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FROM VISION TO VOCATION: BECOMING A COMMUNITY CONNECTOR THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE-BASED INNOVATION

Anthony Dady

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FROM VISION TO VOCATION: BECOMING A COMMUNITY CONNECTOR THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE-BASED INNOVATION

Anthony Dady

INTRODUCTION

Having been gifted some land near Pirongia by my parents, and being a relationships-based person, I thought it would be good to open a small hotel to provide income for my wife and me. This was to be off-grid and built with “alternative” eco-friendly building techniques and using low-cost, freely available materials. Thus, it would provide opportunities to address issues such as affordable housing and revitalisation of the local tourist industry, as well as offer a passive education to guests about energy efficiency. However, this drive to use what I do for the benefit of others led to my rethinking my idea, and instead doing something that could be of greater benefit.

Being a church minister, I began connecting with church volunteers who were working to improve their communities. Engaging with them multiplied my efforts for societal transformation when compared with just my wife and I trying to improve an area through our hotel. This was also a major change in my own priorities and learning, and in terms of my professional identity formation, as I went from looking at a business idea for my family to facilitating change for the better in communities around New Zealand.

What developed was a project connecting church congregations with their communities. This followed a transdisciplinary, practice-based approach in which transformation was not only a goal for the communities but also a lived experience for me as a practitioner. Becoming—as a central thread in this journey—unfolded through cycles of reflection, dialogue, and action. My faith shaped how I engaged with others, encouraging me to listen deeply and remain open to change. Soft systems thinking and the principles of design thinking supported an iterative approach, where ideas were tested, reframed, and developed in response to stakeholder input. These recursive loops of transdisciplinary research informed my learning, helping to surface new insights, not just about community needs, but also about how I was growing into a new professional identity—moving from planner to connector, and from researcher to practitioner in service of others. All this was grounded in a professional master of applied innovation project that grew from sustainability-focused innovation ideas to community transformation. In short, I became a pracademic, someone Pousadela et al. (2025) define as being both a practitioner and an academic.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

It may seem strange to have gone from a hotel business idea to conducting transdisciplinary community work with a large array of stakeholders. However, my journey through life has equipped me to be able to work in both contexts. I have been an ordained church minister for 25 years, with most of my ministry taking place in the UK. During that time, I also ran my own business and gained an MBA from the University of Northampton.

My response to my calling in ministry has been to want to make the world around me a better place, which has led to serving on the boards of several charities and community interest companies. It is also what drives my desire to want to care for the environment. I was an early adopter of electric cars and for many years all of the electricity used in my home has come from renewable sources. Wanting to improve other people's lives, and society in general, may explain my desire to provide a positive customer service to people while serving them in an eco-friendly hotel. It could also show why I went on from this to focus on affordable and environmentally sustainable housing, as well as vertical farming to supply food to those in need. It is what drives my desire to see others realise their potential and be released to serve those around them.

Upon moving to New Zealand in 2023, I began a master's-level degree course in Design Innovation, which took place at the Design Factory at the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) in Hamilton. It was then that I began planning for my eco-friendly hotel.

There were very few formal teaching sessions at the Wintec Design Factory, as most of the collective learning was conducted through students sharing with one another at "Community of Practice" days. These were times for education and reflection. It was during this process, as well as through engaging with those in my community, that my idea evolved into the process of facilitating churches' meeting community needs.

As its name suggests, the Design Factory advocated the five steps of design thinking when solving problems:

- Empathise (spend time truly getting to know the issues those you are working with face);
- Define (clearly specify what it is that you are trying to help with);
- Ideate (come up with proposals to deal with the clearly defined problem or need);
- Prototype (develop a product or system that may address the problem or need), and
- Test (trial the potential solution and analyse whether or not it meets the stated requirements).

An example is given later of what I am doing in Auckland to put these principles into practice. For more about design thinking, see Razzouk and Shute (2012).

As mentioned, my study was conducted as part of a design innovation course. The idea of a church doing things to help people in the community may not be seen as innovative, but it can be. There are many definitions of innovation, although I like the ideas put forward by Rogers (1995), who describes it as being seen by people as being better than what they currently have, is easy to adopt, and fits their values, experiences, and needs. I made suggestions to the groups I worked with, ideas which they are planning to adopt and are now discussing. I made one Auckland church my focus, and suggested children's games they could put on in the park near their church hall as a starting point for letting people know about other things the church could offer, and as a way of finding out other needs. This idea is already being put into place by enthusiastic members. This will be an opportunity to trial ideas in a design thinking way, while at the same time getting to know community needs and starting design thinking processes with new projects.

