

Claire Morgans, Transforming your context

Good evening, everyone. My name is Claire Morgans and I'm CEO of a children's charity, called Ykids. And this evening I've been asked to come and talk to you about transforming your context and what that means. Now, if you're anything like me, you've been quite annoyed by speakers sometimes. You know when they tell you their story, and it's all hunky dory, and everything's given to 'em on a platter, and it's all nice and shiny, and you just, you just want to punch their lights out? Well, maybe that's just me, I am northern.

In reality, if you want to make a difference, you want to change society, you want to change your community, you want to change the world, it's going to cost. And there will be a lot of hard knocks. Now, for me, I love to hear testimonies. I love to hear what God is doing through people's lives. I love to hear the great things he is doing, but unless it's accompanied with the truth, about the hardships, the realities of what happened, the mistakes, the sacrifices, and the lessons learned, then for me, it completely lacks authenticity.

So today I'm going to attempt to tell you at least part of my story, and the story of Ykids, warts and all. Now, I'm assuming that everyone has come to listen and talk about changing, transforming communities. And I imagine the sorts of things that are going through people's minds are well, how can I do that? Is there a strategy? What can I actually do? Can God use me? I mean, really, is it possible even to make big change when there's just me? How did God call you?

And also, maybe you just want to be realistic. Maybe you feel that God's calling you to something, but you want to count the cost. Not because you're gonna say no to God. But 'cause you realize you need to gird your loins and get ready for what God is going to do through you. So, I'm going to attempt to cover briefly in these next few minutes, my journey of community transformation

So, as the CEO of Ykids, we work in Bootle, which is one of the most deprived communities in the UK. Our vision is twofold. Firstly, it's to bring transformation to children and young people, transformation to Bootle through children and young people. And secondly, it's to reach every child on the planet for Jesus. So, it's only a very small vision.

The first part of our vision is very much about our local community and transformation. And the second part to reach every child on the planet for Jesus, well, we know we can't do that on our own. However, what we want to do is excite people about what God can do through children, and how they can go out and change the world.

So, what do Ykids do? At the moment, Ykids delivers work in seven different areas. We do relational youth and children's work, so we run after schools, clubs, activities, events, homework, clubs, anything that will help children have a good time, develop their education, their self-esteem, their confidence, raise hope, raise their aspirations, discover skills, and just get the best out of life. God put us on this planet to enjoy it. And many of us forget that sometimes and that's, want our kids to do.

We also work in schools, working in class both primary and secondary, delivering workshops, mentoring, assemblies, cross-school educational projects like the Bootle Children's Literary Festival. We work in our community, we deliver different community focused projects, such as art projects, social action, and have a community garden. We believe in enterprise and business and we have a high street cafe, which takes on young people who are far from the job market and have different barriers to work. And we help them to gain careers in hospitality and in retail. We teach enterprise skills to children and to young people. We even keep bees and teach young people how to keep bees and how to set up their own business using the products from the hives.

We do families work, we have a family link worker, we support families through peer mentoring, family projects, parenting skills, drop-ins, food. We buy things like school uniform, a bed, sometimes just a birthday cake, something that'll make a difference to that family because they're struggling, but we also advocate for them, take 'em to hospitals, courts, debt problems, domestic issues. I've only done five. Six is training, we offer qualifications, work placements, apprenticeships and accreditations. And we also deliver bespoke training to churches and community groups.

And finally, faith. Faith is at the core of all that we do. We deliver faith projects in schools, we run children's work at small and large Christian conferences for little churches and big churches. We run an intern program and have a number of church partnerships where we take on staff and then subcon them to the local church because they don't have the capacity to do all the employment things that you need to do. So, we enable them to have their own staff, and we also run a youth church cafe once a month for young people who've got no clue what church is

Recently, we moved into an old library that we'd had refurbished. Recently, we were given a brand-new state of the art minibus as well as our community garden and the beehives and the cafe. We also have another outlet and an NHS building. And we've just been given an empty shop in the Strand Shopping Centre to turn into an exciting steampunk themed literacy project to teach children to read. We've got some wonderful partnerships with hundreds of groups and businesses, decision makers, movers and shakers, and we have a reputation for delivering quality innovative activities that make a real difference.

