

## The Shed Project, Stornoway

*Tommy MacNeil*

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*Rev Tommy MacNeil has been the minister of Martin’s Memorial Church of Scotland, Stornoway, for the last 18 years and recently became the Convener of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team. His heart’s desire is to help the church shift from a managing decline mindset to prepare for a better and brighter future. In this reflection, he shares his – and his church’s – journey to a future with hope.*



To help put The Shed Project<sup>1</sup> in its proper context, I need to share a little of my own story.

Born and raised in Stornoway, I wasn’t inside a church till I was 15. By that time, I had already made my mind up that I didn’t particularly like God, and I didn’t like His people. All I could see was religion and religious practice. I was brought up in a town where, when I was a child, the local authority would lock up the swings on a Saturday night so that children wouldn’t play on them on Sunday. This had serious implications for how people viewed God. I – and many others – recognised God for the things and the people He was against. This meant I was starting from a negative position whenever anyone spoke of Him. I carried this awareness of how people viewed God into ministry.

My understanding of who God was changed when I began to meet young Christians who were doing street outreach at the time. They were ‘street pastors’ before that was a thing. At weekends I would drink myself into oblivion or take drugs. These young Christians looked out for me, sometimes looking after me, and always made sure I got home safely. Why were they being so caring and considerate of me when I made it clear through my words actions that I had no time for them, their faith, or their God? It was unconditional and undeserved love that would lead to my heart and life being transformed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theshedproject.org.uk/>.

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When I came to faith at the age of 17, I decided that the change Jesus and His love made in my life was so real that I needed to spend the rest of my life telling people about Him. I wanted to be a Christian Youth Worker, but God wanted me to be a minister. I wanted to please Him, so He won!

When I came to Stornoway as minister in 2006, the church had been through a 2- to 3-year vacancy and was struggling numerically, financially, and with the age demographic. People often ask where the idea for The Shed Project came from. Apart from the obvious answer that it came from God, I knew I would have to take deliberate steps to open the eyes of my people to the needs that were in our community, and at the same time open their eyes and engage their hearts so that they could see that they could be part of the answer to their own prayers.

The feeding of the 5,000 in Mark 6:30–44 became a prominent passage for us. When Jesus sent the disciples to organise the crowd, one thing he didn't say was, only give food to those who believe in me. Or, only give food to those who will be in the temple. Whilst He would teach them and feed them spiritually, He also saw they were hungry and would make provision for them. On the basis of this passage I adopted the phrase 'No Strings Attached'; it is the foundation of all our community work.

What I also find interesting in the feeding of the 5,000 was the response of the disciples. Jesus saw the largest crowd he spoke to as a wonderful opportunity to reveal His heart of love for them. For the disciples, they viewed the crowd as an inconvenience and so made two responses. 'Just send them home' was one. The other was Philip, like many in the church today, asking the question, 'How much will this cost us?' I turned that question on its head when sharing the vision of The Shed, and asked our people: What will the cost be if we don't reach out in practical ways with the love of God?

The other lesson we took from the feeding of the 5,000 for The Shed Project was the simple idea of starting with what you have to hand. "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five – and two fish."

In my first year we introduced the Giving Tree initiative. The idea behind this was that we would partner with local agencies (alcohol and drug support, homelessness, social work, Hebrides Alpha, Women's Aid, etc) in getting basic information about individuals and families they were working with. We would then pin these details on a Christmas tree in our church and invite our church family to take away one of the slips of paper

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with the basic details and return them to the church with Christmas gifts they had bought. We would then deliver the gifts to the agencies who would distribute them to their service users.

In the first year we gave out over 90 gifts. In 2020 it was over 160. Over the 17 years we've been here, we've given away over 2,000 gifts to people in our community. This is a simple way of us expressing our love to people around us. At the same time, it was an important step in opening the eyes of the people in our church to see that there was real need in our community, and they could make a difference in meeting such need.

Fast forward to 2012 and we had outgrown our existing space for our work among young people. We had a heart to reach more youth, especially those in our community who were disenfranchised and facing various challenges. We began to work together on The Shed Project and began to dream about what the building could look like and the difference it could make.

I heard in a sermon a few years ago that 'nothing happens in God's kingdom and in the world without a declaration'. In creating the universe and the world where we live, God didn't just think creation into being (which being God He could have done!), He spoke it into being: 'and God said' (Genesis 1 vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). God put in place the principle whereby when we apply words to the vision of our hearts, it will bring life to it and vision will become reality.

With this in mind I, took our youth worker outside the back of our church and pointed to an old derelict building over our wall and asked him the question, 'How would you like that to be our new youth and community centre?' His response was predictable. 'That would be amazing, but how is that going to happen?' The answer to that question became a developing story of many God-moments that made clear The Shed was not just our idea, but God's.

In 2009 we as a church undertook a massive refurbishment of our main sanctuary. It cost us £300,000. Here we were in 2012 and we were still paying off monies owed towards that. We had no ground, no money, and no idea how to turn vision into reality! But we had a sense of God speaking to us through Isaiah 54:2 'Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes' (NIV). God was speaking and we knew we had to obey.

Six months later, we came to own the derelict building and the ground it's on. It had been gifted to us with a very generous donation to kick-start

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our fundraising for The Shed by its owner. Fast forward another two years (planning issues) and we now had the necessary finance in place. We had secured the services of a local builder, and the derelict building was being razed to the ground to make room for The Shed.

The Shed enabled us as a church to move from being a ‘one-day-a-week service church’ to being a ‘seven-days-a-week serving church’. Our mission statement sums up the heart behind the work – ‘Serving our community to the best of our ability!’

We opened The Shed in 2014 with two full-time workers: a full-time youth worker and a community worker. 10 years later, we employ 15 staff. Our youth and schools’ team have 5 staff; our family support team have 5 staff; our alcohol and drug support staff have 3 and we have a part-time fund raiser and cleaner.

To bring you right up to date, we’re now working towards The Barn Project. The Shed has reached capacity in every way, but our hearts and our vision have not. The Barn is in effect going to be a family centre with a new purpose-built community kitchen. It will house our Safe Families team, our Intergenerational Team, our Youth and Schools team, and will be a base for us to develop family support ministry.

The Barn is going to cost us £700,000 (approx.). We find ourselves in the place again where we don’t have the monies required to do it, but it’s not stopped us before. We have discovered and proved again what one of the giants of the faith, Hudson Taylor, discovered in his day: ‘God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply!’ We’re moving forward with our plans and hope to go out to tender in the near future.

To have a future with hope both for the Church of Scotland and the Church in Scotland, we need to stop being inward-focused. We need to open our eyes to the needs of our communities, and see that God is already present and active, and that He’s calling us to partner with Him and so become part of the answer to our own prayers.