



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

In This Issue

Tracing threads of our conversations in past issues, Brian McGaffigan leads off this double issue by challenging us to take seriously the rural context as an overlooked "marginal" place of ministry. He is followed by a personal and practical reflection on "Evangelism as Companionship" by Katie Hayes (p. 3).

Several articles give attention to the way "gospel and our culture" concerns surface in a panorama of Western, secular societies. Three of these are excerpts from addresses given at the October 2002 GOCN Consultation. David Kettle reflects on "The Gospel in the Haze" of Britain's Christendom (p. 5). Ross Langmead traces the way the gospel finds expression in an Australia where the church was "Never Quite Established" (p. 7). Jurgens Hendriks broadens the field by reflecting out of a South Africa that is both Westernized and marked by a pluralism of African cultures (p. 10).

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—the Editor

MINISTRY AT THE MARGINS

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It was with a real sense of excitement that I read the words of Ann Wilkerson-Hayes in "New Ways of Being Church" where she observed that "we need to watch the margins of our society - the inner cities and the rural areas where creative approaches are emerging, often born in despair. And so when desperation forces us to let go of the old ways God can bring

vast majority of the population is not being touched. Fresh expressions of the church and its ministry are needed. According to Craig Van Gelder "these fresh expressions of the church will come from the margins of society, where they will radically reshape both our understanding of the church and the gospel."⁵ The need is for change agents.⁶ Eddie

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new life."¹ Different authors are indicating a growing recognition of the collapse of the old ways of being the church. Douglas John Hall writes of *The End of Christendom*²; David Kettle of "The Haze of Christendom"³; while Philip Jenkins writes of *The Next Christendom*⁴. Even with all the energy being expended in traditional ways of doing church, it seems that the

Gibbs is specific when he writes, "change agents are more likely to be pioneering church planters who have no congregational history to deal with and who are immersed in the cultures of the people they endeavor to reach. In the case of established churches, they tend to be those who are arriving fresh to the task.... We must also recognize that God may have impor-

tant things to say to the church through the complete outsider.”⁷ In my own role as a complete outsider in a village on the Prairies, I am discovering this need for a new approach to our thinking about “church”.

I first began to consider the concept of margins back in 1998 while researching new ways of being the church in a rural environment. My interest at that time was in the transformation of rural church and

support different denominational outposts. The village I call home (population 270) had its two denominational churches close within a year. By God’s grace, a group of believers from different denominational backgrounds gathered together to receive one of the buildings as a community church in order to preserve a place of Christian worship within the community. As a result we are learning that scriptural Christian unity is not only possible and

compatible. Because folks live in close proximity within rural communities it is difficult to place one’s light under a bushel. There is no hiding. There is plenty of opportunity to love one another with *agape* love, because there has to be a lot of give and take, and acceptance, where everyone not only knows everyone’s business but also is connected relationally in some way.

There are many folk hurt by traditional church who will not talk about it, never mind attend one. Some folk express a sense of feeling trapped in existing church structures. Still others have had no religious involvement at all—ever. Many are therefore looking for the reality that is the gospel rather than the unreality of the churches¹⁰ and I have found myself ministering to people from every sphere of life and denominational background, attracted by that something special that is the gospel lived out in community.

Now I recognize that I began my current ministry with a Christendom mindset - doing all the stuff of door-to-door visiting, events planning, flyer distribution, and outreach programs of all kinds. After limited success I had to

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community because of the church institutions that were closing. They were simply not in a position to effect the creative change necessary to survive. After much frustration in trying to renew my little corner of Rural Christendom⁸, I came to the conclusion that I needed “to stop lamenting the death of Christendom, and start working on the life that that death makes newly possible.”⁹ Rural interests are becoming like “lost sheep” about which few care to concern themselves, no less in the church than secular institutions. However there are folk in many rural areas who are beginning to reach levels of desperation where they are willing to let go of the old ways with an expectancy that God will do something new. Thus it is that rural ministry can be considered as being on the margins—the cutting edge of the future. It is where leaders are being raised from the grass roots—folk who have not come up through the system—where discoveries between rural life and the gospel can still point to effective ministry for all in the future.

One very basic fact about rural ministry is that due to declining population and resources, rural communities are becoming unable to

necessary, but also deeply enriching of worship and prayer. In keeping with the gospel admonition of Matthew 5:47, rural life fosters the need to learn to relate and to care for whomever is there. It means developing relationships with folk who would not ordinarily be a part of one’s life, instead of seeking out those who seem on the surface, at least, to be

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EVANGELISM AS COMPANIONSHIP

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A response given to an address by George Hunsberger at a Ministry Summit held at Abilene Christian University

Consider my father-in-law, a minister in the Churches of Christ for forty years and counting. By one measure, Jack's career as an evangelist peaked in the 1970s when he studied with and baptized dozens of people a year. That number was at one time one of the most important measures of his success in his work, a quantifiable indicator of the effectiveness of his ministry.

But the number gradually declined as the world "moved on" (Stephen King's phrase from the *Gunslinger* novel series). Over time, people no longer responded predictably or at all to the proofs he could offer, the reasonableness of his presentation of the gospel. People were no longer grateful to be shown the narrow path to the tiny door that opened to reveal the Church of Christ on the other side—an earthly holding pen for heaven-bound souls who had figured out God's scriptural code better than anybody else. It didn't sound like good news any more.

