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# Rekindling the flame of community through compassion – a call for leadership toward compassionate community

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the perspective that we live in communion with one another and that social justice and interdependence stem from compassion. One aspect of compassion is the notion of interdependence and being passionately moved by others and for others. Embracing community development and social capital theory engages practitioners with compassion in social action. Social isolation, social exclusion and the fragmentation of community social support networks are hidden challenges to social justice. More sustained attention can be paid to the ways social workers could and should link people to others who will remain in the clients' lives long after the professionals have moved on. The argument is advanced that it is critical for more action in the rekindling of community and the linking of people to others – compassion reflects the grace of relationships that comes from authentic connection between people. The social justice challenge laid out is to promote social inclusion and interdependence and nurture the common life through engaging with those around our clients and us.

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## **Introduction**

Social exclusion, social isolation and the fragmentation of social support networks that provide a sense of community pose a little-recognised threat to social justice. This is because a fundamental part of being human comes from us living in communion with others. If that connection with others is lacking, an essential spark of community dims.

Social change, economic reform, globalisation, individualism and modern lifestyles have changed the social infrastructure of community throughout Aotearoa. There is a growing public debate about diversity, about ecology, about sustainability. Within this, attention needs to be paid to our social networks and the way we care for and relate to one another.

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Social workers and organisations who claim to have an interest in social justice can and should do more to let compassion flame brightly and use a relational community development perspective to link people with others. Development after all, rests on supporting resourceful people to do what is right for them in their place and space, in communion with others.

## **Background to this article**

Since 2003 Presbyterian Support Upper South Island (PSUSI), has been pursuing a strategy that puts more and more of its workers in community settings like schools, workplaces, church halls, medical centres, and Plunket rooms. The strategy was informed by the idea that services were better being available close to the place people called home, and being part of community.

What has emerged, particularly in the last two years, is a practice base that is evolving from casework and services into a mosaic of community development activities sustained through relationships. This includes a strong focus on nurturing social capital and pursuing social connection and inclusion as the basis of a just society.

There have been two main drivers for this evolution. One is the individual worker responding creatively to needs they come across every day related to social isolation, social exclusion and fragmentation of social support networks within communities. The second has been reflection on this at an organisational level and recognition that our roots as a Christian social service agency lie in the notion of interdependence and social justice being driven by compassion. In this thinking about the relationship of all to all, we are being pulled towards activity that links people to one another. The resulting social connections encourage meaningfulness and a sense of identity and belonging for the vulnerable and frail, old and young.

This focus on interdependence enables the rekindling of the flames of community that comes from people helping people in the thin space between hope and despair. We have identified that we have to move beyond conventional client-worker service delivery and find ways to encourage and enable people to be linked with others. Equally we have to link networks and organisations with other networks and organisations and nurture the quilt of community that shelters us all (Pipher, 1996).

This article explores the need for activity that empowers and enables the linking of people to one another within their communities as part of relational community development practice. The organisational and practice model used by PSUSI is described. Theories of community development and social capital are canvassed. The notion of compassion as the driver for social justice through interdependence is articulated. A challenge for more active policy, professional and organisational contribution to the growth of centred communities that shelter us all is laid down – *Aroha tetahi ki tetahi*, let us look after each other. (New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, 2008).

## **Dancing lightly in other people's lives but what happens after that?**

Mostly the presence of social service or health professionals in people's lives is a passing phenomenon related to various crises or life stage events that require something extra in

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skill, knowledge, resource or the imposition of social control. The dance in and out of lives requires care so that we do no harm, and preferably leave people better off.

Often the most vulnerable people have many professionals in their lives from multiple disciplines. The observation by staff in PSUSI, is that equally often, there is a lack of connection with family, friendship and informal networks. The people we work with are frequently socially isolated or excluded, as well as being in need of professional support. In our work this is notable with frail older people, young people and children who are struggling in the school system, immigrants, and families with children where there are issues of adequacy of care, maltreatment or special needs.

The proliferation of situations with multiple agencies involved and the rationing of resources has been given attention at the policy and planning level particularly since the late 1990s. There has been a growth in social policy planning documents and service orientation that emphasises collaboration, networks of providers, co-coordinated case plans, and common assessments amongst other things (Family & Community Services, 2007; Child Youth & Family, 2007; Ministry of Health, 2005, 2007). These are very important mechanisms to ensure people know which professionals are doing what in their lives and why. Equally the mechanisms enable professionals to utilise their skills effectively and in a complementary way so that the best outcome for the person in the middle of all of this is more likely. Additionally there are organisational and economic benefits through better use of resources and more comprehensive and concerted service delivery.

