

Response to Michael Volland's Reflections

Michael Volland's reflections^[1] on the Bonny Downs story^[2] are a helpful framing of important issues we're all seeking to engage in our current contexts. He rightly teases out the tensions between how we are God's 'sent' people for whom the metaphor of *journey* (one is reminded of Gabriel Marcel's *homo viator* and Augustine's framing of the Christian life in terms of journey) is a critical imagination and that of *place* where we are to stay, root down and dwell (here the images of Jeremiah 29 or the Benedictine call to practice stability come into play). He rightly picks up on what I have described as the trendy moments in Christian life where, at this point in time, the local ('staying') is fast becoming the new sign of virtue and relevant Christian identity (see, for example my critique of the recent book *An Other Kingdom*)^[3]. This implicit critique is worthy of our consideration. As Christians try to understand how to shape their practices today the sense of call to the local has come to the forefront as a way of faithful, communal practice.

But 'staying' is not an end itself. It's not as if we have, somehow, discovered the new solution to being God's people. Jesus did, in the small geography of his world, move about a great deal. The disciples were sent and, the Apostle Paul seemed to stay in one place only when he was forced to (in Roman prisons). There is, therefore, no special virtue in 'staying'. There are rhythms of time that intertwine a staying and a going. The Celts picked this up in the rhythms of their lives together. Their choosing to build houses beside the sea was intended to remind and embody for them that all of life was to be shaped around these times, like the tides, of going out and coming in. In this sense, there is no virtue in raising up the new gospel purity of staying and going local. The true virtue is that of discernment. The important question for the travellers and pilgrims in God's way is how we listen to the Spirit in our time and moment. In this sense I share with Michael his desire to frame the Bonny Downs story in this broader context.

How I wonder, do these rhythms of going out (being sent) and staying in place (seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you) make sense in our contexts? Some general questions and comments might be made around this. I wonder if it isn't the case that for most of the past hundred or more years in the West, we have lived and drunk deeply of a whole process of disembedding in which place has been systematically dismantled through powers like consumer capitalism, the overarching stretch of the state (obviously less and less so in recent years) and the effects of technological development? Does it not seem that those sinews and habits that once held a community together and formed us in social practices have been so attenuated that they barely exist today? My own experience as someone born in that massive post WW2 baby boom has been of a world of movement away; it has been built on a wager: the more mobile ('free') I am, the better my personal choices and the more fulfilled I become. For me the question of being sent or 'staying' must be worked out in this broader context and it must be shaped by the discernment question of what the Spirit might be calling us to do at this moment in time. My own sense is that, at this moment, the healing of the city, the welfare of people in this confusing time occurs as God's people go against the grain of the times and choose to dwell in the local, stay in place and discover what the Spirit is doing there. But this is not a better virtue than being sent, it is a discernment of vocation with God at this point in time.

I was struck by a recent article by Anna Rowlands reflecting on her experience of meeting with a

group of people post Brexit in northern England.^[4] Her reflections in this moving description of people struggling with the disembedding of their lives helped me understand just how deeply fearful we have all become, with few roots in the local to know how to be or how to build the common good. Is a gospel virtue at this moment to seek out the good of the place to which we have been sent? For me, this does mean we are in one of those times when staying and dwelling may well be far more critical than being sent. It is not that one is better, or more spiritual, than the other. It is not that this 'going local' is the next new technique to fix ailing churches. It's a matter of asking about the times and what the Spirit might be inviting us into. In Bonny Downs and many other places it may well be that the Spirit is calling us to do this settling and dwelling. Part of this, for me, involves a strange notion. This call to dwell is also a call to leave and travel. I fear we have too long created churches that are now affinity groupings disconnected from their local communities. My sense is that the Spirit's call to dwell in the local is also a call, like Abram and Sarah, to let go of these dreary tents to discover a radically different form of church. Michael's reflections and cautions are welcome reminders for us not to reify and make dwelling the new virtue. It is about discernment and the Spirit.

^[1] Michael Volland, 'The Pilgrims of Bonny downs' *Journal of Missional Practice*, Spring (2016).
<http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/the-pilgrims-of-bonny-downs/>

^[2] Sally Mann and Angie Allgood, 'A Deeply Rooted Missional Community in Bonny Downs', *Journal of Missional Practice*, Spring (2016).
<http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/bonny-downs/>

^[3] Alan Roxburgh, 'Book Review: "An Other Kingdom" by Block Brueggemann and McKnight', *Journal of Missional Practice*, Spring (2016).

^[4] Anna Rowlands, 'The Fragility of Goodness: Brexit viewed from the North East', *ABC Religion and Ethics* 29th June (2016).
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/06/29/4491205.htm>? (Last accessed 1/08/2016)