

An excerpt from “A Nazareth Manifesto”

The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, April 2008

Styles of Engagement

It's time to move from the “why” of engagement to the “how.” If something is wrong, and you are a person who wants to help, there are broadly three ways to do so.

One is *working for*. *Working for* means doing things on behalf of other people. When you see someone leave the grocery store with a huge pile of shopping bags, it's the most natural thing in the world to say “Here, let me get those for you.” You're then *working for* that person by carrying their bags to their car. If it's a simple task with a short timespan, there's every chance it'll end with a heartfelt “Thank you!” and a reciprocal “You're welcome: have a great day.” This is what we might call the conventional model of engagement. One person has a need, while the other person has skills, availability and willingness to help. The latter person conventionally spends a lot of time working those skills up to a very high standard, and consequently makes those skills available in specific circumstances under very strict rules. This is what we call being a professional. This is what medicine is about, this is what the law is about, this is what dentistry is about. Physicians, attorneys and dentists do *for* us what we can't do for ourselves. It's hard to overestimate the hold this conventional model has on our imaginations. Pretty much the whole of the professional school structure—medicine, law, nursing, engineering, divinity, environment – runs on this model. I wouldn't mind betting that pretty much every undergraduate who comes to university wanting to make the world a better place assumes that's the way it's done. You become very good at what you do, and you spend the rest of your life doing it for people.

It's immensely satisfying to be able to do for someone exactly what they need doing, whether it's fixing a child's toy or showing a novice how to find a website on their computer. We can see an end result, and it affirms us as people of skill and ability. In many cases it makes the recipient's life materially better – and in the case of a physician or firefighter, it may even make the difference between life and death. So why do professional people so often find that their clients don't say thank you? The reason is that *working for* makes the expert feel good and important and useful, but it doesn't necessarily leave the recipient feel that great. The *working for* model sets in stone a relationship where one person is a benefactor and the other is a person in need. It's humiliating if many or most of your relationships are ones in which you need someone to do things *for* you. The *working for* model perpetuates relationships of inequality. Worse still, it's possible to be the recipient of a person's help and still find the benefactor remains a stranger to you. The whole point of the professional infrastructure of divided offices, administrative assistants, appointment times and special uniforms is to remind all parties that this isn't a friendship, with expectations of compassion and tenderness, but the provision of a service with no strings attached outside and beyond that service. The working for model dominates contemporary notions of welfare, but it leaves the rich and the poor pretty much where they started off and it keeps them strangers to one another.

Let's go back for a moment to the person emerging from the grocery store with too many shopping bags to carry to the car. It's natural for you to say “Here, let me get those for you,” and thus initiate a *working for* relationship. But will the person automatically say “Thanks so much?” No, they won't, for one of two reasons. The first is that they may feel they are being patronized, particularly if there is a sensitive dynamic of gender, age or disability. For some people it is better to struggle on alone than get on the receiving end of any kind of *working for* relationship that simply reinforces their lowly social standing. The other reason why the person

might say no is if they think you might be going to run off with their shopping. So these two factors, empowerment and trust, are prior to any *working for* relationship getting off the ground. I'm now going to look at them in turn.

The issue of empowerment is taken up in the second model of engagement which I'm going to call *working with*. One writer describes *working with* like this:

Working with the poor is a lot more difficult. This means recognizing that being poor is not just about lacking income, but also being excluded from positions of power. Working with the poor means waiting for poor people themselves to define what their needs are, and to support them in the action they decide to take to change things. It involves entering into a relationship with poor people, and so surrendering some of one's own autonomy and sense of power in being able to identify what needs to be done and take steps to make a difference. It means offering what one has and is for their use.

(Sarah White and Romy Tiongco, *Doing Theology and Development: Meeting the Challenge of Poverty* [Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1997] 14)

Working with means bringing different skills and experience together around a common goal. It can create a wonderful sense of partnership, provided that the agenda is being set by the person in need, rather than the person trying to help. Instead of a professional relationship, where the person in need sees the benefactor entirely on the benefactor's terms and in a relationship dictated by the benefactor's sense of priorities, the *working with* model depicts a round table where each person present has a different but equally valuable portfolio of experience, skills, interests, networks and commitments. The *working with* model recognizes that the journey is as important as the destination. Just as on a medieval quest or pilgrimage, the conversations and adventures one has on the way matter as much and shape character as significantly as the place one is walking towards. *Working with* is not so much about giving people better material conditions and facilities, it's about making new people, inspired and empowered and finding new skills and confidence through being given responsibility and access to conversations that have wider influence.