There is a significant gap, however. I see in recent years that while we are occasionally talking more amongst ourselves as professionals, and have become more proficient in collaborative, multi-disciplinary professional processes, we have not paid adequate attention to ensure the person in their place is connected to sustainable social support networks. We have not routinely paid attention to the shadow lands between the individual and their community or pursued the vision of social inclusion implicit in the notion of the common life or our profession's social justice and anti-oppressive heritage. Other PSUSI staff also observe that there is very little sustained effort or even recognition that linking people into family / whanau and friendship support networks is critical.

### **The practice experience of PSUSI staff**

It is increasingly apparent that wherever staff get involved in a community they very quickly become involved in activity that wasn't envisaged. Inevitably this activity is to do with linking people with one another. One example of this was a social worker who began to work with families in a small and reasonably isolated rural community. It quickly became apparent to her that many of the issues were a result of the people having moved into the area for cheaper housing. Once there they struggled to break into the established social networks and, at the same time, were adrift from access to friendly help and support when they needed it. They did not have someone to chat to or to lend a hand with the children. There is an obvious professional response to this type of scenario that involves service co-ordination and interagency collaboration. There is also a compassionate response that involves finding common ground where isolated people can meet others and gradually develop friendships and integrate into their new community through shared activities and interests. In this case, children provided the way through school events, involving the parents with others through the school com-

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munity, and encouraging some parents to develop a childcare facility. This type of work takes time and an organisational and worker capacity to be flexible, responsive and response-able (Kaplan, 1999), rather than constrained by programmes or methodology.

## **The twin forces of interdependence and social justice within compassion**

The term *social justice* is usually used in the context of describing a fair and just society in which groups and individuals are treated fairly and have equitable access to resources. Idealists and politicians of all shades generally agree the components of a just society include the rule of law, respect for human rights and some form of welfare. Ife (2002) argues that rights need to include civil, political, economic, social, cultural and collective rights. Collective rights in this context consist of economic development and environmental rights at a community or societal level.

Compassion is the hidden and possibly taken-for-granted element, that inspires social justice. In other words it is our oneness or receptivity, belief, faith, trust and hope in others that drives us to seek justice. Spiritual and religious movements recognise this explicitly as a motivator for doing good. Our professional literature approaches compassion in a number of ways but tends to make indirect links between compassion and social justice, and in that sense disguises and underplays its importance as part of the spiritual component of social work (Canda & Furman, 2000; Milner, 2006).

Compassion can be described as empathy in action (Lindsay, 2002), and solidarity of response to suffering, hardship and the challenges of everyday life (Canda & Furman, 2000). The concept of solidarity reflects a broader understanding of compassion as an alert sense of social justice through communal eros, and being moved by others for others (Hillman, 1993). Matched to this communal eros within social work and care work is a passionate concern for people and a sense of vocation to pursue the well being of others in a morally responsible way (Husband, 1995; Moore, 2002).

Another form or shape of the ethical and moral aspect of compassion is interdependence or the relationship of all to all. Interdependence is often used interchangeably with relational interconnectedness (Faver, 2004), and the receptivity and joy that come from love, from reaching out to others compassionately and authentically. Maidment (2005) describes such authentic relationships between professionals and clients as the 'quiet remedy'. I think of it as the grace of relationships, and the reciprocal enlivenment of heart and soul, the hope that comes from quietly and attentively being with others.

This entwined spiral of social justice and interdependence that merges to compassion is a powerful force. When recognised, it inevitably leads to a focus on social capital and the nurture of relationships at a community level through community development as a means to social justice and a compassionate community.

## **How compassion can thread through a model of relational community development practice – explaining the model**

An organisation like Presbyterian Support Upper South Island, with a concern for compassion and social justice, is more effective when it can live its values inspirationally by

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having an internal organisational environment that reflects what it is trying to achieve in the community.