There was nothing to do, of course, but study and pray, wait and trust; trust that the essence of the gospel not only endures but thrives in the changing currents of human history; trust that the Spirit would show the way. Jack's baptism stats are down, but his work as an evangelist goes on, as must ours.

The anecdotal evidence of my father-in-law's ministry career confirms the need for a new way of thinking about evangelism, such as the one offered here by Dr. Hunsberger. There are several ways in which his work moves the conversation along in the Churches of Christ. Dr. Hunsberger reminds us that the "already, not yet" reign of God must be the primary occupation of the church in life, word and deed. Evangelism the old way always involved lots of pointing—pointing at the person you were evangelizing to say "You need to change"; pointing at yourself or the church to say "We know how to change you," or "You should change to be like us"; and pointing at scripture, words on a page, to back it up. A church that learns to recognize and love the kingdom of God in this world has

something better at which to point. Jesus told people, "The kingdom of God is at hand, so close you can reach out and touch it." And he spent his ministry pointing out the clues, teaching people what to look for, pulling back the curtain so they could see what he saw.

I use the verbs "point" and "recognize" with some hesitancy because Lesslie Newbigin and Dr. Hunsberger have rightly pointed out that the church is not simply an observer of God's kingdom in the world. But it is my experience in the decidedly post-Christian culture of Long Island that a nose for sniffing out God's work in the world is one of the best gifts the church has to share with its neighbors. People are adrift in the apparent chaos of the 21st century. September 11th only confirmed what they already believed and feared most of all: that no one is in charge; there is no higher authority on whom we can depend to order the chaos; there is no sense to the circumstances we suffer.

This is one of the "great social and cultural shifts" that Dr. Hunsberger, quoting Hans Kung, says makes this a crucial time to re-evangelize the church with the good news of "the coming completed reign of God, revealed and...effective in the present" (*Missional Church*, 87). In this environment it is critical that my congregation never finish a Sunday without hearing those same words: "This is what we believe, this is what we have seen, and this is what we have to share: that God is in charge, despite all appearances to the contrary."

That is the essence of the gospel for our time: that God is in charge, despite all appearances to the contrary. For now, God's regime is subtle so as to draw the searching eye, a whisper that invites the inclined ear. The Enemy is a totalitarian bully; he blows up buildings and people to get us to see things his way. God's benevolent reign begs discernment.

"Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will....' Then turning to the disciples, he said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and hear what you hear, but did not hear it'" (Luke 10:21, 23).

Sharing our vision of God's reign leads to the companionship that Dr. Hunsberger says is the true invitation of evangelism. Consider my three-year-old daughter at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, standing with me in front of a lovely Matisse. I cock my head this way and that, enjoying the colors and movement of his brush strokes but unable to put it all together. Lydia stares, too, then says,

People were no longer grateful to be shown the narrow path to the tiny door that opened to reveal the Church of Christ on the other side.

“Two goldfish in a bowl.” And so it clearly is. Two goldfish in a bowl.

It was not just information she offered to me; in the sharing of her vision, she taught me to see, too, and once I could see it, we were standing together in a whole new way. She was my docent, my teacher, but not in a way that pointed up her expertise or my lack of vision. She pointed to the painting and offered the key to unscramble the nonsense so we both could enjoy the beauty of the artwork and the skill of the painter. Evangelism as companionship.

If we in the Churches of Christ want to take seriously Dr. Hunsberger’s rethinking of evangelism as an invitation to companionship in the kingdom of God, we have several challenges to meet.

First, we must re-train our vision so that we can

We must address the new and growing reality that people are wary of the religious equivalent of telemarketing.

recognize the reign of God. This means sitting at the feet of the one who first recognized and announced the nearness of the kingdom. This means we should know Jesus better than we know Paul. I trust Paul wouldn’t have it any other way.

Second, we must address the new and growing reality that people are wary of the religious equivalent of telemarketing. They have a sensitive detection system that alerts them when they are just another target for the evangelistic sales pitch. I recommend the movie “The Big Kahuna” with Kevin Spacey and Danny DeVito to follow up this point, but please don’t go home and rent it for your Sunday night care group. It’s rated R for language but far more disturbing than the four-letter words is the real challenge the movie’s characters present to the born-again Christian who is new to their marketing team. How is sharing the gospel different from selling industrial lubricants at a hotel convention? It’s a good question, one we must answer and answer well.

Third, we must reconsider our point-action idea of Christian conversion. We have in the past assumed that baptism was the goal, the culmination of our evangelistic work in a person’s life. Dr. Hunsberger and many others have suggested, however, that the church is called to “a lifestyle of continual conversion as it hears and responds to the gospel again and again” (*Missional Church*, 86). [On this point I recommend Walter Brueggemann’s *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*.] To be perfectly crass about it, evangelism the old way allowed us to check people off our

lists when they were “finished.” Once we got them in the water, we could move on to the next one. But companionship: that connotes relationship, and that means it’s never finished. You don’t complete a friendship; you live it.

This requires us to rethink our own conversion as we invite others to submit anew each day to God’s reign. A friend of mine used to say, “You will spend the rest of your life discovering the meaning of your baptism.” Inviting our neighbors into the companionship of the kingdom of God implies that we consider ourselves to be journeying alongside them in the ongoing adventure of kingdom-seeking.