We commit to our children long term. Many we've had for 10 years in our projects, and over 30% of our workforce used to be children in our projects. Now before you punch my lights out, because you'd be well Within your rights to after all that, we are there by the grace of God. It has not been plain sailing. Many mistakes have been made, and many sacrifices and many tears have been shed.

When you try to do a work of God, you come against opposition. After all, the devil is going to leave you alone if you're going in the same direction as him. We have been lied about, we have been mistreated, people have actively tried to take us down, we have been dishonoured, we've been let down. We've been broken, cheated and taken advantage of. We have seen incredible miracles, and we have wept buckets. We have seen times of plenty, and we have seen many more times when we didn't know if there'll be enough money to pay everybody's salary the next week, because the funding had just ran out.

But you know what, every time God has proven himself faithful. Though often we have had conversations about his timing. You see, I like to plan, he likes me to trust. When you want to make a difference, you step in and you step into that arena of public leadership, you step into an arena, and arenas are where blood is shed, even on the winning side. Because our fight is not against flesh and blood. Transforming our context is not easy, but it is building God's kingdom.

Let me put a little bit of this into context. So, you've all heard all these lovely shiny things that Ykids is doing, and by the grace of God, but let me tell you a little bit about Bootle. In Bootle, 46% of children live in poverty. 36% of adults are out of work, and 47% of houses are owned by social landlords. 42% of working age adults have no qualifications. 48% of children are growing up in lone parent families. Life expectancy is 10 years less than the national average and 20 years less than the more affluent areas of our country. We're ranked up there in the top 1% most deprived in the UK. So how come Bootle? Where did it all begin? How did Ykids come to be there? How did Ykids come into being?

When I first became a Christian, this passage really began to become very real to me. Isaiah 61:

The spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the broken-hearted and to proclaim that captives will be released, and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord's favour has come, and with it the day of God's anger against their enemies. To all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks, for the Lord has planted his own glory. They will rebuild the ancient ruins, repairing cities long destroyed. They will revive them, though they have been deserted for many generations.

My childhood was quite challenging. I didn't feel loved as a child, I had a lot of things that I had to face, the sort of things I would never want another child to have to go through. I became a Christian when I was 15, and for the first time in my life, I felt loved, I felt valued, and I felt I had a purpose. And from day one, God placed a love of the inner city in my heart. Now I was brought up in lovely north Wales in a seaside town. But the inner city was where I felt God called me to. To the neon lights, to the places where people were hurting the most.

There was a bit of a journey in the process. I went to Bible college, I became a youth worker, I became a community worker. I moved from to Bristol and Rochdale and Rugby. And in that time, I had never thought originally that I was going to be a children's worker because I didn't like children. When I first became a Christian, it was like youth you're okay, kids, look, no, I'd been bullied. They were horrible things.

And I went away to Spring Harvest, to actually run, to go and be a helper with the seven-year-olds. Now the thing was, the reason I went was 'cause I fancied a boy who was going. So, I tagged along. And I was given a group of 10 seven-year-olds, and we were told to pray with these children. Don't know what to do these. And this one seven-year-old said, "Please, can we pray for my little brother?" He's four, and

he doesn't want to go "and see yellow granddad anymore." It turned out that granddad was dying of liver cancer. And that for me was my epiphany moment, when I realized that children weren't monsters, they were people.

And what's more, they felt every feeling that we felt as adults, they suffered every injustice, they just didn't have the emotional equipment to be able to deal with it. They stored it all up and when will we see it? Screwed up adults. I didn't know an adult who was screwed up that hadn't had bad things happen to him as a child.

And then it was like the penny flopped. I didn't have anybody to turn to when I was a child. What if I'd had Jesus? What if they'd had Jesus, then even if their parents didn't believe in the myth, there's no one there for them, and teachers wouldn't listen to them, Jesus would. That was my moment, when I felt called to children's work.

So, took the journey. It was 20 years from being called to go to Liverpool when my husband and I finally got there. And when we finally got to Liverpool, we thought we were going to church plant. Six months in, God had other ideas. And he told us to take Ykids, turn it into a charity and begin work and go full time with the charity. Now, up into that point, Ykids had just been a group of volunteers that went and did children's programs at big conferences. We started big, we were doing hundreds and hundreds of children, all singing, all dancing programs. But I always felt that unless you were doing it frontline, unless you were working with children day in day out and you committed long term, how could you possibly be authentic?