**Table one.** A model of relational community development threaded through compassion.

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Connectedness	Respectful, reciprocal (mutual obligation and accountability) relationships between people driven by authentic connection, intimacy, passionate concern and moral engagement – empathy in action. A sense of community is nurtured. Anti-oppressive, values diversity, nurtures social trust. Social capital – bonding, bridging, linking. Interdependence. Ecological systems theory, transpersonal social work.
Cohesion	Meaningfulness: making sense of life through change and difficulty; having a sense of culture, identity and belonging. Manageability: Control over own lives and being able to make good decisions and choices. Comprehensibility: having a sense of everyday life and surroundings as orderly, consistent and familiar.
Coping and capable	Skill sharing, knowledge transfers, strengths orientation, holism, nurturing and developing from what works, response-able, respecting tradition, partnerships, coalitions. Practical help when and where it is needed. Empowerment.
Sustainability	Using time generously as a resource; enabling and supporting socially sustainable relationships and networks. Access to resources (health, education and housing), intergenerational equity, local self-sufficiency, care of environment, socially just. Evolutionary.
Creativity and hope	Dwelling on and being open to the possible, praxis, matching what we know with what we sense (intuition), (reflexive practice) (imagination) (curiosity) (hope, optimism, passion). Trust and good will. Use of narrative. Social action, cause advocacy, lobbying, action research that enables voices to be heard and given attention.

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The table draws on the work of Cox, 1995; Faver, 2004; Ife, 2002; Maidment, 2005; Milner, 2005.

In order to nurture the passion and compassion of its staff and more actively drive its mission, a model was developed in 2004 based on the key dimensions of resilient functional families and communities (Pipher, 1996; Kalil, 2003). The dimensions are outlined in the table above and are connectedness, cohesion, coping and capable, sustainability, and creativity and hope. A hope full, 'can do' and resilient organisational ethos fostered by the dimensions in the model, draws on the strengths perspective and links the elements in a way that workers can apply in the workplace and in work with individuals, families and communities.

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The model places a fundamental emphasis on the spiritual grace of relationships with a multi-dimensional approach that encourages thinking and acting compassionately, systematically and creatively in the midst of complexity. This is always a tension in social service or health agencies as the worker's focus and energy inevitably gets drawn into attending to the immediate practical issues that clients want help with, and that funders expect. This attention to the client is vital but the busyness doesn't encourage sustained engagement in broader community development activity.

The elements within each dimension of the model have evolved and emerged as our focus on being in community and being a part of community has increased. The elements draw from a mix of ideas, theories, writers and our own reflection on practice. The model is an interactive and dynamic conceptual framework for activity. The assumption is that all elements of the model have to be in play to some extent for community development practice that is driven by compassion to be occurring. Practice that concentrates on one or only some of the elements is not precluded. When all the elements are in play though the push is to relational community development with a strong bias to activity that enhances interdependence.

### **Connectedness**

People live in relation to others and their environment. We are born into community and live and die within the context of relational interconnection and interdependence. The elements in this dimension emphasise the importance of activity that encourages and enhances connection to, participation in and involvement between people in sustainable social support networks that promote inclusion and reduce isolation.

The role of the professional is to create opportunities and use their networks and resources to facilitate and enable formal and informal links that advantage and include the isolated and excluded, in ways comfortable for those people. This may often be at a superficial level, but it still offers contact or connection. There is a basic assumption that once relationships are soundly established, the activity that evolves from those relationships will be focused on the things that are seen to be important by the people directly involved. Compassion underpins respectful relationships that are a fundamental part of humanity and is evident through empathy in action, and interdependence. This is also seen as a deeply spiritual aspect of work. Wherever the focus goes onto the connection of people to one another and from those relationships into broader networks, the possibility of societal transformation becomes stronger. An anti-oppressive perspective supports the valuing of diversity and encourages ways of challenging oppression and discrimination through development of relationships and social capital across social, economic and cultural divides. Social workers have an additional responsibility to provide leadership and use their skills constructively in challenging exclusion and engaging powerful figures as part of the networks.