Several years ago I took my youth group to visit a Catholic Worker house in Birmingham. Our host explained the mission of the house, which was called Mary’s House: to provide emergency shelter for homeless families, and to care for every guest in the house as Mary cared for the child Jesus. I asked her about results: How many families moved out of Mary’s House into their own homes or apartments? How many adults found jobs? How many children enrolled in school? In other words, how did she measure the success of her work? She told me: “I am not often privileged to see the end of God’s work in these people’s lives. This house is one stop on their long journey. While they are here with me, they will see Jesus.”

Evangelism as companionship may very well mean the same thing: that we are not often privileged to see the end of God’s work in a person’s life. They, and we, are works in progress, being “transformed...from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Recognizing this, the evangelistic church echoes Jesus’ very first invitation to experience the kingdom of God: “Come and see.” ■



The Gospel in the Haze of Christendom

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Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has issued a wake-up call to the Church on two counts. Firstly, wake up to the fact that the culture around you is neither Christian nor religiously neutral ground; it hides commitments of a ‘religious’ nature which stand in conflict with commitment to the Gospel; it is a pagan culture. Secondly, wake up to the fact that the Church itself not only has been unaware of this, but has unwittingly bought into this pagan culture; the Church and the Gospel it proclaims in word and deed have been compromised.

The British Gospel and Our Culture Network, like your own, would hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church about authentic missionary engagement with our own Western culture, and would serve this awakening in the wider Church. And here we find ourselves presented with two challenges. The first is precisely to wake up to the question of our vocation today. The temptation is there to pretend that for the Church it can be ‘business as usual’ apart from a little tinkering.

The second challenge arises precisely when we do wake up to the fact that our circumstances have changed. And we ask: ‘what shall we do?’ The experience of decline may prod us awake, but it does not itself point the way forward for us. Nor for that matter does it provide the true impulse for mission. We need the guidance and impelling of God, otherwise our visions of the way forward may themselves be captive to cultural presuppositions, and our efforts futile.

Among the cultures of the world, modern Western culture provides a unique provisional context for us in our encounter with the Gospel. It has emerged from a medieval world that was at once Christian in its religion but remained significantly sacralized or ontocratic in its worldview. Culture and the natural order were, so to speak, glued somehow onto the divine purpose. A wild flower could be called ‘Hearts-ease’ because its heart-shaped leaves meant that God had created it to ease the heart. God gave four Gospels as comprehensively speaking to the four corners of the earth. And so on.

This culture, at once Christian and sacralized, provided the soil in which experimental science germinated. This development decisively enlarged the scope of the challenge always implicit in Christian faith towards sacralizing assumptions that fuse our cultural and natural worlds with the ultimate context of God. Here, at the birth of modernity, was an exciting moment of vocation for the Church. Unfortunately, however, its continuing attachment to sacralized authority and its sponsorship of religious wars encouraged people to look for a fundamental basis and

context for new human life beyond sacral order elsewhere than the positive revelation of Christian faith.

The way was opened for a false inversion between God as context and ‘world’ as context. Initially in this secularist development the things of God no longer offered a deeper context, but were displaced into a problematic spiritual realm alongside the material world. The truth of religious belief and the obligation of religious practice remained genuine questions although they might be ignored. In a further stage the things of God become assigned to a ‘private’ realm within the supposedly given context of the secular world.

Britain’s Christian heritage

Michael Polanyi finds the freedom informing English culture quite different in origin and kind from that informing continental Europe. In Europe freedom has roots in polemical rejection of the authority of the Church and has been shaped by secularist ideology; in England (as in America, he notes) it has been rooted in Puritan spirituality. And this has given it a very different character.

Britain, indeed, has been less shaped than Europe by secularist ideology. According to Nicholas Boyle, Britain was too preoccupied with running an Empire to pay much attention to the European Enlightenment and this enabled Christendom archaisms to survive through much of the twentieth century. Ideology only really hit Britain in the 1980’s during Margaret Thatcher’s term in office. Reflecting on the legacy of this in 1988 Boyle could write: “British society is thus at once polarized and homogenized. The great institutions that gave it depth and complexity fade away. Instead we have on the one hand the undifferentiated mass of individual “consumers” and on the other hand the legislative and executive power of central government...enforcing its will, in the last analysis, by the power of the police. The prominence of the police in British life has increased greatly.... [T]he forces of social control represented by family life, church authority, professional morality, or corporate loyalty have all been losing effectiveness....”

The English heritage of which Nicholas Boyle and Michael Polanyi speak in different ways is no mere dead weight hindering progress towards a bright future. It is a Christian heritage. It is, however, tacit. This does not mean that it is ineffectual, or dead. But it does mean that it is not something we take responsibility for or pass on in an intentional war, as a nation—or even as a church. And in a culture where ideologies and consumerism constantly shape cultural change, this makes it vulnerable.

This lack of Christian self-awareness is a mission challenge: awaken to the scope of God’s grace at work in our history and culture. Celebrate it, and take responsibility for it, for the future!

In church circles it is significant that the Church of

England has no doctrinal basis like the Westminster Confession; it claims that its doctrine is implicit in its worship. But what we don't talk about we can't defend or reform or pass on to our children. In a moral context I think of the many parents who look on with great sadness as their young adult offspring cohabit as unmarried partners, but are quite unable to talk intelligently about their values. Part of the challenge we face is to talk about faith when traditionally faith was about deference to God and conforming to moral principles, which one didn't talk about but took for granted.

