

Reflection on 'Cultivating Desire in Mississippi' by Sam Ewell

In *God's Companions*, Anglican vicar Sam Wells describes his experience of ministry on a deprived housing estate, in which his congregation received a large sum of government funding to lead a community regeneration project. During that process, Wells discovered 'that poverty is not primarily about money. It is having no idea what to do and/or having no one with whom to do it. The former I called imagination, the latter I called community.'^[1] In *Cultivating Desire in Mississippi*, (hereafter CDIM) Stan Wilson tells a story that runs in parallel to the story told by Wells. He does so by reflecting upon his journey to lead a predominantly white congregation to live out their desire to be present with their African-American neighbors in a context defined (not by social deprivation as such) but by racial division. I read CDIM, therefore, as pastoral reflections on how one local church struggles, fails, and yet persists in its desire to become what Wells claims the local church is to be: a 'community of imagination.'^[2] More specifically, I read CDIM as the story of Northside Baptist Church's (hereafter NBC) attempt to cultivate a renewed missional stance by re-imagining its understanding of social engagement: a shift from primarily 'working for our neighbors' towards finding ways 'to the enjoy the presence of its neighbors' (16).

As I reflect on NBC's desire to connect deeply with African-American neighbors, my initial thoughts run in two directions. On the one hand, I can imagine British readers (and even some Americans) being puzzled by the way that church in the South still tends to conform to the 'color line.' On the other hand, as a white, Christian male raised in a Southern social arena that was not legally but 'functionally segregationist,' I absolutely get what Stan describes here with such transparency. Indeed, at one level, we can read Stan's reflections as a *sociological* confirmation of the enduring power of the 'color line'—that 11 a.m. on Sunday morning continues to be the most segregated hour in America.³ Yet, I want to suggest that Stan prompts us to deeper *theological* engagement with this story, one which takes seriously two realities: 1) the extent to which we are *formed* by the power of social division (such as race); and 2) the costs and the joys of being *transformed*—especially, how the power of God (Rom. 1:16) is capable of transforming our habits of engagement with our neighbors in ways that bring 'good news' to them and to us.

For my part, I would like to comment on three 'take-aways,' or insights for further reflection prompted by CDIM. First, CDIM invites us to change the conversation around the purpose of Christian social engagement by keeping the primary focus on 'being with' our neighbors instead of 'working for' them. To exemplify the importance of this distinction, Stan highlights the example of Richard Brogan, a previous minister known for 'visiting' people in the community and in their homes instead of 'working for' them or merely trying to get them to attend his church. Stan's description of this minister's emphasis on leisurely friendship stands in stark contrast NBC's habitual perception of neighbors as 'recipients of Northside's ministry' (10). As Stan points out, such habits come with a cost, for 'seeing [the] neighbor as a project for improvement left Northside exhausted, frustrated and at odds with other churches in the neighborhood' (9). Although Stan does not use the term 'being with' in his reflection,⁴ 'being with' sums up 'a new way of engaging its neighbors' (9) that Stan urgently seeks to cultivate at

NBC. For not only is 'being with' a welcome antidote to 'frustrated missional outreach,' (8) 'being with' is based on an eschatological wager: namely, that 'being with is the telos of God's action, and thus should be of ours.'^[5]

A second (related) insight has to do with the relationship between mission and our capacity for cultural intimacy—that is, the capacity to welcome and even become the stranger. One of the things Stan deals with in CDIM is how the historical pressures of race cultivate 'paternalistic patterns of engagement' (8) in which white congregations tend to see themselves as insiders or hosts who attempt to integrate or serve African-Americans as needy outsiders or mere recipients. Yet, Stan is at pains to cast a different vision and imagination for NBC, a vision more in line with Willie Jennings account of the humility of 'Gentile existence.'^[6]

As Jennings points out, the scriptural narrative portrays cultural intimacy in terms of Israel (inside) and the nations (Gentile outsider-being-brought-in). Thus, we (Gentiles) are prompted to see ourselves as believers who have been included through the Messiah into God's promises to Israel. In other words, we (Gentiles) are always outsiders before we are insiders; always guests in another's house before we are hosts. Moreover, this 'Gentile' imagination has everything to do with the missional practices of social engagement. We engage the neighbor/stranger not only out of the 'proper confidence' (Newbigin) of being included, but also with the 'proper humility' that comes from remembering a) *how* we have been included, and b) what we are included *for* (i.e., ultimately for being with God, with one another, and with the renewed creation). Because we have been first welcomed and included by the other, we do not brand, welcome and include our neighbors as 'charity cases' (10), but as bearers of gifts (10). This awareness shifts the conversation from, How do we include them and meet their needs?, to What gifts are we discovering through our being joined together?

Finally, Stan's reflections prompt a crucial insight about leadership—namely, importance of embracing *failure* as leaders. In a refreshingly honest way, Stan describes NBC's inability 'to explore our deep-seated habits of working for our neighbors, rather than simply enjoying their presence' (15-16). Stan describes NBC's experiments as 'remarkable' (in their ineffectiveness) and 'hopeful' (because of what they revealed). It strikes me that Stan would agree with Christian farmer and food activist Joel Salatin who likes to say, 'If something is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly first.'^[7] Of course, Salatin is not advocating that we keep doing things poorly and remain ineffective, rather he is reminding us that things worth doing—whether riding a bicycle, playing piano, or learning how to be with our neighbors—are rarely achieved on the first take. They take practice, and often, innovation; if we think we have to get it right the first time, then it is unlikely that we will take the risk of trying.

The take-away message from Stan is not 'Here's how you do it'; the message is 'Try something first, and don't be afraid.' For those who thirst for tangible signs of neighborhood transformation, Stan does not offer a magic potion—'the last Coke in the desert.' Rather he offers us the humility of someone who has loosed himself from the grip of perfectionism and, therefore, is not afraid to innovate—and to fail. And therefore, albeit indirectly, he encourages us to trust that loving one another *without fear* (1 Jn. 4:18) is ultimately 'good news' for us and our neighbors.

[1] Sam Wells, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 7.

[2] Ibid.

[3] A comment made by Martin Luther King Jr. in a sermon preached just a few days before he died.

[4] Stan does, however, refer to Sam Wells' distinction between "working for" and "being with" in footnote 10

[5] Sam Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) 25.

[6] ⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) 25.

[7] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay/201112/if-job-is-worth-doing>