

Changing the Conversation

The first experience of ministry, for one of our editors, was a small inner city church in Birmingham, England. That congregation had at one time been vitally involved in the local life of the community, bringing hope, nurturing leaders, offering much needed resources. It was a relationship which generated a dynamic and living conversation between church and community. The dramatic changes of the post war period had ended that vital community conversation and what was left by the last quarter of that century was a conversation that consisted of the question, 'why don't you come to our church anymore?' That was another way of saying, 'why aren't you like us anymore?' or even, 'why don't you like us anymore?' Plaintive but not productive questions! Many churches across the western world are in similar circumstances, asking similar questions. That is one reason why the conversation between church and community has to change or even begin. This edition of the journal looks at the challenges we face in addressing this question of changing the conversation about mission and connectedness.

Changing the conversation

In the first half of the twentieth century the conversation about the place of the church in the life of the western world was framed by attempts to 'mend Christendom'. Such heroic and extensive efforts led to a new kind of post World War II framing of the place of the church around its role with the State in education, welfare, politics and economics. The debate in more recent times has recognised that Christendom cannot be mended because in fact, it has in many important senses, ended. We are living in a post Christendom world. One of the results of this recognition is that ever since the mid-point of the last century the energy and focus of the churches on both sides of the Atlantic has turned inward around questions of its own identity, in what would be described as an ecclesiocentric pose. At bottom we have witnessed over the last sixty or so years, a preoccupation with getting the church right, on fixing the church or finding one more new (or older) form of church. It has been an ecclesiocentrism driven by modernity's wager that life can be lived without God.

The Journal, as a trans-Atlantic partnership of theologically informed practitioners and academics in North America and the UK, believes that the challenge facing Christian life in the West was framed by Lesslie Newbigin more than thirty years ago and that the missiological challenge he presented remains critically relevant today. This trans-Atlantic partnership is also convinced that while there are important socio-cultural differences between these two sides of the Atlantic and while the various 'churches' are shaped by differing histories, there are common questions about the nature of a gospel engagement with what is still called the 'West'. In the late sixties after his return from India, Newbigin framed the challenge that stood before the churches in the form of a question: '...what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture that is shared by the peoples of Europe and North America...the culture which those of us who share it describe as modern?'^[1]. The intervening years have not changed this question. Even though there has been a massive

'missional' conversation in response to Newbigin, these conversations have largely failed to grasp or engage the question he proposed nor have they penetrated into the churches beyond a few people. This point has been addressed in earlier issues of the Journal^[2] but, in the opinion of the Editors, has not been addressed in any substantive way by these churches or changed the basic ecclesiocentric preoccupation of most Christian leaders.

Part of changing the conversation must involve addressing this misconception and misapplication of Newbigin's missiological insight about the nature of the challenge facing Christian identity and the hope of people in the West. Newbigin's *missiological* question has been continually and unrelentingly turned into *ecclesiological* questions. The default shaping missional conversations for the past two decades has been *ecclesiocentric*. The basic, underlying current shaping Christian imagination appears to be one in which the church (in its multiple forms and iterations) is assumed to be the primary subject and object of the challenge Newbigin placed before us. The language of *missional* is an adjectival modifier of 'church', as in '*missional church*' or '*mission-shaped church*'. This starting point lays bare a default deeply rooted in the imagination and practice of many Western church leaders and it fails to grasp what is at stake. When one raises this issue of the ecclesiocentrism of the missional conversation the spectre of Hoekendijk^[3] is raised as if one is proposing that the church be devalued or dismissed for some kind of secular religion in which one finds God wherever there are signs of hope and humanity (defined by whomever is looking at the world at that moment in time). This is far from what we're suggesting. There continues to be a preoccupation with writing books or framing statements determined to ensure that readers get the church 'right' so that from the starting point of right thinking, right actions will result.^[4] The tenacity of the default is laid bare in these kinds of projects – if such an approach was going to change anything it would have done so by now. The churches are drowning in an ocean of books on the nature and purpose of the church, on new proposals for being the church and ways to fix the church. Our point is not that the nature or identity of the church is irrelevant. Our argument is different: it's that the ecclesiocentric defaults implicit in these projects blind us to the more significant challenge at the heart of Newbigin's question. The conversation needs to be changed. There is too much at stake for it to be determined by the ecclesiocentric default.