It seems to me we need to learn from yourselves here. Living with your first amendment has sharpened your awareness of Christian faith as distinctive, and your enthusiasm for ideas helps you to talk about faith and take responsibility for it. And we can learn from your debates. Rowan Williams—Archbishop of Canterbury elect—has spoken of Britain's 'mid-Atlantic culture.' Our cultures have much in common. We have much to learn from analysis of North American culture provided by Christopher Lasch, David Riesman, Richard Sennet, Charles Taylor, Jacques Ellul, Alister MacIntyre, Neil Postman, Allan Bloom and Richard Stivers among others, with De Tocqueville in the background. To my knowledge we have little to compare with these analyses in Britain. Nor do we have your strong tradition of Christian Colleges to provide a context for such Christian cultural formation—although I realize these can, like our own church schools, become captive to culture.

Which brings me to the next issue. The committed, articulate Christian self-awareness demanded by Christian mission today must engage closely with ideology and consumerism. And because these inculcate hidden commitments of a religious nature, this engagement calls for personal conversion. For example, it is a matter of personal conversion, to admit that one has been seduced endlessly by advertisements which target one's impulses, one's self-image, and offer false intimacy where one should have risen to judgement grounded in deep personal formation. In the same way it takes a conversion for the Church to shun 'consumerist' distortions of mission, which do the same thing as those advertisements using the figure of Jesus.

Ideology 1: economic rationalization

Ideology hit the U.K., as I have said, with Margaret Thatcher. Her free market ideology was and is driven, it seems to us, above all by the United States. In Fukayama's formulation, the U.S. sits more squarely at the end of history. This ideological pressure is felt keenly today in the corrosive effects of economic rationalization on the country way of life (recently provoking London's largest ever protest march), in the push for private investment in public services, and in the power of the business lobby in general over government. Linked to this is a huge growth in litigation, fear of which increasingly subverts community and the trust on which it is built.

The vision of Christian mission must rise above cultural

captivity in two respects here. Firstly it must rise above domestication to the processes of economic rationalization, merely pursuing civil religion in service to the capitalist enterprise. If we go along with this we should hardly be surprised if God uses figures as unlikely as Cyrus to judge the co-called Christian West.

Secondly, managerial and marketing strategies must not capture our imagination as models for mission. Mission does not deliver the Gospel to a particular market; it changes people. It opens markets to transformation by God into something rather more than a market.

Ideology 2: 'political correctness'

More recently we have been feeling the impact of 'politically correct' ideology. Although this has taken more extreme forms in North America, Australia and New Zealand, it is from Europe—from EC headquarters in Brussels, to be precise—that we have been feeling its impact through EC directives, for example, on human rights, employment and privacy, to which our government must give effect in legislation. And what this gives effect to is that second stage of secularization which inverts the relation between Christian faith and the secular world, confining faith to a private realm within the secular world.

Now in one sense faith has been private for a long time in Britain. This may sound odd, given that Bishops sit in the House of Lords, state schools are legally required to hold religious assemblies, and religion is taught in the school curriculum. But as I have said before, such things are often like wallpaper we no longer notice. Church buildings, church hymns are of sentimental value, but they aren't expected to say anything requiring attention. And they aren't allowed to. The gatekeepers in secondary culture—in education, the media and politics—consistently screen out anything like Christian testimony. Accordingly, as Christian understanding fades, it has become an increasing source of tension in parish ministry that parents bring babies for baptism with no expectation of introducing them to religion. Some ministers have become more rigorist while others practice so-called 'indiscriminate baptism.' The same tension is arising in relation to funerals. Yes, religion is taught in our schools. But I think of the education scheme in which the story of Noah was placed in a learning module on water, and the story of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand in a module on litter. The integrity of the Gospel as a fundamental message to our world is lost; it is reduced to debris lying silently around the place.

In an odd way, however, this is all compatible with a certain deference to faith, reflected in the saying that 'you don't have to go to church to be a Christian.' But this is changing. The new politically correct ideology sees religion as an affair private to the individual, with two consequences. Firstly it subverts Christian community. For example, privacy legislation emanating from the EC today threatens to bar hospital chaplains from routine knowledge of a patient's religion. And it introduces into religious community the ideology of consumer entitlement. Recently my parish received a request

for a humanist funeral in Church. Peter Berger has made the point that 'heretic' originally meant 'someone with a mind of their own.' Today, he said, we are all heretics in this sense. Now deference and consumer entitlement do not mix. And this presents the Church with new challenges to its integrity. Can the Church offer the distinctive hospitality of Christ? What does this mean?

A second consequence of the new privacy of faith is that it has protection in law: we may not discriminate in matters of religion. We must be indiscriminate, relativistic. Religion is a private, vested interest. On the one hand the continuing prevalence of religion in secular society requires politicians to manage these vested interests. On the other hand, the presentation of a religious argument in the public domain is now seen as the unacceptable promotion of a private vested interest; new hostility is forming towards religious input in education, politics and the media.

