

Webinar: Beyond the Billboard

The *Beyond the Billboard* webinar was shared with a panel and 'chat' participants on 17th January. Sally Mann and Alan Roxburgh lead the conversation, keeping a hopeful focus on what God is doing *beyond* the billboard. For them the billboard is a manufactured thing, a commodity, and it may mask a beautiful view beyond. Sally and Alan wonder if we have tended to treat our churches and our faith as a kind of billboard. There are brands and programmes and ideas, but these are beginning to feel manufactured. They are losing their credibility even as we expend energy trying to improve them. But there is in our culture a hunger for substance, for relationships in community where God is active. How do we respond to this hunger when our imaginations are so captured by the billboard, church 'business as usual'? For Alan and Sally part of the answer is through a faithful, listening vulnerability in the neighbourhood. (See the video at 4.00-10.30 mins.)

In this webinar Sally shared a couple of stories about what this may look like, from her life as a Baptist minister in a deprived community. She explained that their church nativity this year was developed and performed among the children of their wider multicultural multi-faith community. This unconventional context shed a fresh light on over familiar stories for the church and others. The presence of surprising outsiders (magi, shepherds) in the gospel stories was shown up in sharp relief by the diverse cast including a Muslim Angel Gabriel! Recontextualizing scripture in another setting, Sally's church has a practice of "cooking" sermons through conversations about bible stories with their food bank community. New insights emerge from this group who have not met these stories before, but who have met poverty and oppression. In these sort of encounters, Sally finds that the faith community meets with the gospel in a way which is fresh and transforming- both inside and outside of the church. (Video at 10.30-21.00 mins.)

Sally's church have recently been focusing on the stories of Acts of the Apostles which repeatedly show an outsider (Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia) confounding expectations and shifting the direction of mission. Alan and Sally wondered how we attend to these outsiders, and who we are missing in our conversations. (Video at 21.00-25.00 mins.)

From this point in the webinar, questions began to emerge from online participants. One questioner raised the problem of 'buy-in' from members of a congregation used to more inward-looking models of pastoral care. A further question raised the difficulty of congregations who live outside the location of the church. In response to these questions, Sally and Alan took up the language of 'rebirthing' from a participant. They agreed that the shift required for the church is that fundamental. Alan and Martin Robinson in their forthcoming book will be using the language of refounding the church.^[1] (Video at 25.00-35.00 mins.)

Refounding or rebirthing must be earthed realities so part of a response to this level of challenge would be practices of engagement with the neighbourhood, and for this to be experienced by leaders before any attempt to steer change in a congregation. Alan described his experience with a small learning community of clergy who committed to a set of practices to help them connect locally. They were invited into a rhythm of prayer, local conversations and

into discovering the stories of both congregation and neighbor to discern God at work. For some of them this was a profoundly disorientating experience. (Video at 35.00-41.00 mins.)

A webinar participant raised a question about keeping a distinct Christian ethos when, in a ministry situation, non-Christians outnumber Christians. A discussion followed both on the panel, Sally and Alan, and in the webinar 'chat'. Sally felt an authentic Christian presence would be transforming, 'salty', in any sort of minority. The Holy Spirit is active in the lives of Christians. But Martin Robinson noted that a Christian ethos has been lost from many organizations in the UK. For Alan, speaking from North America, our Christian identity as a community of salt has been fundamentally lost. Our shaping practices have been about the 'billboard'. Congregations of like-minded people gathering intermittently in a place will not act as salt. What practices are needed to form the authentic Christian presence which Sally mentioned? (Video at 41.00-47.00 mins.)

For the last part of the webinar, Sara Jane Walker, the webinar host, brought the conversation back to the question of refounding. How do we press into this? Alan laid out a response in concrete terms: a church community for a walkable area (a parish), dwelling there, acting as guest and host in its neighbourhood, learning to listen to the 'other' and to discern what God is doing. (Video at 47.00 to 54.00 mins.)

Sally and Alan contrasted this 'beyond the billboard' life, with the church of the billboard. The church of the billboard has professionalized and privatized Christianity. This church provides a service to augment personal spiritual experience. *Beyond* the billboard, in the parish, the church takes responsibility for practical and social concerns. It has an Isaiah vision and a public role. It may be small but it will be covenanted to its life within the neighbourhood. There will be a need for new leaders with fresh insight for this refounding for it is an Abraham and Sarah journey. We are called away from the familiar, to a moment by moment dependence on God, on our way to an unknown destination, but not alone. (Video at 54.00 to 62.00 mins.)

[1] Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018)