The reason for proposing that the conversation needs to move on is that Newbigin's question is about the challenge of a *gospel* engagement ^[5] with that narrative tradition, itself founded upon the Christian story, which is known as the *West*. This is the locus of our own missional challenge. It is about this vexing, difficult challenge of *how the gospel might, again, become the narrative shaping the imagination of the West*. This is certainly no longer the case - at best, the West is a culture living off the distant fumes of a story now largely forgotten or relegated to moments of private reinforcement or the state's need for a religious mythology about itself.

Since the beginnings of modernity a massive shift of imagination has occurred in the West. We live now in what might be called a 'new' West shaped by narratives radically different from those of the Christian tradition. The primary narratives shaping this West are determined by certain forms of economics and the secular state. Beneath these narratives lie those of the autonomous self and, its concomitant doctrine, namely, that life can be lived well and completely without reference to God (except, of course, in one's private, personal, self-validating experiences or when the state needs religion to bolster its own narrative). It seems to us that

few have yet to take the measure of what Charles Taylor has been proposing for some time but especially in his book *The Secular Age*.^[6] Secularization isn't that people have religious choice and some choose not to have religion. Secularization isn't that somehow religion has been banished from the public sphere. Whether one is or isn't a religious person isn't the issue. There's enough religion around today to exhaust us all. Religious choice proliferates. The old secularization theories look pallid at this juncture. The issue is that what goes all the way down in the Western imagination, whether one is religious or not, is that God simply doesn't matter, doesn't enter into the calculation and practice of everyday life. God isn't an agent at any practical level. It really doesn't matter how vital, or healthy or empowered or (fill in the blanks) the church might be, it is all a dance of shadows within the 'secular age'. In late modernity this secularity, whether in its economic, political or humanist forms, trumps all else and, therefore, the current search for getting the church right or fixed can be just left alone; it is irrelevant because, as part of the secular age, it is a harmless distraction.

Once this is perceived the contemporiness of Newbigin's question and the immensity of its challenge become clear. Furthermore, once this becomes clear, the ecclesiocentrism of the current missional conversations with all their scholastic efforts to provide one more clear and simple description of the essence of the church, looks like fiddling while Rome burns. The conversation needs to be changed. The vocation of Christian life is in the Spirit's call to embody a new West within which the Christian narrative is the imaginative nucleus. The growing sense of hopelessness across the West^[7] demands that we change the conversation in order to embrace the missiological challenge of making all things new. It is from this standpoint and on this journey that we will discern what is required to be the church and where, in the great tradition, the resources for being this church might lie. For this reason the metaphors we need are far less those of an 'exile'. We are like Abram and Sara called out by this incredible God to go on a new journey where the maps aren't given and the old workbooks won't guide. God waits for us, calling us on to discover the ways in which the Spirit is inviting us to be the healers and restores of life in this new West. In the language of Augustine we are travellers, *viators*, in an unknown land. The question for the journal is then how to discern God in this wilderness?'

A Praxis Orientated Journal.

