

Study-Leave Report: “Effective Ministry”

Background:

In March / April 2014 I had the privilege of being invited to attend the biannual International Gathering of the “Grain of Wheat” Ministries held in Switzerland. My wife Clare & I were asked to provide keynote addresses, daily devotions and work-shop input at the Conference and also be available for pastoral care during the week of the Conference.

Grain of Wheat is an international ministry begun after WW2 by Jean André, a well-resourced grain importer based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Jean had a concern for children affected by the War and felt moved to purchase properties in Switzerland that became bases for bringing groups of children for respite and rest. Children were brought to the camps initially from Germany and France, but over the years that extended to other countries affected by war, unrest and poverty. While a number of children are still to this day brought to Switzerland, the ministry has steadily been indigenised into more than 30 countries with many leaders and volunteer helpers being trained by Grain of Wheat International.

Since the post-war years approximately 4 million children have been ministered to and many families encouraged and resourced. Grain of Wheat now has a significant presence in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the former Russian confederation, parts of Asia, South America, Africa and in its original base in Western Europe.

This year’s Conference involved Ministry leaders and Board members from more than 20 countries. For Clare & myself it was truly an amazing and humbling experience to meet with leaders from countries where life itself was a challenge (e.g. Syria, Lebanon, Myanmar, etc) let alone the difficult ministries that these leaders were involved in. The stories of children touched by the love and grace of God and the effect on their families was very moving. Grain of Wheat Ministries International has had a significant effect on the social fabric of many countries and continues to be a strategic outreach in these places. Clare & I admired the commitment and devotion of long-term leaders and volunteers (some up to 40 and 50+ years!) as they continue to prayerfully bring the Gospel to the lives of many children and families.

The week-long Conference was held at La Bessonaz - a large old homestead accommodating up to 100 people and situated in the Jura Mountains inland from Lausanne. It was an inspiring time with significant teaching and sharing from all involved. The Conference had a steady pace. Every country represented shared on their various ministries and each team also had personal time with the Grain of Wheat International Board members who were assessing ministry resources and needs in each setting.

Prior to attending the Conference I had begun reading a book called: “When Helping Hurts” (Stephen Corbett & Brian Fikkert, 2012, ISBN: 978-0-8024-5706-6) which is subtitled: *How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor ...and yourself.* The book is a fascinating piece of challenging writing principally aimed at the North American Evangelical Church with its massive involvement in poverty-alleviation into the majority world along with some of the inherent risks and opportunities. There is much food for thought in this well-researched book. The timing of reading this book and attending the Conference was very appropriate. There were a number of ‘cross-over learnings’ as I listened to different teams sharing their stories and talking about the impact of ministries to children and families, many of whom struggled with poverty issues. Along with some teaching input from One Hope Ministries at the La

Bessonaz Conference there was a congruence of reflection and challenge in this timely study-leave break.

The Call to Mission

At the heart of Grain of Wheat International Ministries is a clear call to Mission. Jean André and those who have followed him were clear on one thing – people, especially children and families in this ministry's focus, need to hear and experience the love and grace of God in real and tangible ways. It is very clear that God is at work all around us and we are called to participate in this mission as God gives us gifts, talents, resources and opportunities. As Christians we are called to help people. It is the essential core value of the Gospel. Jesus Himself touched the lives of many and urged us to do likewise. At the heart of the Good News of the Gospel is the call to *love God and love others*.

The challenge of that calling is to make sure that we are being as helpful as we hope to be. Our faithfulness is usually not in question. Down through the years of Christian Mission countless numbers of people have responded in amazing faithfulness to serve the Mission of God. People have faithfully served God and ministered world-wide in His name. Faithfulness is, in most cases, not our point of weakness. However sometimes in responding to the call to mission we may actually cause more harm than good. This challenge usually pivots around issues of cultural awareness and power. Some aspects of this tension are most obviously seen in the history of colonisation. But in many ways well-intentioned Christian helping ministries can easily fall into this trap today.

Why has this challenge arisen in the midst of faithful attempts to share the Gospel? As we were reminded at the Grain of Wheat Conference the concern is not just about faithfulness but about **effectiveness**. One of the weaknesses of Christian ministry is the failure or inability to ask sufficient questions or to analyse the effects of what we are doing and why we are doing it. If we faithfully continue to do what we do we can sometimes become convinced that our best efforts are effective when sometimes they are not! We run the risk of 'institutionalising' our endeavours to bring God's love to people. The check-point can simply involve asking deeper, more thoughtful questions and beginning to take note of what we learn from good answers as we take time to measure our effectiveness in mission endeavours. While some might say we just have to *let God guide and everything will work out right*, we also need to realise that God has given us common-sense and a brain with which to assess effectiveness. At the end of the day wouldn't we all want to say: let's make sure that we do the *best* we can do to reach people and bring transformation through God's love?! Working faithfully and hard is not all there is to the call to mission. We also have to ensure that we are working *well* and indeed having the impact that we most desire.

