost art of community building, but also that it is difficult and possible.

Fourth, when I look back now at all the activities and efforts over 20 years of living and serving in urban poor neighbourhoods with UNOH, I suspect that the attention given in community formation with neighbours, UNOH workers and broader church is what will last. That which didn't have this bonding together might be remembered, but that which was experienced in 'faith, hope and love' together will last forever.

Fifth, to help create diverse 'containers' of common rhythms and practices to incubate the process of community formation is a real challenge. This is especially so where global and corporate culture - which for me includes the serious limitations of free market competition and cyberspace identities - provides false and superficial belonging, even in churches. Addicted to this pseudo-community that only perpetuates loneliness and isolation, will Christians see the need to detox their globalised self and help intentionally nurture, create and maintain a real sense of community that is grounded in the reality of God, neighbours and place? I hope we can. Ultimately, I don't believe we are post-community, but in the early days of finding new ways to share life centred in Jesus in our new urban world.



Ash Barker

Ash Barker with wife Anji and their children live in Klong Toey, the largest slum in Bangkok. Since early 2002, the Barkers have shared life there focusing on building relationships, discipleship, church planting, education, creating employment and recreational options so that their neighbourhood could be transformed through Jesus from the bottom up. Until October 2013, Ash was the founding director of Urban Neighbours Of Hope (www.unoh.org),

which the Barkers started in Springvale (Melbourne, Aus) in 1993 and now have eight teams of Christian workers loving God and neighbours in some of the neediest urban neighbourhoods in Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland and Bangkok. After over 20 years leading and founding UNOH, the Barkers will move to Birmingham, August 2014 with Ash to join the faculty at Springdale College. The Barkers also plan to be immersed in the life of an urban poor neighbourhood, this time a Birmingham public housing estate, to seek transformation through Jesus there. An inspiring speaker and lecturer, Ash is the author of seven books including 'Make Poverty Personal' and 'Slum Life Rising'. He completed his PhD addressing a Christian response to the rise of slums (MCD University of Divinity) and is the Convener of the 'International Society for Urban Mission' (www.newurbanworld.org).