

Think Tank 2018: Allowing Stories to lead us

I'm learning the power of stories.

My involvement with the *Journal of Missional Practice* began with telling my story. In Spring 2016, Martin Robinson and Mary Publicover came to interview us. Our community church, Bonny Downs, was [featured in Issue 7](#). I can't tell you how important this was for us. Like so many other featured communities, we are not from a celebrated place. We are at the margins, and live deeply in a particular neighbourhood, mostly unnoticed by others. The Journal arriving to listen to our story prompted me to reflect more deeply on what God was doing here. Watching that first interview, I realise that it was not a reminiscence piece, it was more an act of 'remembering': bringing the pieces of our story together so that we could see God's work more clearly. As Issue 7 unfolded, other commentaries followed - from Martin Robinson, Michael Volland and [Alan Roxburgh](#). Each of them took our story as a starting point and set about doing theology. They were not neatening us up, or telling us what we should do, they were dwelling in our story and asking what God might be up to through it. They identified patterns and themes and compared these to others they had seen. They reflected on theories which our story reminded them of. And then they invited me to join in and add my own response: <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/reflection-remainers-sally-mann/>

I have journeyed from telling my story to listening to many others. Today, I am a member of the editorial board for the Journal and have taken part in three international Think Tanks. We continue on the trajectory of allowing stories to lead us - to invite us in, teach, challenge and often disrupt us. As a team we curate, publish and reflect on stories from the everyday but nonetheless extraordinary people of God. We shine a spotlight on communities seeking to engage with God in their local neighbourhoods. These stories are not treated as anecdotes or examples to theories we have already supposed to be true, they are the starting point for how we understand what God is doing. Issue 10 ['Questions of Place'](#) was a great case in point. We began with a sense that God was revealing a great deal about the importance of faith communities being rooted in a particular place - 'loving the hell out of their locality'. But we had not figured on the extent to which different ethnic groups viewed 'place'. Listening to diverse stories from First Nation leaders in Canada, Latino congregations in the States and African migrants in the UK, a whole new set of questions began to emerge. We allowed this to happen. The stories were disrupting what we thought we knew. By the end of Issue 10 we had more questions than answers - but we had better questions! As a feminist, I appreciate this method of developing knowledge: it takes marginal voices seriously. It doesn't expect to tidy everything away with a neat, last word. The method of knowing through action and reflection allows God to break down some of our tidy explanations and disturb pat answers. It invites us to take our obliviousness seriously, to recognise privilege and learn from the grassroots. It takes seriously that God is always the prime mover.

Every year the editorial team gather to seek a sense of God's call. We begin every day with time 'dwelling in the Word'. We have consistently been led to Acts 16:6-15. Paul imagined a map and method for his second missionary trip (the one which would bring the gospel to mainland Europe). But through unexpected meetings, dreams and the practice of listening to

gathered people, Paul learnt that God was ahead of him. The stories we uncover in the Journal are contextual, intriguing and unique. We are learning not to force them into existing frameworks but to listen deeply. They have become an intriguing patchwork of perspectives rather than a two-dimensional 'how to do mission' handbook. Giving stories priority has changed the nature of the Journal. We welcome this because theology cannot be separated from lived faith. This is why we have decided to allow Issue 11 to be a place of intentional listening. We plan to return to stories we have featured in the past and to open new conversations between diverse communities. We will also seek broader input from readers and invite you to join in a grand listening experiment later in the year.

If I may, can I extend the invitation once offered to me? It's an invitation to join in a learning community that is committed to attentively listening, recounting and reflecting on stories, so to better understand how God might be at work in the world.