At most, a 'faith voice' may be permitted. Now the ruling monarch of England, as you may know, bears the title 'Defender of the Faith.' Prince Charles, however, has said that he would like to be known as 'Defender of Faith.' What is this one thing called faith? Surely, I have been asked by a visitor from the Middle East, since September 11th Christians can point to evidence that faith is not all one? In fact, I told him, Christians are all the more intimidated now about speaking of differences. Secularists think private faiths should be one in upholding secular order. On September 11th religion—all religion—was shown to be a menace, they say. If Christians were to talk about differences now they would be seen as exploiting the situation and only confirming the menace posed by all religion.

And yet the Church cannot acquiesce to the silencing of its faith in public. It cannot accept the protection afforded private life, any more than the early church could accept the protection afforded by Rome to private religions. The Church

is *ecclesia*, a public assembly. It proclaims the truth of God's sovereignty over his world. It witnesses to, and hosts, a richer rationality for public debate, including public debate about religious truth, than supposedly inclusive secularism with its hidden religious commitments. But any such claim will meet with opposition, both from secularists and from any group which sees its own interests served by this 'inclusive' ideology and which comes to identify Christianity with intransigent resistance to its aims. We may therefore be moving into a time when Christian witness or *martyrion* will be costly.

In effect I am saying that, in Britain at any rate, now is not time to talk about the Church learning to live in exile. It is time for the Church to come out of exile, led by the Lord, and enter public culture as his serious witness.

It goes without saying that there is real devotion to Christ among individuals in the British churches. However, this devotion has often been such a private thing, for so long, that the prospect of talking with others about Christ, for example in a bible study group, can be very intimidating. The object of their private devotion is to be turned into public property subject to argument, to the views of scholars, and so on. And yet how else do people discover the fullness of community in Christ? Spiritual sharing is vital to authentic Christian spirituality. Small study groups and support groups are, it seems to me, vital to nurturing mission from the very beginning with enquirers groups and catechesis.

Here, then, are some issues facing mission to our pagan British culture—mission which, waking from domestication to that culture, authentically discloses the approach in Jesus Christ of our sovereign God. ■



Not Quite Established: The Gospel and Australian Culture

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I want to argue that the gospel has never had a real 'bite' on Australian culture, and in particular, that the Christian church has never quite been established in either the narrower or broader sense. There is a certain truth to the common claim that Australia is one of the most secular societies to be found. But the picture is not as simple as this. While Australians are not generally interested in organized religion, most believe in God and are open to the spiritual dimension of life, even if they are somewhat inarticulate and stop short of commitment to a group. There are opportunities facing the Christian church in Australia as a contextual faith shows signs of developing in terms of Australian theology, new forms of church practice and engagement in wider society.

Some qualifications are important. In this discussion I'll be referring to the dominant cultural strands of Australian society. A thicker description would have to take account of Australia's multiculturalism, indigenous culture and marginal groups. Also, for the most part I'll be discussing Australian distinctives, though many Australian cultural trends are actually trends in Western culture, linked through the effects of globalization.

Secular Australia?

It was a popular view until recently that Australia is one of the most secular states ever to exist, perhaps

‘the most godless place under heaven’ (in the words of Scottish Presbyterian James Denney). Although I’m going to put an alternative perspective there are several factors which led to this view gaining wide acceptance, particularly in the 1980s.

First, it is arguably *the first modern society without deep religious roots*. Unlike other New World colonies, New South Wales had no religious ceremony to mark its foundation; a worship service was not held until eight days after the first fleet landed. Historian Patrick O’Farrell writes, “There came here no truly religious people, save very few, and they founded here no [Australian] religion.”¹

Secondly, *European Australians have been slow to appreciate the Australian continent, to come to terms with the indigenous people they displaced and to learn from indigenous spirituality*. Most Australians have had a relationship of attraction to, and yet avoidance of, the vast center of the continent. They see themselves as pioneers and people of the bush but live on the seaboard. The ‘sky God’ of European Christianity has not been integrated with the immanent God of the Australian landscape. European Australians have lived on the ‘edge of the sacred,’ unable to integrate within themselves their relationships to the country, to indigenous people, to migrants, to the opposite sex and to their place in the cosmos.² Their experience has largely been one of exile. The gospel in Australia has been a truncated gospel.

A third often-mentioned factor, related to the land, is *the sun, sand and surf which have often led to a shallow hedonism*. A television documentary series on Australian spirituality, screened in the 1980s, summed up this view with its title: ‘The sunburnt soul.’ Closely linked is the national obsession with sport. As just one example, in 1888 the Melbourne Cup drew 100,000 people, reputed to be the largest crowd ever to gather for a horse race until that time. The gospel has struggled in Australia to come to terms with pleasure and

celebration, with the churches repeatedly cast as killjoys.

Fourthly, *a set of myths has emerged from Australia’s nation-building phase* that is powerful for the way Australians (particularly men) have seen themselves. Australians see themselves as easy-going larrikins who stand by their mates—self-reliant, laconic, anti-authoritarian, egalitarian, iconoclastic and impatient with abstract thought. The world has seen this self-image most clearly in the larger-than-life characters of Paul Hogan (especially in the film *Crocodile Dundee*) and Steve Irwin, the crocodile hunting television celebrity. The gospel has had to compete with the frontier myths of self-sufficiency and tribalism.