Foundations

Jesus came to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah as recorded in his address in the synagogue in Luke 4 v 17 – 21. The Kingdom of God was being unleashed on a broken world – a world that faced poverty in so many ways. Jesus was introducing the concepts of justice, peace, righteousness, and healing. The kingdom is all about the renewal of this world. It will not be fully realised until Jesus' eventual return, but nonetheless it is evidenced here and now.

The existence of the Church is firmly rooted in the mission of Jesus. The Church without mission simply does not exist! We are called to show the goodness of God in word and deed. A sharp focus of the Church's mission is to help the poor. But *who* are the poor?

For too long we have often defined the poor in terms of monetary values. Even so we struggle to gain a good perception of life through the eyes of the materially poor; but we also easily overlook poverty in other dimensions.

As Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert comment in their book “When Helping Hurts”: *defining poverty is not simply an academic exercise, for the way we define poverty – either implicitly or explicitly – plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that poverty.*

They go on to broaden our understanding of poverty to seeing that along with material poverty, there is also relational poverty – with ourselves; with others and ultimately with God. Unless we come to understand our brokenness and need, we stand a chance of abusing rather than helping those who we focus on – the materially poor.

So to summarise... “poverty” can be defined as including:

- Lack of what is needed for the basics of living;
- Lack of a Godly understanding of who we really are created to be;
- Lack of healthy relationships with those around us;
- Lack of a sound and growing relationship with our Creator God.

Alleviating poverty is a ministry of reconciliation – helping people to move into a better relationship with God, with self, with others and with the rest of creation. Corbett and Fikkert would claim that *reconciliation of relationships is the guiding compass for our poverty-alleviation efforts, profoundly shaping both the goals that we pursue and the methods that we use.*

Consequently we need to be more aware of our distorted world-views that affect and influence our approach to ministry. These worldviews often create lenses through which we see ourselves, others, our world and God. It is good to evaluate and renew our perceptions of what we believe is real.

Tools for the Kit

At the Grain of Wheat Conference Chad Causey, VP of One Hope Ministries International, gave us some excellent tools and experiences to evaluate *effectiveness*. Chad took us through several helpful exercises to stretch our understanding of our default beliefs and how to move to a more healthy balance of viewing effective Christian ministry. Chad encouraged us to see the link between faithfulness and effectiveness when it came to ministry situations. Both are needed! It is God’s work that we are doing; however we also need to recognise the need to use gifts well and devote good energy into lasting change and healthy impact. Using Biblical metaphors Chad reminded us that we need to *build good foundations* and *look for the development of healthy fruit*. He then took us through a variety of practical exercises to illustrate these truths in real ways as we reflected on our own ministry contexts. The variety of tools (‘Cover Story’; ‘Five Whys’; ‘Outcome Cloud’; ‘Impact/Effort Matrix’; ‘Logic Diagnostic’; ‘Design Space’; ‘Empathy Map’; and others) were both challenging and insightful and could easily be used and adapted to a variety of ministry contexts.

Tools can be very useful techniques for helping people break free from some of the default habits and practices that lessen the impact we can and should have in our gospel endeavours. In our work in the church and in Christian ministries we should not be afraid to make use of tools where appropriate, always remembering to contextualise these processes to fit the setting of where we are working.

Chad also dropped in some useful, thought-provoking memory check comments... e.g. "Every 'yes' is a 'no'" – when we agree to commit to something we are also saying that we will *not* commit to something else. It is therefore important for us to consider the impact of our decisions. We need to learn to make wise decisions! "Small deeds are greater than large intentions." – when we manage to effectively achieve a small gain in ministry we have made more progress than just *thinking* of doing great things! Even little steps forward are better than no steps at all! "The qualified 'yes'" – sometimes we are tempted to say 'yes' to something out of concern for the one who requests our help. As we enter the task, however, we may soon develop regrets and wish we had considered our commitment more carefully. By then it is often more difficult and possibly embarrassing to back out of such commitments. It is wiser for us to qualify our 'yes' by imposing some *limits* or *boundaries* to our initial commitment. That gives us the opportunity to reflect and consider our commitment and either decrease or increase our involvement without feeling 'trapped'. It's a wiser approach all round.