A church should exhibit ethical leadership. Sharma et al. (2019) say that qualities such as honesty, integrity, and equality will lead to improved morale among those being led and a greater desire from them to get involved. It will also result in an organisation being viewed more positively which may lead to its being more successful. It should be obvious that ethical leadership should characterise an organisation that wants to promote an ethical way of living. However, it is also something to be desired in the context of meeting community needs, since an ethical leader will be one who is more successful in encouraging those being led to get involved in the process.

Professional identity formation (PIF) is a process that takes place as an employee adopts the values of the organisation that person works for (Bloom, 2022). This is something that could affect the behaviour of church members, as they take on board the mission of the congregation. If the church had a collective and often-proclaimed identity as a group of people who are passionate about making a positive difference in the community, this is something the members would internalise and be concerned about, making them more likely to look for and address community needs.

Innovation, ethical leadership, and professional identity formation, when applied in the context I am focussing on, will lead to a church being more effective in making a positive difference in the community.

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK

I began my study with a literature review. Using a funnel technique, I first read about needs around the world. I refined this by reading about how those needs are being met and how churches are meeting community needs. I then researched what needs there are in New Zealand. Finally, I looked at how churches are meeting those community needs in this country.

This was a transdisciplinary study with ethics approval from the Waikato Institute of Technology (approval reference WTLR35130924). While carrying out my literature research, I also gave presentations about my work to students and teachers at the Institute. There I solicited short, anonymous input to guide me in my research. This was carried out by my sharing information about my project and then those present writing unnamed responses of a sentence or less to the various questions I had posed. This input was on small sticky pieces of paper and stuck to sheets on the wall where the questions were written. I was never in the room while these responses were submitted, so I had no idea who had written what.

In the next stage, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Christians and non-Christians in many locations from Whangārei to Invercargill. Those who were a part of my study fell into one of three categories:

1. Specific groups I worked closely with and made specific recommendations to:
 - A national church denomination that operates throughout New Zealand, particularly its Auckland congregation;
 - A church in my home town of Cambridge;
 - A Christian School near to where I live.
2. Other Christian organisations from around New Zealand.
3. Members of the public and those not associated with Christian groups.

The wide geographical scope made my work a useful resource to Christians nationally. Furthermore, while the interviewees were Christians and non-Christians, I collaborated with many organisations outside of Christian circles. This made the project transdisciplinary, as I was able to learn best practice and advise the Christian groups accordingly.

I analysed my findings using various techniques. I used concept maps to investigate factors relating to my various community and business ideas. These ideas were scrutinised using CATWOE (customers, actors, transformation process, worldview, owner, and environmental constraints), a system advocated by Checkland (1989) which requires a user to look at various factors and stakeholders who have an interest in an issue. Understanding who would be affected by my study, and their views on the subject, was crucial for carrying out the ideate stage of design thinking.

Doing this early work built a foundation for the design thinking process that I was then able to carry out with those I was working with, as we operated together in discovering the best way for churches to meet community needs.

All of this took place in the context of iterative supervision, analysing and improving my work with the help of academic and industry professionals. I had weekly meetings with my Wintec supervisor, as well as monthly meetings with the head of the course. I also received regular feedback from students and other professors at the Wintec Community of Practice days. Following my weekly meetings with my tutor, I compiled reflective supervision notes. These were sources of insight to not only show what had already been achieved, but also to provide inspiration and direction in moving forward.

I chose a national church leader as an industry partner. I also found myself an industry mentor, a businessperson who was passionate about improving the community and could give me advice from a non-church viewpoint. This meant I was hearing from a variety of voices in addition to the input I was receiving through my research interviews.

The input was constantly reviewed as I continued in my quest for community transformation. This iterative process highlights the recursive nature of my transdisciplinary approach, with feedback loops ensuring my work was being constantly improved as findings from the research process were fed back into the system to guide future work. As I went along, I found themes developing from my interviews by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Gupta (2025) also advocates and supports an approach highlighting recursiveness, transdisciplinarity, and qualitative research analysed using thematic analysis.

As stated earlier, I initially gained insights into the situation I was seeking to address through anonymous feedback from students and tutors at Wintec events. However, the majority of my data was collected from the semi-structured interviews with Christians and non-Christians in various locations around New Zealand. Some of these people were industry professionals, such as leaders of churches or community organisations, while most were members of the public, some of whom attended church services or events, while others did not. This gave me the opportunity to find out what needs there were in various communities, as well as to see where church members felt they were able to serve. My plan was to put these two factors together (needs and offers of service) so as to maximise the potential community benefit.