In the 1980s all of these factors combined with a realization that Australia was experiencing *a significant decline in church attendance and belief in God*.³ Sociological research into religious belief and practice, until then scarce, began to show trends common to most Western countries.

Nevertheless, the statistics then and since have also challenged the popular view that Australia is highly secular. Further, they suggest that complex changes have been taking place in Australian society over the last few decades. Consider just a few representative indicators, each of which gives some comfort but also raises issues of concern for the Christian churches seeking to express the gospel in an Australian way.

Spiritual but not religious

First, *the great majority of Australians have always identified as ‘Christian’ at a time of Census*. In the 1901 Census 96% identified as Christian, and in 2001 the figure, though significantly lower, was still 68%.

Secondly, *although for most of Australian history church attendance has been low, belief in God has remained high*. Australian spirituality is arguably not absent but inarticulate. Many people believe in ‘someone behind it all’ but find it hard

to go beyond this general belief and translate it into religious commitment of any kind. Most Australians believe in God. The National Social Science Survey of 1993 found that 61% believe in a personal God, a figure that goes up to 79% if the idea of God is broadened to include a ‘higher power’; only 13% identified as agnostic and 9% as atheists.

Thirdly, *for a long time the churches have had the respect of average Australians for their defense of the poor and for addressing the darker issues of Australian society*, such as racism, conflict and poverty, but (as in other countries) have recently lost much of that moral authority by being slow to respond to their own dark issue, abuse of vulnerable people in the care of the churches themselves and, in particular, sexual abuse by clergy.

The double call of contextual faith

I’ve painted in broad brush the ambivalence that exists in Australian society towards the gospel as it is expressed in the churches. The record of the church has had highlights and lowlights, but for the most part it has been mediocre. Australia is not a secular society if by ‘secular’ we mean that most people are atheists or irreligious. But if a secular society is one that ignores religious dimensions in its mainstream daily pursuits, then Australia is increasingly a deeply secular society. Despite many positive things that could be said about Christianity in Australia, it has lacked vigor and has often failed to engage in a vital way with politics, economics, the arts, education, the law, entertainment or other aspects of Australian culture.

In Western societies where part of the church has been established at the center, whether legally or culturally, the missiological task includes intentional disestablishment. The church must disengage from the dominant culture in order to meaningfully reengage that same culture. Mission flows from neither simply disengaging (in order to be a sign of

the kingdom on the edge of culture) nor simply engaging (without critical awareness of our entanglement with culture). To use Douglas John Hall's words, it calls for a "dialectic of separation and solidarity."⁴ To put it another way, the ongoing critical contextual task involves seeking both to be culturally attuned and to allow the gospel to challenge and transform the culture we live in.

The challenge for Australian Christians is to discern how the gospel, expressed in theology, church and mission, can authentically reflect the dialectic between cultural attunement and cultural critique. The search for authentic faith has led to solutions all the way along the spectrum from non-contextual to highly-contextual faith. At a shallow level the Australian church has tried everything from importing North American ways to articulating 'ocker' theologies such as a 'gumleaf' or 'boomerang' theology. But there are signs that in the last twenty or thirty years the Australian churches are engaging in this quest in these three areas.

Australian theologies

Gideon Goosen, in his comprehensive survey called *Australian Theologies* (St. Pauls Publications, 2000), argues that "Australian theology is identifiable, vigorous and growing [and] has moved from being sectarian to being ecumenical [against] the wider background and reality of world religions, the whole planet and indeed the whole cosmos" (p. 68). Among the issues that contextual theologies are tackling are indigenous spirituality, traditional doctrines expressed in terms that resonate with Australian culture, the land, the environment, Australian identity myths, feminism, justice, everyday life, literature and the arts.

Australian ways of being church

In ways of being church there are signs that churches are experimenting with authentically Australian ways of

gathering, worshipping and expressing community. Some churches meet over a barbecue, in neutral venues or on a weekday. Australian hymns are now being written (though the songs coming from the dominant Hillsong stable tend to be non-contextual). Most importantly, natural ways of exploring Christian community continually emerge. Training networks such as the Forge Network are devoted entirely to training younger leaders for a missional church attuned to the postmodern generations and those on the fringe of society (see www.phuture.org). Many of these trends are shared with other Western cultures, and the theme of disengagement in order to begin at the margins of society is a recurring one.

There are strands of the gospel which are muted in Australian churches but which I would argue resonate with both the gospel and Australian culture. One is the recovery of community, which is both at the heart of Australian longing (though it may be counter-cultural to talk about commitment) and at the heart of the gospel call to love one another as the body of Christ. Another is the practice of hospitality, again central both to Australian culture and the gospel. A third, rather counter-cultural at first sight, is the centrality of embodied life together, a central aspect of community. In a 'virtual world' marked by media saturation and fragmented lifestyles lived at an increasing pace, the always-embodied God offers in the authentic church a grounded and personal reality where the holy is valued and time slows for people to get back in touch with each other and the sacred, thereby allowing space for growth and transformation.

It must be said, however, that the signs of life in Australian churches are counter-balanced by many signs of conservatism and decline. Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are often global rather than contextual in character, drawing particularly on North American songs, theology and education programs. Cathedrals and other old church buildings often stand as symbols of

the 'cultural establishment' of a previous era, even though their congregations are ageing and in numerical decline. Churches find it difficult to shed the old patterns and to experiment with new ones. Their 'disestablishment' is being forced on them as they become weaker and less culturally relevant.