And so, my heart had more and more grown, that one day would lay down roots in a place, in a place that was poor where we could really make a difference. And when we got to Liverpool, very quickly, God said here. I got a job as a community worker in Bootle. And it wasn't long after, James Bolger had been taken and killed. But what many people don't know is, there were two other child murders by children around about that same time. Bootle was in a sorry state. I remember talking to some church leaders and they said, "Bring Ykids to Bootle. "We need Ykids here." And I very politely said, "No, I'm sorry, God said Liverpool." Then God said to me, "Bootle is Liverpool, stupid." Doesn't mince his words, does he?

So, as a community worker, I began to get to really know this community, and I fell in love. I fell in love with the people, I fell in love with the place, and I knew that God wanted me to be there. Bootle at the time was militant, it was angry, it had been let down and it was run down. There were nearly 40 schools in the area and none of the major supermarkets. Poverty was tangible. Drugs were dealt openly on the streets; housing stock was in a terrible state. Children were terrified to go out because of the gangs. One eight-year-old told us that when he grew up, he wanted to get a round. Not a milk round, a round of drugs. Another eight-year-old was caught tying another child to a tree to set them on fire as part of an initiation to join a gang.

Poverty was such that we knew of one family who only ate cornflakes for a week because they had no food in the house, and another where the children were peeling wallpaper from the walls to eat it because they were so hungry. Things needed to change; the community needed to transform.

So, I began, and I was still working this community work and I began to build links as Ykids. I went into schools and started to teach, well not teach maths but help the

ones, not the slow learners in maths unfortunately but the good ones. They were better than me at seven, they really were. And I remember one boy telling me, "My family laugh at me 'cause I'm good at maths." And I cheered him up, I said, "Don't worry, when you're an accountant "and you've got a nice big car, "they won't be laughing anymore." I then started a children's choir and lots and lots of children came to that and then we did a carnival costumes project involving the whole community and won prizes, things, it was so much fun.

And then a local church offered us a free office. It was actually, had been a ladies toilet. They had taken the toilet out, but it wasn't very big, but it was free. And in those early days, I began to share the vision of what I believed God was saying that he wanted in Bootle, and the difference that he wanted us to make. And people laughed at me. People actually said to me, "You must believe in miracles." Actually, I do. God gave me a passion and the heart for that place. Then God gave me a vision for what could be, and then he gave me the strategy of how to achieve it.

Do you know even now, sometimes people say to me, would you ever believe that Ykids will do all of these things, and all this would have happened all those years ago? And actually, honestly, I have to say, well yes, because God said so. It's not about me, dear me, I can't do anything. But he said so, he's just, he's doing the work, I'm tagging along for the ride.

So maybe I'll talk a little bit about strategy, what we actually did, I remember one day in St. John's and James Church. At this time, we'd actually, we'd grown out of our toilets and we'd moved up to a youth room, which was much bigger. And I remember there was a buzz on the doorbell, and I went downstairs and there was a boy stood outside in the pouring rain with no coat on. "Can I come in?" I couldn't let him in. I was in the building on my own. Now his house wasn't that far away, but it broke my heart because I wanted him to have a safe place to come and be.

And I went upstairs, and I just cried. I said God, what's the point? We're doing all this work with kids, but they don't know you yet. And God reminded me that actually the strategy that he had given us was to win the community, to love the community, to serve the community and to become an anchor in that community. To yes be Christian, but not expect lots of bums on seats. It was about loving them for who they were and making life better for them. And if our motivation was only that we got them into church and converted, that was conditional love, and we had to give unconditional love. So that's what we have been seeking to do. That was our first strategy.

Now I'm very good at second guessing myself, I suppose most of us are. And there were quite a lot of times when I was pulling my hair out and talked to a person, said what should I do? Should I do this, or should I do that? What should I do? God, will you guide me, and I didn't know what to do. And my husband said to me, "You're called to reach children in Bootle, aren't you?" Yes. "You're called to change Bootle, aren't you?" Yes. "Well, just do it. "Do whatever you want to do to make that happen." I was like wow, oh, yes. God hasn't given me a blueprint of everything I have to do. I can use my imagination; he gave me one. And that was like a moment when I felt set free, set free to do whatever to make a difference in the community.

