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Case Study: Unintended Change in Urban Ministry

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The [Eden Network](#) is an initiative of The Message Trust which places incarnational mission teams into local churches in urban communities identified as among the most deprived in the country. This case study draws on a programme of qualitative research undertaken into the Network which sought to understand what was happening in the relationships between Eden team members and the urban community members they met and how it could be seen as effective. I concluded from the research that a new model of mission was emerging among Eden teams which I call Missional Pastoral Care. This way of missional living enacts the mission of God in a holistic sharing of life for the good of one another, in an articulation of life narratives, including faith narratives; and in the reshaping of the worldviews (or meaning-systems) of all involved.

I present here a change process within a change process. For the Eden Network, the emergence of a new form of mission which challenges inherited theology and practice was largely unintended. My research has made visible previously unarticulated shifts in the theology and practice of Eden teams. This remains fragile and emergent with the wider organisational structures largely retaining their previously held understandings of mission. In addition to this organisational story, Missional Pastoral Care is itself a mode of mission which enables change, in both the Christian 'missioners' and the 'recipients' of their mission. In fact, it collapses these categories, in Missional Pastoral Care all are changed as part of the work of God among them. This exemplifies the messy and unfinished nature of change, offering insight into meaning-making as a central component of change, and the connectedness of personal worldviews to theological frameworks and God's work in the world.

What was the situation facing the church/organisation?

The Eden Network began in 1997 in response to a growing awareness that young people in urban estates were largely disengaged from Christian faith and that the majority of Christians did not live in such areas. This led to the first Eden teams moving into communities in Manchester with eventual expansion into other cities and now countries. The Eden Network's strapline for the majority of its history has been 'Transforming communities from the inside out'. My work developing the Eden Network nationally and living in an

Eden area myself exposed me to the questions and challenges teams faced in their ministry. Their hopes were for young people and their families to experience Christian conversion and dramatic life change. This happened far less frequently than they anticipated, leading some to experience feelings of failure and disappointment, others turned to God in intercession and still others sought a more expansive theology to understand their experiences. These conflicted ministry experiences were framed by the hope for 'transformation', usually, interpreted as conversion. My research sought to understand the reality of transformation in this context.

How did you and the church/organisation approach the problem/opportunity?

The changes in practice and thinking among Eden team members which emerged in my research were not part of a structured process of change. Initial expectations of change were focused on the changes which urban people would experience as a result of Eden team's intervention. The hope was for the lives of urban people, and ultimately whole communities to be changed through Christian conversion. This highlights that perhaps some of the most significant changes are those that are unanticipated.

What process was followed/what activities were undertaken?

The relocation of Eden team members into urban communities was the primary action taken. Having moved in Eden teams sought to get to know people, being neighbourly, running activities for young people and families, and getting involved in local civic life, for example as school governors. In my analysis, relocation led to the development of seven elements of Missional Pastoral Care as a way of life: Difference, locality, availability, practicality, long-term commitment, consistency and love. These elements provided the conditions for Eden teams and community members to change their understandings of the world and their ways of living.

Please describe any notable features, events or stages of the process

The change in practice and theology among Eden teams was the result of long term relationships built with urban people and an engagement of these experiences with their charismatic theology, expecting God to speak and to act in their daily lives. A pivotal moment for many Eden team members was the discovery of mutuality. The realisation that they were receiving from their urban neighbours and that God was speaking to them through their urban neighbours prompted a re-framing of their worldviews.

What outcomes were achieved?

For the Eden Network the outcomes have been long term ministry in urban communities. The looked-for outcomes of conversion and life change have happened in some cases and to varying degrees. My research suggests that Missional Pastoral Care is the central outcome of the Eden Network's activity and that this form of ministry results in a 'complex good'.

This complex good involves flourishing, understood as a stronger love of self, a more positive approach to life choices, an increased ability to act, increasing awareness of a good God, and mutuality. It also involves loss and ambiguity. This is found in the vulnerability of building relationships, in the long term, process nature of this model and in the limits of life change. These ambiguities are common in experiences of mission, and are often interpreted by practitioners as failure. My research shows that rather than these effects being wholly negative, they are a necessary part of this complex good. They constitute the challenge to and breaking apart of aspects of meaning-systems without which the flourishing described above would not be possible.

Looking back, what have you and/or the Church/organisation learned about change from the experience?

It is evident in my research is that life change is bound up with a change in worldview, our overarching understanding of what is true and how the world works. When we are exposed to experiences or people who challenge our existing worldview we are shaken. Many people retreat from such experiences and therefore do not change. However, when an experience of difference is accompanied by an affirmation of our sense of self we are enabled to consider the challenge to our worldview without feeling threatened. When this happens over time and in practical actions as well as words it allows for experimentation with different ways of seeing ourselves and the world. In this process, our worldviews can be reshaped and lasting life change can occur



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supporting those in incarnational urban mission for the last twelve years. She brings skills in coaching, theological reflection and ethnographic research. Anna is also a trustee of the William Temple Foundation and is interested in the role of the church in the public sphere, particularly in relation to issues of poverty and marginalisation.