

Two aspects with theological resonance

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1. Conversation

In Ghana, the head of a household, in the course of a SALT visit to his home said: *"There is no one who brings us together to talk any more."*

Convening dialogue and conversation which goes beyond representational committees and groups requires time and is essential for developing a broader movement for transformation.

A Village Chief in Malawi said, when the local hospital asked to visit people in their homes, *"The last time the hospital came out of their compound to talk with the community was in 1962!"*

In the course of dialogue and conversation people get to tell their stories. Stories, when heard and reflected upon evoke the power of parables. Parables are deep and create pauses and silences for thought about the assumptions we often make.

"...But we don't want parables. We want precepts and we want programmes..... We are frightened of the lonely silences within the parables." (Dominic Crossan, NT scholar and church historian, quoted by Michael Whelan SM, Melbourne Catholic Education Conference, 2002)

Facilitation of conversation at the local level of household and neighbourhood in my experience has a completely different dynamic. It is *their* conversation, about *their* health and well-being. It is not extractive. This is a prerequisite for ownership and sustainable transformation. Traditional participative development methods often start with good intentions but quickly default to representative extrapolation. "Rapid" appraisal techniques give a clue to motivation and who is driving the process.

Werner Erhard¹ asserts that all transformation is linguistic. A shift in speaking and listening is the essence of transformation. Picking up on this Peter Block² argues that *any desire to create an alternative future is only going to happen if we change the conversation we are having now.*

The Word of God transforms all creation. *"The Word became flesh and lived among us,...."* John 1:14

Q. What might we as professionals need to 'put down' when entering into a conversation about people's health and well-being? What might we also need to 'take up'?

Q. As health practitioners we are trained to fix people's health as 'service providers'. What are the short-comings of this mindset?

¹ Werner Erhard is a leading academic in the area of leadership and processes of transformation. (www.wernererhard.com)

² Peter Block: Community: The structure of belonging. Berrett-Koehler. (2008)

2. Agency

When we take the idea of being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) seriously, what reflections of God's image do we see in people?

The whole Biblical narrative speaks loudly about the initiative of God in redeeming humanity and the whole of creation.

The ability of people to make responses to their shared concerns and aspirations is a reflection of the ability to act with a sense of agency, to initiate change. This is one of a number of core strengths that need to be named and affirmed when seeking to foster and nurture a thriving and flourishing community. A villager in northern Uganda said as a result of a process of community conversation that had resulted in dramatic improvements in education and health:

“Now we think deeply about things. There will be no going back. Something very fundamental has happened here.”

Another said:

“Relief was like leaning on rotten wood. We were weakened by it”

Q. What sort of process might have led to these people saying these things?

Three years prior to these statements being made, villagers had been subjected to a steady stream of NGOs coming into the community. This had bred a deep sense of dependency that had undermined their humanity and sense of agency.

A villager said:

“NGOs come and assume they know our needs. They cannot do this any longer.”

Sometimes, the provision of services is necessary but when seen as the only arrow in our quiver in the fight against poverty, people will always be left diminished and condemned to dependency.

Health in its broadest sense is the issue that most deeply defines our experience of life. This means that if we fail to work in ways that respect people's ability to initiate change and create conditions in which they can make responses to shared concerns and hopes, we are not participating effectively in God's mission. Discuss.