In fact, if you've seen the film "Robots" and there's Bigweld in the "Robots" and there's a wonderful catchphrase he says, see a need, fill a need. And that was how Ykids began to grow. Because we saw a need, and we filled a need. For us, it was we started working with children, very soon we were doing youth work, and then we were doing families work. And then we realized these young people weren't getting jobs, that's how we grew. Because we wanted to fill a need.

So, I and the team, we asked God for a strategy. And every year, one of the things that we do, we have a vision day every year and we come together we pray, and we asked God, what's your word for this year? Give us a handle on what you want us to do this year, what's going to see us through? What can we hang our coat on? And God began to give us all sorts of wonderful things each year. One year, he said to us, be church. Not be a church, be church. Because we were a Christian presence, where the children were meeting when they weren't going anywhere near the doors of a church. Get your house in order was one. That was about actually making sure that we had, we were working with excellence, that we were doing all the policies, and we were not as good as the world, better than the world. We wanted to be the example of good practice.

Another one was step up. And at that time, we weren't doing much in the way of Christian projects. It was basically community focused. God put his foot on the pedal and said right, go, start doing the Christian stuff. One of my favourites he told us was win friends and influence people. Now, lots of people don't realize I'm actually quite shy. I've learned to mask it a bit, but naturally shy. If I can email you and not have to speak to you on the phone, much better. I can stand in front and talk in front of people, put me in a room to network people I don't know, nightmare, nightmare. So, win friends and influence people was quite a challenge me. And I stepped out of the boat, and I actually contacted our local councillors, the head of our council, people I thought wouldn't possibly want to speak to me. And you know what, they made time for me. And all I did was get to know them and share what we were doing. 'Cause actually, what we were doing was helping to meet their objectives. And there began lots of really, really good relationships, and I can honestly say that there are people in the council, in schools, and in those public places now that are my friends, and that I work with.

Take the land, one year he told us. That year we were offered 10 pieces of land or buildings. Now that just seems crazy, and we certainly couldn't use them, some were totally unsuitable. We're just like, stop it, got to take the land, do we have to take them all? We didn't, but it was just like, okay, okay, we get it. We need to move forward. Be distinctive, that was about staying true to our Christian foundation and not trying to hide it because you'd be amazed how many people said to us, drop the Christian bits and you'll get more money. But we're not in it for the money.

Jubilee, we all get excited. Jubilee yeah, you have Jubilee, all the debts are cancelled, then lots of money is gonna come in, woohoo! And that wasn't what it was about. 'Cause Jubilee is about forgiving debt. And we have been hurt by many people and different churches and stuff had happened. And it's like God was saying, yeah, you need to let that go. Forgive them.

Another one was stand. Stand, and that was all around Jehoshaphat standing on the walls, when the army were coming against him. And Jehoshaphat stood, and there was Israel, Jerusalem behind him. And there was no way they could beat that army. They just had to stand their ground and trust God. Of course, they didn't lift a finger because God sorted it. And what's really exciting for this year, as we've moved into our new building, God has said, see, I'm doing a new thing. And we're very, very excited to see what he is going to do this year.

There's been a number of things that have been really important to me, as I thought about the community leadership and really making a difference. And the first one, I just want to run through some of them with you. The first one will be, know your context. Know where you are, know your community. You can't think, God's given me a vision, I'm going to turn up and go, "Ha-ah, here I am, I'm going to change the world." That's really disrespectful. And that's what God did with us. He made us part of that community, so we had a voice. So, the first thing you need to do is love that community and earn the right to speak, because you have served and loved that community.

Second thing is, and maybe should be the first thing but say yes to God. And keep saying yes, even when the going gets tough.

The third thing is stay true to your calling. As I said before, people have tried to get us to change our ethos. And that's often come up with funders, but you say you're Christian. Now not everybody who works for us is Christian, and we're certainly not Bible bashing every child that comes to the door. Many of our projects are just purely to bless the community. But we are Christians. And I remember being at a youth service meeting with the councillors there, and all these bigwigs and another youth provider decided to out us as Christians. And what was really funny was watching everybody look at each other around the room, shrug their shoulders go, "Yeah, we know." Because we've never hidden it. We'd never hidden who we were. Dream big and believe the impossible. If your vision is manageable, and achievable, it probably isn't from God. If it's impossible and crazy and you desperately need him to help or it's going to fall apart, then it probably is from God. Partnering with God means trusting him.