Contextual mission

The third area in which there are signs of contextual engagement is mission. Incarnational mission, in which the church 'enfleshes' the message to which it points, is at the heart of God's way of communicating in Christ and therefore at the heart of Christian mission. It is also at the heart of contextual faith, because it seeks to take shape in its specific context and culture.

Australian churches are experimenting with new ways of sharing faith in informal settings or holding 'Spirituality in the Pub' evenings. Australian theological conversations held in public forums are beginning to cross boundaries and address questions of meaning that Australians are asking.

One of the goals of the amalgamation of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational denominations in 1977 to form the Uniting Church in Australia was to become an Australian church, and it has been a leading voice in contextual mission since. In particular it has led the Australian churches in speaking prophetically on social issues. On matters such as indigenous reconciliation, the environment, aid to developing countries, canceling the debts of heavily-indebted poor countries, poverty in Australia, the reduction of welfare funding, and gambling addiction, the voice of the Australian churches has been loud and clear.

Whether in theology, church or mission, these encouraging signs are only a beginning. In most aspects of the expression of the gospel in Australian culture the process of losing what power and influence the churches once had is still largely experienced as loss, and there is little

desire to 'disestablish themselves' voluntarily (as Douglas John Hall puts it) in order to discern more clearly what the gospel says to Australian culture.

There is an increasing number, however, who see the link between mission on the margins and the cultural location taken up by Jesus. When Australians, who are generally sceptical of the traditional church, see new expressions of the gospel which are at the same time both culturally-attuned and yet counter-cultural in a 'gospel way', the receding tide of the gospel's role in Australian culture may yet turn in the power of the Spirit and the transforming power of the Good News may be felt at a cultural as well as a personal level. ■

NOTES

¹Patrick O'Farrell, "The Cultural Ambivalence of Australian Religion," in *Australian Cultural History, Vol. 1: Culture and the State in Australia*, eds. S. L. Goldberg and F. B. Smith (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities and the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1982), 5.

²David J. Tacey, "Relationship to Place: Spiritual Problems in Secular Australia," *Eremos* No. 59 (May 1997): 18-19.

³Bruce Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Sydney: Albatross, 1983).

⁴Douglas John Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis: The theologic of Christian awkwardness," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 204.



The Acts 15 Agenda

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The missional renewal of the church is integrally linked to its cross-cultural diffusion. The cue for this hypothesis is taken from Acts 15. The process of the movement of Christianity from one place to another and the principles that guide that process, are nowhere more prominent than in that chapter. The earliest believers were devout Jews. They maintained observance of the Torah, practised circumcision and culturally remained Jewish. When the Antiochene believers approached Jerusalem on the issue whether circumcision was a necessary requirement to be saved, the real question was between continuing the Jewish practice of making proselytes and accepting people who had a genuine conversion experience as Christians. The question was about the relationship between the gospel and a culture. Does Christianity mean becoming Jewish and following the Jewish customs? The astonishing decision was to place no Jewish cultural burdens on the Gentiles. They were thus challenged to find, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a Christian lifestyle within Hellenistic society. By doing this, a truly Greek Christianity emerged that penetrated the Hellenistic intellectual and social heritage.

The letters of Paul, Peter, James and John testify to this demanding struggle where every aspect of the culture was challenged by the gospel. Converts could associate with Christianity because it was translated into their own cultural world, addressing what was wrong and converting life itself in ways that witnessed to the central truths of the gospel but within their own social world and realities.

Acts 15 produced two distinct Christian lifestyles representing two distinct ethnic and cultural worlds.

The result was not, however, two distinctly different Christian communities, a Jewish and a Gentile one. Each of the lifestyles represented a culture converted to Christ expressing something that the whole body needs. The tension that the different cultures had in working together illustrates the twin dangers. One was the instinctive desire to protect one's own version of Christianity, trying to establish it as the standard and normative one. The other, which Andrew Walls calls the more seductive one in the present condition of Western Christianity, is the post-modern option to decide that all versions of Christianity are at liberty to enjoy their own in isolation from the others. Walls concludes: "None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ" (*The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, 2002:79).

In due time the heartland of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to the Eastern Mediterranean, to Africa and to Rome. It should be clear that no one church, place, theology or culture owns Christ. When a candle died at one place, it was kindled at another. The cross-cultural movement of Christianity has been its life's blood. The church has been in principle both multiracial and multicultural from its very inception, the result, amongst others, of the Acts 15 agenda.

The DNA Structure Of Christendom

Walls' argument is that the missionary movement should be seen as the connecting terminal between Western Christianity and the Christianity of the non-Western world. In exploring the relationship between the two worlds, Walls (2002:34-47) proposed three hypotheses that I find of utmost importance to grasp:

(1) The history and outlook of Western Christians, their theological

DNA structure, was shaped by the circumstances through which they received the gospel. The Roman Empire needed a unifying ideology to rule a world with too much diversity and pluralism. In order to have a united people they needed a unifying code. It made good political and economic sense, even today! The momentum and influence of Christianity was used to this effect. In the process a form of territorial Christianity was born and a very specific relationship between the church and the state developed. It was very effective. The Protestant Reformation caused the division of Christendom but did not abandon the idea. The Protestants were trying to reform Christendom in a religious way. The idea of a pure and Godly commonwealth, of a certain type of civilization and an attitude of “rule and control,” was so much a part of being church that very few people questioned it. “One empire, one church” had the indirect implication that one theology of what was right and what was wrong was also needed.

