



We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

The recent “*Community is the Answer*” workshop co-hosted by Inspiring Communities and [Inclusive New Zealand](#) was fuel for the heart and mind. Not only did the 140 attendees get to learn from leading global thinker Margaret (Meg) Wheatley, we were also enriched by some of New Zealand’s community-led change stories and emergent thinking.



The workshop, an extension of the [Community is the Answer](#) hosted by the International Association of Community Development Conference in Glasgow, brought people together from across the country. A key note speaker in Glasgow, Meg noted her own journey and quest to see who holds what wisdom in the world. She contrasted increasingly destructive modern western culture with its fast paced corporate, consumer focus and hierarchical nature that tells us to live alone, with the African notion of [ubuntu](#) which reflects we don’t exist alone, that being human and connected to others is at the essence of our collective being.

The importance of relationships and connections was also reflected in three local stories and observations and learnings around resilient leadership from Margy Jean Malcolm.

The first story came from Gisborne. Manu Caddie from Te Ora Hou Tairāwhiti shared how [Tiakina ō Tātou Tamariki](#), based in Kaiti, was making really great progress in increasing the capacity of local residents to care for each other. Now in year 4 of a 10 year timeframe, intentionally focusing on building relationships, trust and resident-led activities at street and neighbourhood level has resulted in positive increases to social capital indicators such as knowing the names of local children and levels of social contact with neighbours. This is making a real difference to life in the neighbourhood and is also a likely contributor to significant reductions in local crime statistics and fewer notifications to Child Youth and Family.

In the second set of local examples, Wellington City Council shared how by taking a proactive approach to connect local residents in local spaces and places is helping grow a stronger shared sense of community in Strathmore. Going to the local community and asking what they want help with, seeking multiple contributions and making possibility visible is all part of the change that's now happening in the suburb. Similarly, seeing tenants living in Council-owned housing as potential community developers has taken the Council's City Housing Team on a very different journey from traditional asset managers. For example, seventy Council hosted BBQs in different Council owned housing complexes has helped build a culture of a tenant-led action and local residents now lead community building projects themselves – from community gardens, to murals, to local newsletters, cooking programmes, Christmas events and much more. For more about City Housing's amazing success story see [here](#).



The final local presentation shared success through being brave, working collaboratively and giving people opportunities to participate and contribute in many different ways has also born amazing results for [Berhampore School](#). Faced with massive staff and student turnover and the realisation that no one was coming to save them, in 1997 new Principal Mark Potter and his courageous Board of Trustees made a decision to “help people no matter what.”

This has seen the school:

- opening up the school's classrooms for after hours use by community groups
- starting up a playgroup in the school led by local Mums from a variety of ethnic groups to strengthen family connections with the school and learning opportunities for under 5s
- partnering with a private provider to upgrade the school's pool facilities
- staying open to all ideas that walk through the door – which have including keeping bees on the school grounds and creating a values based programme with the local golf club.
- supporting a “Whanau Army” approach that embraces parents who want to do things other than go to meetings. This has helped launch new initiatives such as the successful quarterly parent-led market days which provide new income earning opportunities for both local whanau and the school.

In the afternoon, Margy Jean Malcolm challenged some of our dominant assumptions about leadership, exploring leadership as learning and offering some frameworks and strategies for leading amidst complexity. As noted in her recent paper to the [ANZTSR Conference](#), good leadership is full of paradoxes and polarities – like being vulnerable and creating space for others to contribute, while at other times being decisive and leading from the front. Using the [analogy of tides](#) moving forward and back, she encouraged us to think how leadership responses are always ‘in flow’, and the shadow sides of leadership qualities when things are taken to extremes; and the resources we can draw on to work with those polarities.

Reflecting on patterns emerging from stories she'd heard, Meg offered the following insights:

- too many people have been given up on, declared as 'broken' and impossible to fix. Having been defined as collective needs, syndromes and illnesses, experts have blamed people for their own 'misfortunes', taking no responsibility themselves for failed programmes and processes. In this way, experts have distanced themselves from people with problems as human beings and in doing so, have put "their potential in a box."
- the human spirit is never extinguishable. It can be illuminated and ignited – energy is created when we bring people together.
- humans want and need to be together, we also want to care and serve one another. "What benefits you, benefits me, I exist through you – you exist through me". There is an inherent faith in human goodness, and we are keepers of the faith, despite the detractors often around us.
- we are curious inventors who want to learn things that benefit our children – we want to find a better world for them.
- in creating connections, none of us can be fixed in a role and in fact, no one role is big enough to do all the things that need to be done! We also need to be willing to 'let go' our professional labels and see our own gifts, talents and potential.
- there is never just one problem or solution – there are many. The key is to develop connections and see how things can be strengthened as a result.
- major change will not be led by big government systems, it will come from locally-led action. Even heroic individuals within governments can't save nation states. "[We are the ones we've been waiting for](#)" – a gift from the Hopi Elders.
- we need to continue working from where we are to:
 - create "human spirit sanctuaries"
 - create beauty – not just functional public spaces but ones that invite the human spirit to engage
 - reclaim the understanding and language of community and multiple meanings of success
 - be in relationship with the earth
 - notice the companions all around us
 - persevere and keep going.

"When an old culture is dying the new culture is born from a few people who are not afraid to be insecure."

Rudolf Bahro