Run with the opportunities. Do you know you never know what's going to happen? Say yes to things. And now you've got to look after yourself, of course, but say yes to things you might not have otherwise 'cause you never know who you're gonna meet. Recently, I was invited to go on a course about social innovators, an Erasmus course, I thought, it's a whole week, I haven't gotten time to take a whole week out and talk about social innovation. It'll be fun, but uh, haven't got the time. I had a wonderful time. But at the end of that week, I'd been invited for Ykids to become the British partner in another Erasmus program, to develop a program again for children, to encourage them to have a social innovation mindset. And it comes with funding. It was like if I had not gone, that never would have happened. So, you never know what opportunities there might be. But when you find them run after them. Give time to people, listen to people. We all need that value and respect and you know, everybody's the same, give time to somebody who might be seen as important but give time to the little people as well.

Lovely story about a young lady who, one of life's waifs and strays, had a very difficult life, never seemed to settle anywhere, didn't even have a permanent home and came to volunteer with Ykids. Didn't actually like children but liked being part of our Ykids family. So, we found jobs for her to do that were relevant but not with children. And she had a counsellor, and she never shut up about Ykids to her counsellor which piqued her interest. So, she told her husband, and her husband was about to make a donation so said, "Well, I know, I'll give it to Ykids." So, he asked to see me, so I said yeah, of course I'll meet you for a cup of coffee. And if you'd like to make a donation, great. I'm thinking great, a couple of hundred pounds, woohoo. That's worth a nice meeting and a coffee. At the end of that meeting, I came away with a salary for a children's worker for free. And it was all because we looked after this lady who wasn't a child, but she was a person. And though she wasn't in our objects to reach, but she needed time, and she needed love, and she still gets it, we love her.

Partner with others is my seventh thing I'd recommend. I love the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah who went and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. He needed everybody on board. He needed the team and he needed to galvanize that community, because you just can't do everything on your own. And what I find really fascinating about Nehemiah is, he chose people, he got people who were really not suited for building walls, like perfume makers, and goldsmiths. I mean what do they know about building walls, but they did it. He even used people, he didn't want to work with anybody else, the men from Tekoah didn't wanna do what everyone else was doing. But you know, they still built the wall. And the thing is, not everyone has to be a Christian to care. There are lots of great people out there who want to make change in our community and they're not necessarily Christians. There's lots of Christians out there who couldn't care less. Work with the people who want to work with you to make change. And if they're not Christians, you just shine as bright as you can. So, win friends and influence people has very much become part of my mantra now. It gets you a lot further than ranting if you honour people and respect them.

The power of thank you. I've been amazed how many funders have said to me, no, no one said thank you. We always make it a point that we say thank you, we send reports. We put case studies in because people are just people and they need to know that what they're doing is good. Build friendships, build relationships. Transforming your context is also not about the bums on seats because God cares about the whole person. He cares about the hairs in our heads, it's everything matters. Our job is to be salt and light in our communities. Like Daniel, another wonderful Bible character, Daniel, who lived in the world, but not of it. Who influenced world leaders, numerous world leaders from a position of slavery in exile. And yet we're living the other side of the cross. So how much more can we influence the change makers and become the change makers?

Expect to be misunderstood, especially by those you think should know better. Not everybody gets it. And sometimes you can try and explain and explain and explain, and they won't get it. Time to move on. Take the people who will go with you and leave the rest to God. Because you need to get on and do what he's called you to do.

And finally, keep God at the centre. God wants community transformation. He's the one with the strategy, he's the one with the resources, and he's the one with the contacts. He's the one that makes the miracles happen. We have prayed, we have prayer worked, we've blessed, we've bound, we've praised, we've stuck promises in the ground. But if it's not for him, we're not going to get anywhere very fast anyway.

So Ykids has been in Bootle now for 16 years. A lot has changed. Our community is changing for the better. In fact, recently I found out we're no longer in the bottom 1%, we're now in the bottom 2%, which is quite a big jump. It's not perfect, and we're yet to see what's gonna happen in the Universal Credit and things like that. We're yet to see what's going to happen. However, God is at work in Bootle, and it's his work. We're taking ground, we're bringing his love and his healing and his hope into dark places because we are the shining light of Jesus. We're not alone. Ykids is not the only group in Bootle doing amazing things, and we're working in partnership.

So how do you transform your context? You say yes to God, you listen to his strategy, you believe him at his word, you set your face like Flint and you get into the arena.

Thank you.

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