### **Cohesion**

Ideas of well being and basic understandings about life and its living in an emotional and conceptual sense make up the dimension of cohesion. This becomes more important for individuals at critical transitions between life stages and in the latter years of life. At a community development level, cohesion requires attention and should be evident in respect of societal infrastructure (individual, family/whanau, groups, networks, organisations and place). Roles that give meaning and belonging, such as parent, worker, volunteer and

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kaumatua/elder, should be supported across all levels. Part of the nurturing of community in a developmental way is to revitalise intergenerational networks where the old and young can learn from and support one another in mutually beneficial ways. Elders have wisdom, patience, time and various practical ways of coping with the world they have learnt which they can share. Younger people have energy, vitality and a sense of curiosity and fun that can brighten a day. Opportunities for more sharing of these attributes are important in a world where segregation of age groups is common. Cohesion is also supported by recognition that some level of familiarity with people and things that surround us is important. The routine of the everyday provides a sense of manageability and comprehension. Things like parents chatting as they drop children at school or childcare, the cheery wave from the neighbour, the postie, the familiar faces at the local shops, the regular walkers passing by all contribute to a sense of place and belonging. Equally the more ethereal place of internet chat rooms and connections through texting, email and phone are important in the modern world.

Within networks, groups, organisations and families, cohesion is aided by choice and control over the decisions that affect people's lives.

### **Coping and capable**

Interaction between social workers and those they are working with in this dimension requires a commitment to empowerment, to skill sharing and increased transformation of information by professionals to the advantage of networks. A strengths orientation enables recognition of existing capability that can be leveraged and increased. More importantly the combination of strengths and empowerment approaches ensures that what professionals do is in response to the aspirations of the people they are helping in a practical and responsible way. The professional being part of the community and alert to its essence is critical. This enables the natural strengths, traditions and desires of the community to drive any development and for the pace to be that which the community can manage.

### **Sustainability**

Community development is never a quick fix, but a patient, generous-spirited investment of time and steady effort. Care is required to ensure the networks and coalitions are socially sustainable and have the capacity to be self-sustaining in the medium term. This normally occurs through buy-in, commitment, supporting development of the community's resourcefulness and common interest. The big issues of society inevitably emerge in this dimension, usually in the form of efforts to improve access to basic resources and fairness. Workers need to contribute to these efforts, but be realistic and practicable about what contribution will be most effective and will most effectively complement the efforts of others. A preparedness to participate in an evolutionary and often unpredictable process is essential, and the small steps of social work (with the occasional leap of faith) are often critical to supporting a sustainable approach.

### **Creativity and hope**

Reflexive practice, optimism and passion for people, the cause or place underwrite this dimension. Many social workers think of their work as an art especially in the midst of uncertainty. Creativity rises from imagination, from dwelling on the mysterious and allowing the intuitive sense to merge with professional knowledge and skill. This intentional unleashing of heart and mind in creative endeavour gives rise to hope. Optimism can't be forced but social service professionals can and should encourage in themselves and their clients

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a healthy curiosity and openness to knowing inspiration when it knocks lightly. When we are moved by and for others, act purposefully and courageously, dwelling on the possible enables transformation through a subtle theology of hope. Trust and goodwill is a part of the relatively superficial relationships within neighbourly and social activity evident every day in communities. It is an important ingredient in being part of the wider whole. Good people everywhere know this through social action.

## **Community development, communitarianism and social capital theoretical perspectives**

There are many views about what community development is. Chile (2004) identifies three key principles of community development practice as enhancing sustainable development, conscientising practice and empowerment. Central to the application of these principles are two concepts of building community and developing society along with an anti-oppressive practice base and a social justice vision that everyone is of worth.

Ife (2002) describes community development as driven by concepts of social sustainability; holism; intergenerational equity; global justice through increasing local self-sufficiency; recognition of relational interconnectedness and the value of all living things; care of the environment; and, most importantly, nurturing a sense of community which values diversity, intimacy, identity and belonging, reciprocal obligations and interpersonal accountability, connections and culture. Within this, the focus is on working responsively with client and local definitions of need, enabling the voice of the client to be heard through attention and advocacy; securing access to education, health and adequate housing; closing gaps between rich and poor; and creating opportunities for people to have control over their lives and be able to make choices.