In the context of the Grain of Wheat Conference in Switzerland Chad's input proved invaluable. Ministry leaders and Board members were challenged and encouraged to review the effectiveness of their various ministries and to consider how best to invite their staff and volunteer workers to evaluate progress and the impact of their ministries back in their own countries. It gave confidence and a kit of practical tools to achieve these reviews. From our personal perspective Chad's helpful, practical advice gave us good ideas for future ministry in the local church context and also on a regional basis. A visit to NZ from Chad could be a very helpful resource for the church and especially for our new regional Presbyteries as they tackle the challenging task of overhauling ministry in a very different missional context and utilising 'best practise' with our gifts and energies.

Allied to this consideration of effectiveness, Corbett & Fikkert provide a helpful model to guide our work specifically with the material poor. Grain of Wheat is working in many environments where the children and families they connect with are suffering from various degrees of poverty. In essence the authors challenge the church to discern whether a particular situation calls for *relief*, *rehabilitation*, or *development*. They suggest that the failure to distinguish between these aspects can lead to the most common reasons why poverty-alleviation efforts often do harm rather than good. These are very helpful descriptors for those involved in ministry to those in need.

They define them further as:

"Relief" denotes urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. The key principle of relief is the 'provider-receiver' dynamic where the provider gives usually material assistance to the receiver who is largely incapable of helping himself at that point in time. It is clearly the 'Good Samaritan' example.

"Rehabilitation" starts after the relief phase. It seeks to restore people and their communities to rebuild positive elements of their lives and communities to pre-crisis conditions. The key principle is *working with people* as they participate in their own recovery.

"Development" is the process of on-going change that moves all the people involved, both 'helpers' and 'helped' closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others and the rest of creation. This provides the basis for people to be restored in their calling of working and supporting themselves and their families. Development is not done *for* people, but *with* people. The key principle is promoting an empowering process in which all people, 'helpers' and 'helped', become more of what God created them to be.

A big mistake is in applying *relief* in situations where *rehabilitation* or *development* is more appropriate. It can be a good exercise to stop and consider what we are currently involved in with our ministries and see which category such ministries might fall into. For example – perhaps we started a good community ministry to assist some people in desperate need. Are we still in the same mode as when we started, or have we changed our way of operating to move more into ‘rehabilitation’ and subsequently ‘development’ mode?

Some key ‘clues’ in discerning may help when facing situations...

Is there really a crisis at hand?

Is the individual personally responsible for the crisis?

Can the individual help themselves?

To what extent has the individual been receiving help in the past?

Assessment tools can help us adjust our response and work on the best possible way forward for any given situation. We are not, of course, called to act without compassion but sometimes our heart-reaction can overrule best practise and contribute rather to unhelpful responses that really do not ultimately help people.

Some important factors to keep in mind when working in the different modes include:

Effective Relief

- Needs to be immediate
- Will be temporary, until people can begin to help themselves

Rehabilitation

- Conduct initial assessment to provide understanding of the situation and to determine the nature of the response required
- Must ensure that people affected are *involved* in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the assistance provided
- Respond when the affected people’s needs are *not* being met either by local people or organisations due to their inability or unwillingness to help. This is a sensitive issue!
- Target assistance based on vulnerability and need and provide it equitably and impartially
- Helpers must have appropriate qualifications, attitudes and experience to plan and effectively provide appropriate assistance processes. Avoid paternalism!

Development

Some tools include:

ABCD – “Asset-based community development”

ABCD begins from asking materially poor about people’s own gifts and resources and how individuals can be restored to being what God created them to be as helpers first engage in the relationship with them. It seeks to affirm people’s dignity and ultimately assists wholeness of being. This can be contrasted with needs-based assessments which assume that all help must come from outside. Needs-based help can never be sustained and can also lead to local initiatives becoming disempowered. ABCD, on the contrary, drives us to understand and appreciate the deeper dynamics of any given community and to seek God’s presence and power at work in more profound ways. Outside resources can still be utilised; however they are only provided when absolutely justified and in helpful ways.

Three common methods of ABCD:

- Asset Mapping

e.g. resources of local individuals, businesses, associations, and institutions. When these things are known ways can be found to leverage these assets to improve the community and solve problems.

* Participatory Learning and Action

A variety of group-based exercises to engage and energise community members into thinking about their community's history, assets, survival strategies and goals.

- Appreciative Inquiry

Focusses on what is right and good in a community's past as a means of creating a more positive future.

