

Is There a GAPP in Community Development?

Elisabeth Ford

When Geoff Broughton moved to Glebe in inner-city Sydney, he found that there was a gap in the services provided by the larger welfare and development organisations. This gap could be addressed through the community of St John's Anglican Church, where Geoff is the minister. From 2001 census data, he found that within two kilometres of his church, one-third of residents are on low incomes and 15.5% of residents are single-parent families. In Glebe, 19.5% of the residents live in Department of Housing buildings and almost 50% of the students at Glebe Public School are indigenous Australians.

Geoff says, "These statistics and the apparent lack of emergency assistance service in the Glebe area demonstrated the need for St John's to develop this new and different kind of programme to assist the Glebe population. St John's was well placed to offer a partnership-based programme where people were welcomed, listened to, treated with respect and dignity and the belief that people could be helped best by discovering their own God-given resources in the context of friendship and genuine support."

And so, in mid-2004, the Glebe Assistance and Partnership Program (GAPP) began. Each Monday and Wednesday morning, about four volunteers and one community assistance worker spend time in St John's hall and garden with those who come seeking help. GAPP receives modest funding from the Anglican Church and the Australian Government. However, its most valuable resource is its volunteers, who sit in the garden with those who arrive, having coffee and cake, creating an environment where children feel safe to play and their parents feel safe to talk honestly.

The employed worker aims to work in partnership with each visitor to GAPP as she meets with them privately to discuss their needs. Most visitors are local women from housing commission areas who receive social security (Centrelink) payments. The form of assistance is limited only by the creativity of the people involved, but most often it involves offering financial budgeting advice, providing food and pharmacy vouchers, helping people to make phone calls and organise their affairs, and referring them to other practical services. Long-term assistance is usually only provided as part of a plan which aims to reduce the factors impacting on the ongoing need for help.

On visiting GAPP, you might meet Sam,* who has eight children. Although her husband sometimes gets casual work, this is unpredictable. Although Sam is careful with money, she sometimes needs help in the form of food parcels and vouchers. You would see how overjoyed she was when she was helped to call Centrelink and discovered that she was entitled to greater government assistance than she had been receiving. On another day, you may meet Jasmine*, who has had a stroke and wondered if someone would occasionally weed her garden and plant some flowers. The next week, you may overhear her delighted voice when this need was met by local young adults, who cleared space for Jasmine's wheelchair in the garden and visit monthly to keep the garden looking good.

Many weeks you would meet Amy* who has schizophrenia. Since her partner has been in rehab, she has found life more difficult than usual. You would see her laughing with the volunteers and may not realise that when she first came to GAPP, she was distracted and sometimes hostile. And almost every week, you would meet Jed* who started coming to GAPP for assistance, but later trained as a volunteer because of the impact of the programme on his life.

GAPP is a place where each person is respected and where it is okay to make mistakes. These values flow out of the approach that those involved take to the programme: that Jesus Christ is their model. When asked how spirituality relates to the work of GAPP, Geoff says:

Christian Faith should affect every aspect of life. Many Christians are nervous about the political implications of the Gospel. But it declares our commitment to the poor and those most excluded from contemporary society. Faith and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. In his life and through his death, Jesus showed compassion for the poor and inclusion of the Other. On the cross God shows us how seriously he takes justice, reconciling both rich and poor to himself.

GAPP is one place where people seek to stand with 'the Other', where the faces of inequality have names and begin, slowly, to walk in hope.

Elisabeth Ford works as a Community Assistance Worker at GAPP on Wednesday mornings. The rest of the week she works as a lawyer, studies International and Community Development at Deakin University and attends Glebe Café Church. For more information about GAPP, please contact St John's at geoff@glebechurch.org.au.

* names changed to protect privacy

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