Kaplan (1999) provides a perspective on development and capacity building based on experience in Southern and East Africa and Eastern Europe. This perspective frames community development around respectful 'response-able' engagement with processes that have their own form and pace. The development role is facilitating the resourcefulness of people through three stages of dependence (learning and skills development enabled by others); independence (a change in relationships and power through using capacities and competencies to establish uniqueness and self reliance); to interdependence and collaboration. This latter phase involves a realisation that full achievement of individual potential is only possible through collaborative activities with others. Kaplan (1999) also explores the idea of capacity building in relation to organisations that are the vehicles for implementing social or community development policies. This is a useful and practical dimension to examine. It acknowledges the problematic tensions and vagaries of development where workers' engagement with community processes may be at odds with the demands of project funders or policy prescriptions the employing organisation is bound by. Kaplan (1999) argues that capacity building should emphasise and improve the ability of an organisation to function resiliently, strategically and autonomously; that is to organise itself flexibly in response to its aspirations as part of a community. Kaplan (1999) uses the term 'response-able' where this is done with the aim of empowering community. 'Colonial' models of capacity building emphasise training and support to deliver what the funders or policy makers want. Kaplan's (1999) capacity building model incorporates organisational adaptability and interaction with the environment and the relational (systemic) and inspirational aspects of

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organisational functioning. These sit alongside effective management and adequate people and financial resources.

McKinlay (2006) also identifies in the NZ context the importance of organisational culture in what approach is taken to community development. He goes on to articulate similar concerns to Kaplan that government and local government heavily influence and fund community development activities in New Zealand. The paradox is the subsequent control and way those resources are channeled potentially excludes or constrains community.

Munford and Walsh-Tapiata (2006) articulate eight key principles for community development in Aotearoa New Zealand using a bi-cultural framework. The principles are: having a vision for the future and what can be achieved; understanding local contexts; locating oneself within community; working within power relationships; achieving self determination; working collectively; bringing about positive change for all communities; and action and reflection. There are core themes around connections to others and place, drawing out and working from the stories and experiences of the people involved in order to achieve change, and understanding the personal and public world from diverse perspectives, particularly those of people who have been silenced, marginalised and unable to participate.

It is worth briefly examining the concept of communitarianism in relation to theory and ideas about social capital.

Communitarianism is the idea of people working together for the common good and of individual autonomy being shaped by the culture and values of the public space or community (Shirley, 1979). The notion of a civil society is an important element in communitarianism and its use is more commonly associated with political ideologies and philosophy than social work. In the political context, some proponents of communitarianism promote a conservative notion of communities that are exclusive rather than inclusive. Shirley (1979), however, links community development practice to historical communitarian movements where people worked together for survival and local interests. The term is also now being used in health circles and Ellyard (2005) includes communitarian approaches as an element of the future shape of health services within what he calls a 'Planetist' paradigm. Many of the elements of this paradigm reflect those in Ife's description summarised earlier. Used in this context, communitarian ideas fit well with a development perspective.

Equally, communitarian ideas and those related to a civil society heavily influence thinking about social capital and the critical importance of social connection and of people taking responsibility for changing what is unacceptable and oppressive in society. Cox (1995) describes social capital as a collective term for the ties that bind us. This is a stunningly simple concept that becomes dissected by a range of theorists into bonding, bridging and linking social capital or the connections within and between networks that have value. Bonding social capital is generally defined as ties in insular groups, and bridging as the connection between differing groups. Linking social capital is the connection between networks of different culture and type (Schneider 2006). There are also various distinctions made between social capital and economic or cultural capital and varied views of what social capital is. These include viewing social capital as a generalised civic good, or as a structural influence that creates access to social resources (Schneider, 2006). Cox argues that underlying social

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capital there are powerful forces of trust, goodwill, reciprocity, mutuality, co-operation, time and social fabric.

Social capital is not community but it does contribute to a sense of community.

Theory related to social capital, communitarianism and community development converges around concepts of connection, resourcefulness and common interest that are response-able, anti-oppressive and inclusive of diversity.

## Conclusion

Life is complex. There is a difference between people who choose to lead solitary lifestyles and those who are isolated, excluded and adrift from supportive social networks. Social policy identifies and acknowledges the need for strong communities but more can be done to enhance connectedness in an increasingly diverse Aotearoa. New ways of being in community with one another are evolving, yet there are many loose threads and too much fragmentation and exclusion. Community development activity aimed at interdependence encompasses the hope of inclusion. Community development is a process sustained by relationships. Relational community development practice driven by compassion enhances social trust, fairness and justice. It is sustained by creativity and hope, and by workers who have a sense of spirituality's power to improve wellbeing (Nash and Stewart, 2005). The heart of community is the notion that the ties to those around us should not bind us but free us to look after each other carefully.

In the words of the poet Yeats ' I must lie down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'.

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