A wonderful example of the wholeness of this process of ministering to the material poor is Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus the founder of the Grameen Bank which he established to provide credit to the poorest people of Bangladesh. Since 1976 the Grameen Bank has reached 7.58m people lending \$7.4b. More than 98% of loan funds have been repaid. Dr Yunus' work spawned the global microfinance movement which aims to reach 175m of the world's poorest families with loans and other financial services by the end of 2015. MF has become one of the key strategies for bringing economic empowerment to materially poor people in the majority world.

Some suggestions for working with people struggling with material poverty...

- Try to establish truthful & transparent relationships with partners who could assist over time;
- Be less visible; support indigenous leaders;
- Be very hesitant to 'make suggestions'; learn to listen more and talk less;
- Make sure that local people, the ministry providers and those being helped, are serving – contributing time, money or other appropriate resources to the project. This helps measure their commitment to change and their degree of energy and drive.

Take-home principles

My experience at the 2014 International Grain of Wheat Conference, the involvement of Chad's input, and my reading of Corbett & Fikkert's stimulating book gave me some valuable insights to take back for ministry in the local church and wider Presbytery contexts.

We are hearing more and more that our calling is to **Mission**. While it is a little ironic that 'missional thinking' is quite often being promoted as the *new focus* of the church when mission has been implicit from the beginning nevertheless it is a timely reminder of our *raison d'être* as a Christian movement!

As I mentioned earlier, the aspect of *faithfulness* is rarely missing from mission. Many people have committed their lives and resources to serving in mission over the years. Considerable effort has gone into church activities and programmes. Prayer and focussed intent has been at the core of much of this activity. Far be it from me to question the *faithfulness* of many Godly saints!

However the question remains: *are we really being effective?* Is our Gospel message having impact? Are we continuing to see lives and families and communities transformed? Is the Kingdom of God growing and developing in our land? To some degree we can answer affirmatively to these questions. Unfortunately we are also very conscious of an increasing struggle and lessening capacity to do mission. Many churches are simply trying to *survive*, let alone thrive! Leadership and membership are often frustrated and blame is apportioned in all directions. Why is this happening?

Part of the reason, I believe, is that we are failing to ask enough good questions about why we do what we do. We are substituting *aspirational* faith for real faith. For a number of reasons we fool ourselves that evaluation and assessment of what we do is 'ungodly' or lacking faithfulness. On the contrary, just as the Bible reminds us to look for 'fruit' and 'fruit that will last' we also need to check how effective our missional strategies and practices have been. We might be pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised when we seek to have a real grasp on what is happening. Despite our fears or doubts I'm sure it can do us no harm to ask better questions and seek deeper understanding. Indeed we might discover to our advantage that a better analysis of what is actually happening might be the catalyst for amazing change and potential growth. What have we really got to lose?

My next step is to collate and fine-tune the tools that Chad willingly shared with us at Conference and also reflect further on Corbett & Fikkert's thoughts about poverty and how we seek to minister in ways that will not cause harm to those who provide and those who receive help. Their book provides helpful strategies in achieving this goal. At the end of the day it's all about helping us to hone our skills and understanding of being missional in a very different society than many of us were used to in days gone by. Times have changed and while we are called very clearly to be true to the basic tenets of our faith, we are also called to be 'as wise as foxes' while being 'as gentle as doves'.

Dealing with our own demons and 'god-complexes'...

Something that has come home strongly to me in this study has been the need to be constantly aware of our spiritual default beliefs. Our worldviews can easily skew our understanding of poverty and our mission to meet its crises. From a Biblical perspective we are firmly linked to our connection with God, ourselves, others and the creation. However, we are often practising Gnostics and it is very easy for us to disconnect these elements. In the missional call Jesus shared in Luke 4, God calls us to be intimately involved in what life is all about – its joys and frustrations – and to continue to seek to bring wholeness, healing and freedom to all to whom God guides us. That is the core of the purpose that God has placed us on earth to fulfil.

We therefore have much to do! However we are not called to be overwhelmed by the weight of this calling. At the end of the day it is *God's* calling and He initiated it not us! In the amazing sweep of God's history we are called to be part of what He has already planned for us to do (Ephesians 3). He has called us, equipped us and promised to be with us. It is surely the greatest privilege to be part of this movement of God's grace in His much-loved world. There are great challenges along with incredible opportunities. And we know that at last the long-expected return of our Lord Jesus will see everything come to its fulfilment!

*In Jerusalem, the Lord of Heaven's Armies
will spread a wonderful feast
for all people of the world.
It will be a delicious banquet
with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.
There He will remove the cloud of gloom,
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.
He will swallow up death forever!
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears.
He will remove forever all insults and mockery
against his land and people.
The Lord has spoken!*

Isaiah 25 v 6 – 8

Barry Ayers – June 2014