In the summer of 2014, our annual JMP Think Tank met in Baltimore, MD^[8] where we wrestled with the question of how the Journal could best serve the emerging conversation about a missional engagement with the new West. In those conversations the voice that shaped our work came from Dr. Jannie Swart. Jannie died in the fall of 2014 from a massive heart attack while playing Frisbee with his students. He was in his early fifties. We still feel the loss of this compassionate, brave South African scholar making his way as a professor at Pittsburgh Seminary. In Baltimore Jannie argued strenuously that the Journal not be shaped by an essentialist narrative. In part what he was pressing into was that we not have a journal based upon abstract ideals framed in the absence of on-the-ground praxis. His passionate pressing of the point prevailed. We agreed that the Journal would be shaped around engagements with the ordinary, everyday stories of men and women seeking to figure out the missiological questions of joining with God in their localities. In April of this year (2015) the Board met in Swanwick, UK

for the annual Think Tank to deal with this question of the Journal's direction and format. We determined that the Journal must be shaped in the form of a table conversation that leads with actual stories of local praxis into which theologically informed practitioners are invited to interact and reflect upon what we are discerning and learning about the shaping work of the Spirit. Local practitioners (dwelling in their neighborhoods) committed to being worshipping communities in their neighborhoods know that the challenges before them are no longer about fixing the church or developing some new models of church. It is about discerning where God is at work ahead of them in their local contexts and, out of that discernment learning to shape communities of Christian praxis.

It is their stories that form the 'food' for our table. Our intention is to listen in on these stories of what is happening on the ground in the local as ordinary Christians test where they might be seeing the presence of God's agency in front of them. This is a table without pretence. None of us have figured out how to answer Newbigin's question of missiological engagement nor Charles Taylor's observation that secularism isn't just 'out there' but is among us all. So into these local stories we will need *reflectors* to assist and guide us in discerning where we might be seeing the contours of the Spirit's directions. The reflectors won't be seeking to critique the stories but to assist us in searching out themes, discerning traces of the Spirit's invitation.

Issue 6 introduces this new approach and format. Our intent is to shape a practice of leadership framed by God's mission in everyday life across North America and the UK. The lead story is from a practitioner-theologian, Stan Wilson is a Baptist pastor working in Clinton, Mississippi. His story reflects the pastoral work he has done to invite a well educated, middle-class white congregation to cross boundaries and become those who listen to and sit at table with the other in their contexts. Questions of how and where the Spirit is at work inviting this congregation to join with God in their contexts are powerfully present. It is a story that raises important questions about the nature of leadership in the context of this journey. The story presents a leader with keen theological and pastoral praxis. At the same time it presses into questions of how such a leader cultivates the spaces for significant culture change among a group of people formed in particular habits and practices of faith.

We will invite three or four reflectors to engage the story. We have framed a set of questions, an *Invitation to Participate*, to focus reflections around the journal's themes. We want to extend the invitation to other practitioner theologians to engage with these questions, with Stan Wilson's experience, *and with their own stories*. Email and let us know what you are discerning from your life in your community and context. What if by listening attentively to stories of Christians testing out Christian life in the local, ordinary and everyday we might find ourselves coming to believe again that God is the primary, active agent in the world and that this God whom we confess, is out ahead of us in our locality? It is time to change the conversation and our own complicity in the wager modernity made with itself so long ago.

[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 1.

[2] See for example Martin Robinson and Alan Roxburgh, 'Editorial: Responding to the New

West', *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 5, Autumn 2014 and Jamie Wilson, 'Together at God's Table: How Practicing Hospitality Shapes our Imagination', *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 4, Spring 2014.

[3] David Bosch describes the impact of Hoekendijk and this approach on the missiology of the 1960s in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 382-385.

[4] See Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989) 24.

[5] By *gospel* he meant this capacious Christian story centred in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, in history, for the sake of the world. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

[6] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). James K. A. Smith has written a précis of this book: *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

[7] See, for example, Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (San Francisco: Sage, 1992).

[8] Participants at this meeting were: Alan Roxburgh, Martin Robinson, Michael Binder, Mark Lau Branson, Graham Cray, Craig Van Gelder, John McLaverty, Mary Publicover, Lynda Robinson, J R Rozko, Jannie Swart, Sara Jane Roxburgh Walker, Fiona Watts and Jamie Wilson