Everyone has a paradigm and position from which they work, which influences their method and interpretation. As a practitioner-researcher and faith-based community member, I chose a transdisciplinary pragmatic way of working, taking a qualitative approach to my research so as to discover underlying trends and interwoven areas of need.

The transdisciplinary nature of this study meant I had to go above and beyond the disciplines and beyond what I thought I knew to try and bring the information and stakeholders together. It is the nature of transdisciplinarity to be recursive, recursive meaning that we frame and reframe, construct, deconstruct and reconstruct our knowledge and understanding as we go through the process. That process underpins my story of becoming, of moving from one position to another.

STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

My journey of transformation centred around three identity turning points:

- From hotelier to community facilitator;
- Embracing iterative learning, and
- Becoming a community connector.

This community-improvement project began in the Waipa district (working in Cambridge and Te Awamutu), although it took on a national flavour with the integration of other groups from further afield. One of these was a denomination that had traditionally grown through producing a magazine and presenting lectures, discussing world events and what God had to say about them. Those who were interested often became members of the Church as a result. However, over time the Church grew to believe that what was more important was building relationships with those in the communities where members lived and went to church. The goal was to get to know people and see how the members could serve those around them and be of benefit to the community. For decades they struggled with how to do this, sometimes doing things to be of benefit to local charities, and sometimes with members volunteering with different community groups. However, the congregation had not managed to go out as a church to be of benefit en masse to the communities around them.

A couple of the members of this denomination's Auckland congregation mentioned in interviews the possibility of doing something in the park opposite where the congregation meets. I decided this would be a good place to begin identifying community needs. There is a large children's play area in the park, and parents and children are often to be found walking around and playing there. I thought this would be an easy demographic to target by offering activities that children are likely to enjoy, such as facepainting, balloon modelling, and games in the park. This would then be an opportunity to serve the community while getting to know the local residents and finding out their needs and how the church members could serve them better. When I proposed this course of action to the congregation, several members immediately told me they would like to be involved. I mentioned to the pastor that permission might be needed from the local council to do what I proposed, so he arranged that. Another member got a banner made and bought much of the equipment for the activities.

The pastor was so pleased with what was happening that he wrote a letter to my Wintec tutor to tell him how much what I was doing was of benefit. In addition to this, the church's national director for New Zealand said he would like to employ me to connect with members around the country who were passionate about community activity. In all, receptiveness to my recommendations has led to implementation of my ideas in Auckland and a desire for further application around New Zealand.

I have had to accept and be ready to adapt to this ever-changing landscape as appreciation for the work I have been doing has grown. However, even before that, my literature review had taught me of the need for humility and openness to new ideas. Nicolescu (2014) writes of a person having to acknowledge that he or she does not have all the answers, or even a complete view of reality. Thus, taking on board people's views based on their paradigms is very important; this is something I did in this project.

Even in my literature review, I had to be open to reconsidering my paradigms. At the beginning, I read about the health needs there are in society. I was tempted to ignore this information, as I assumed churches were not equipped to meet such needs. However, most of my interviewees told me of the sense of connection they get from being associated with a church, and even those who had nothing to do with churches told me the friendship and camaraderie that churches offer was important. People spoke of the mental health benefits that come from being part of a loving community like a church. One industry professional went on to describe the problems, such as addictions, that can come from loneliness, thus demonstrating the physical health benefits that derive from church affiliation. What I could have written off as not feasible for churches turned out to be what the majority of people I spoke to feel is the most significant thing churches do to meet community needs. My priority in this work is now to facilitate opportunities for connection, something I did not realise was of such importance until I was willing to be open to new input and let my identity in professional practice evolve as a result.

Elsewhere, there has been a shift from what may have seemed like "having a good idea" to stewarding communal effort, dialogue, and shared action. For instance, when I showed my findings and recommendations to one pastor, he asked my permission to discuss them in detail with the rest of the leadership. He also asked me to give a presentation to the congregation to discuss the concepts further. When I visited the church I was told by members

of the leadership team how useful my findings and recommendations were, and how they were exactly the sort of things they needed to hear and act upon. Similarly, the principal of a Christian school I worked with was very grateful for my research and proposals and looks forward to meeting with me to discuss their implementation.

Identity formation has taken place through what I have done. Organisations I have worked with have been keen to be identified as forces for good in the community, and I have been able to form my own identity as someone who facilitates this positive change in these organisations. I have taken their intentions, reflected on their individual situations, and made appropriate suggestions that are both based on my findings and that also fit their contexts. This has given each organisation a way to move forward with their goals that is realistic, attainable, and appreciated.

