

Urban Seed and Credo Café

Finding community where you least expect it

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In 1999 I was filled with a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction – there were things I believed in, but I wasn't sure how to begin living them out. At the time I couldn't explain why, but sitting alongside those in need, rather than simply giving them a hand-out, resonated with me. After reading Tim Costello's books, I thought that the work of the Urban Seed might be the place to start looking.

Urban Seed's work centres on the "Credo Community" a term used to describe those who gather around Credo Café. Credo Café is located in the basement of Central House, the building owned by Collins Street Baptist Church. It is accessed either from a white-walled, green-carpeted hallway off Collins Street, or through a narrow laneway known as Baptist Place, one of the CBD's highest drug-injecting locations.

Credo Café is the location of free meals that form the basis of our work, and provide an opportunity not only to meet a physical need that exists for some members of our community, but also to build relationships. Credo Café isn't a soup kitchen, it's a community meal – volunteers don't just provide food, but sit down with their own meal and chat with those beside them. In sharing a meal, we meet our deepest needs, not only for physical nourishment, but for "spiritual" nourishment through the building of a sense of camaraderie and community.

The origins of Credo Café lie in the mid-1990s, when a few young people who lived in Central House began inviting people they met on the streets back home for meals. Today it has grown into a daily meal for around 70 people, but retains the sense of friends hanging out together. Those who come to these meals are encouraged to become involved in other aspects of Urban Seed's work, and time and time again I have seen the way in which relationships built in Credo facilitate an improvement in people's self-esteem, community-connectedness and self-reliance.

Like so many, I was initially drawn to Urban Seed's work by the desire to do something for people I perceived to be less fortunate than I. Yet if I had any naïve belief that people somehow 'needed' me more than I 'needed' them, this was quickly dispelled. At my first meal, I was immediately, painfully aware that I was a middle-class white kid with a tertiary education who could discuss the finer points of international relations theory and equitable estoppel, but had no idea who was on top of the AFL ladder or what happened on *Neighbours* last night. I felt completely inadequate as men who lived in boarding



Photos by Rebecca Monson

houses generously and doggedly drew me into their conversations about the things they were interested in. If I had come to Credo with the illusion that I had more to offer than to gain, I certainly didn't leave with that impression.

My friends from Credo have taught me to make small talk, to enjoy life more, and to find great joy in the smallest of things, like a warm bed or a sunny day. They've also challenged many of my notions of social responsibility. Several years ago, people began to ask me why we didn't have a time of prayer before our meals on

Sunday nights, and request that I do something to remedy this.

After seven years, I still eat with some of the people I met at my first meal – they have noted the stress on my face during exams and have reassured me, and hugged me with joy when they discovered I got the job that I wanted. In a culture where Christians and commercial lawyers are frequently criticised, my friends in the Credo Community have shown me that I need not be an apologist for who I am.

The relationships built in Credo give me a sense of fulfilment and connectedness that I cannot find elsewhere. The physical location of Credo Café, caught as it is between the glossy Collins Street shops and the depths of Baptist Place, reflects its social function in bringing together those who are at the centre of our city's political, cultural and economic life, and those who are pushed to its margins. Here, over a meal, people meet and eat with me as I am, with little interest in my university marks or my ability to draft a contract. In Credo, it matters not whether we are a volunteer residing in Central House, a young woman on the streets, an elderly man from a boarding house, or a commercial lawyer – we meet each other as human beings, with the same needs.