To take a familiar example, there are a number of institutions in our major cities where a homeless person can find an evening meal. The conventional model, *working for*, suggests what the homeless person needs is an evening meal. But simply providing an evening meal reinforces the person in their poverty, and leaves them hungry again tomorrow. So the familiar distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor separates the person who needs a help up through a tough time from the person who will keep coming back for meals however often they're available, and the logic often goes on to assume the only way to help the undeserving poor is to punish them until they learn to fend for themselves. The empowerment model, *working with*, is not content until the homeless person not only sets the menu but does the cooking themselves. On this view community kitchens exist not to produce meals but to empower people, and the director of the kitchen should change every few years as a new homeless person comes through the ranks to take over the reins. Before long the question of why people continue to go hungry should bring all kinds of people, business leaders, city managers, and welfare advisers around the table with homeless people to empower homeless people to resolve their own problems at the table of power. *Working with* is essentially about realizing that a social problem is everyone's problem, and about everyone getting to feel the sense of satisfaction at resolving that problem that in the conventional model only the professional person gets.

But there is a third model. The third model addresses the issue of trust we left unresolved when we were wondering whether we could take those shopping bags back to the overburdened person's car. This model I'm going to call *being with*. The same author I quoted earlier describes *being with* like this:

Being with the poor is more difficult still. It means experiencing in one's own life something of what it is to be poor and oppressed, to be disempowered. To set aside one's plans and strategies for change, and simply feel with the poor the pain of their situation. It involves seeing the implications poverty and development have for people's sense of themselves and their connections with one another, not only their material well-being. This spells the end to an easy view of poverty as romantic, or the poor as simple and virtuous. It means to see tensions and contradictions within and between the poor and non-poor, and to recognize through this that all of us are part of the problem. Poverty is not just out there, but within us, whoever we are. (White and Tiongco, 14)

Being with adds an extra dimension. It means experiencing in one's own body some of the fragility of relationships and self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty. It means having the patience not to search around for the light switch, but to sit side by side for a time in the darkness...

...*Being with* is incomprehensible to an imagination that has been entirely shaped by the conventional working for model. After all, how can one hope to solve anyone's problems if one divests oneself not only of the safety of professional boundaries but of the skills that go with them? As one person who did this in the Philippines relates, "It was not socially acceptable. I lost my privileges, my old contacts, my security. I felt very vulnerable. I used to wake in the night afraid that I would get sick and have no money to pay a doctor." (White and Tiongco, 13). The transition one has to make is that poverty is not fundamentally a problem to be solved. The *working for* model, and some versions of the *working with* model, tend to turn everything into a problem ripe for solving. But some things aren't problems, and some problems can't simply be fixed.

Just imagine *working for* and *working with* have done their stuff, and achieved all they set out to. What then, when there is no world to fix? The American expression is, "We get to hang out." In other words, we enjoy one another. We enjoy the actions and habits of life because they make us realize how good it is to be alive, how good it is to be a person among others, how good it is to be a person in the created world... The being with approach says, "Let's not leave those discoveries till after all the solving and fixing is done and we're feeling bored. Let's make those discoveries now." To say to someone "I want to be with you" is to say "When I'm with you I feel in touch with myself, in touch with what it means to be a human being among others, in touch with creation, in touch with God." (That's a lot to say, so in America we put it in code by saying. "Let's hang out.") To say that to a wealthy person may be a way of saying "I value you for who you are as a person, not what you've achieved in your career." But to say that to a poor person is to say something very extraordinary. Yet if you can't say such a thing to someone, there really is no reason in the world why they should trust you. Because if you can't say such a thing to a person, it's clear you're only using them as a means towards some further end.

Take for example the case of a person who has a terminal illness. There's very little *working for* to do. Sure, you can fix up all sorts of gadgets and comforts to make the last days or months less burdensome. But there's no way to solve the problem. As for *working with*, there's certainly a lot to be said for demedicalizing the person's situation, for getting away from drugs and technology as much as possible and turning whatever one can into words and mementos and significant moments. But what's really required is simply *being with* – staying still, listening, being silent, not having the answers, sharing the struggle, praying together, singing songs and hymns, taking time over meals, recalling stories, remembering messages to pass on. What's needed isn't therapy – it's company. What the dying person is saying is "Please don't leave me alone."