It was interesting to see the change in my own life that took place when I decided to focus on helping churches and Christian organisations better meet community needs. Having moved to New Zealand in 2023, I had spent my time taking a backseat in terms of getting involved in my community. However, when I approached Christian groups to see if they would like me to involve them in my potential study, I went from being an outsider to being a valued resource. One church offered me employment on a permanent basis and asked me to continue working along community needs lines with them well after my Wintec studies were over. The ethical imperative I felt to continue this important work, as well as the desire of the Christian groups for me to do so, became an experience of integrating into the New Zealand community; I became a community practitioner rather than someone simply doing research to complete a course. This ties in with the notion of praxis, an idea of doing and reflecting that produces self-knowledge and contribution.

My literature review educated me regarding needs and how to meet them. My study into philosophical positions, theories, and systems showed me how I could address issues. However, it was carrying out my project that led me to realise the significance of what I was doing. Rather than approaching the subject apologetically, I began to see that others considered my work to be significant; so much so that people are desperate to read the completed study, I have been asked to provide training based on my findings, people are carrying out my recommendations, and I have been given employment through it.

There is far more to my work than simply trying to deliver my original idea. Although I could have contributed to society through running a hotel, to increase what I can offer I have had to adapt. Even when I had established that my emphasis would be on Christian organisations meeting community needs, that had to evolve as certain organisations were not in a position to collaborate with me as much as they had originally hoped. My focus shifted from a local to a national basis as I was given the opportunity to integrate my paid work with the results I was discovering through my investigation. During the research process, I had the opportunity to engage with more and more stakeholders and build partnerships with them. This led to a shared ownership of problems and solutions, with any success I now see being as a result of this collaboration. Whereas individual success could be defined as having a business idea and making money from it (such as my hotel idea), my success has come from working collaboratively. This has encouraged people to know that they can make a positive difference, to give it a go and see society improved as a result. Mixed in with the success of understanding churches and community needs is the fact that I now get paid a salary for doing it.

My adaptive way of working began with responding to best practice opportunities for furthering my project and led to me taking on more and wider professional roles than originally expected. I became a facilitator, both in terms of enabling interviewees to express themselves, but also in communicating how community needs can be met. I took on the role of ethical leader as I brought what people knew they should be doing (making the lives of people in their communities better) to the forefront of their minds. I showed people who were at a loss as to how to make a difference what they could realistically do to improve society. I also became a co-creator as I worked with people in interviews to help them uncover their feelings and ideas. This co-creation also meant working with groups to help them discover their communal talents and assets and how they could be used to meet the societal needs I had uncovered.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The process I have gone through has shown me that one's identity in professional practice evolves through deep listening, structured reflection, and a willingness to let go of fixed outcomes.

This journey reflects becoming, of moving from one point to another. This is a process that aligns values, vision, and context over time. I knew it was important for Christians to help those in need and make a positive difference in their communities. I saw a way to facilitate this through discovering needs and aligning these needs with the talents and passions of local Christians. I was willing to adapt as circumstances and opportunities evolved. This led to going into employment to investigate needs around New Zealand and demonstrate how my work can be of benefit on a national basis.

My pracademic journey is one I feel others would benefit from going on, not necessarily focussing on the same issue, but through learning to approach things they are passionate about in a similar way. I changed as a person as I studied literature concerning meeting community needs, wrote a master's thesis about the subject, and put my findings into practice in real-life situations. My process was iterative as I analysed and refined my work. It was also community anchored as I sought to work with partners in improving the lives of others. This was an opportunity to conduct a project where I could both learn and lead. I suggest that other pracademics take the same approach.

My findings could help someone in a similar situation to me who wants to carry out transdisciplinary work. They may also be useful to Christian groups throughout New Zealand, and possibly further afield. Moreover, my findings could be of benefit to all people wanting to make a positive difference in their communities, regardless of their faith. However, the scope of my project was clearly defined, and as such, I was not trying to help people of other faiths, or of no faith, in their community outreach. I did not intend to advise secular groups about what they could do to improve, not because I did not want such improvement, but because this was beyond the boundaries of the project. This additional level of community involvement could be the focus of future studies.

Anthony Dady grew up in the UK, where he gained an MBA, although he has also studied in the USA and New Zealand. In addition to his church ministry around the world, he has worked with many charities and community groups. He served as a councillor and mayor of Corby (UK) before moving to New Zealand in 2023.

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