(2) The way in which Europe and the West colonized the Americas, Africa and Asia in the end led to the downfall of Christendom. The two terrible wars of the twentieth century put the final nails in the coffin. Western political and economical imperialism is, however, continuing this legacy with the holy war rhetoric between President Bush on the one hand and Saddam Hussein and the Taliban on the other hand.

(3) “[I]n keeping with the serial nature of Christian Expansion that seems so characteristic of the Christian faith, the dissolution of Christendom made possible a diffusion of Christianity that is now in process of transforming it” (Walls 2002:34). After the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, a landmark in the history of mission, the two world wars curtailed most of the missionary planning and work. Unshackled from the bonds of Christendom, the natural process of inculturation advanced in the new heartlands of Christianity. The Acts 15

agenda was freed to encounter the cultures with the good news and to transform them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Acts 15 agenda may well lead to a diversity and pluralism of unprecedented scale. For those whose theological DNA structures were formed within the confines of Christendom where every region has to have its official religion backed by its denominational creeds and (Systematic) Theology, this is going to be very difficult to accommodate. The Acts 15 agenda is, however, balanced by the Ephesian call to unity (ecumenicity). It proves to be no easy exercise. The biblical challenge is, however, not to continue making proselytes of Christendom but to give converts the freedom to take the gospel to address their cultures.

Africa: From a Liminal Perspective

Analysing and interpreting Christendom is crucial in order to understand the state of Christianity in Africa. Africa is, however, in a liminal phase. I want to apply the concept of liminality to my personal situation as a member of the Dutch Reformed Church as well as to Africa south of the Sahara where I am involved in networking theological colleges. The white people in Africa are here because of what happened in the last 500 years of Christendom. In South Africa the ideology of the apartheid period was in no small way influenced by Christendom. Since 1994 our country is a secular state. The old stable world (of whites) collapsed as it did in all the former colonies in Africa. The stable structures of modernity are also collapsing for those privileged enough to benefit by them. In many African countries to the North of South Africa, Zimbabwe being the tragic example par excellence, people are experiencing a terrible in-between world: in-between life and death, death because of poverty, drought, AIDS, political instability and corruption. Africa cannot be described as a stable continent nor as a continent with functioning Christian core values. Our

perspective from Africa is a liminal one.

Christianity in South Africa (measured in percentage of population identified as Christian) expanded until 1980 and then the typical Western recession began to register. Within the general trend, there is decline in the white and coloured population groups but steady growth in the black population group until 1991. After 1991 a slight decline is evident even in the black population group. In the Asian population group, culturally quite a distinct group in South Africa, there is steady growth. It is important to note that it is the two population groups (white and coloured) that identify more strongly with the Christendom paradigm that showed the sharpest decline pattern.

The most outstanding growth through the twentieth century has been in what are called the African Independent Churches. Consisting of some 4000 groups, their phenomenal growth is by all means the most outstanding feature of the South African and African church scenario. The history of these churches is fascinating. Basically African leaders who were no longer content to serve under and be manipulated by the patronizing style of mainline leadership broke away from the Christendom-styled denominations and founded their own churches. In many of these churches one can still find typical characteristics of the denomination from which they broke away. The African Independent Churches (AICs) inculturated the gospel and translated it especially for the black people who moved to the cities. These congregations, most of them small and in houses, acted as a safe haven where people could find fellowship, community, as well as spiritual and physical support. They were cared for by their own people in their own cultural ways. They grew and multiplied.

Following the Acts 15 agenda, the gospel was crossing cultural boundaries. In the beginning there was a lot of uncertainty whether these churches could be called Christian, because the

theological framework used to assess the AICs was that of Christendom. Once freed from the cultural domination of Christendom's "standard Christianity," they showed vigor and expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the mainline denominations in South Africa.

Doing Theology in Africa

So then, what does one do if you were born and bred in one of Christendom's denominations in Africa? One response has been NetACT (Network for African Congregational Theology), formed to network Reformed-Presbyterian Theological Schools south of the Sahara (see <www.sun.ac.za/theology/netact.html>). The emphasis on "congregational theology" has a specific motivation. We acknowledged that seminaries can become an academic refuge, a comfort zone typical of the Christendom paradigm. Without being praxis-based, theology can too easily become a way of training students to be proselytes of Christendom. Will we be able to change the way seminaries teach? Will it be possible to develop leadership in our seminaries with a passion for a missional church, congregations, faith communities where every single member is empowered to think and do theology and take it upon themselves to make a difference in our continent with all its woes and challenges? The key question was: How do we understand and do theology in Africa? We formulated our answer in the following way.

We believe theology is about:

- # The missional praxis of the triune God, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and
- # About God's body, an apostolic faith community (the church),
- # At a specific time and place within a globalised world (a wider contextual situation),
- # Where members of this community are involved in a vocationally based, critical and constructive interpretation of their present reality (local analysis),
- # Drawing upon an interpretation of the normative sources of Scripture and tradition,
- # Struggling to discern God's will for their present situation (a critical correlational hermeneutic),
- # To be a sign of God's kingdom on earth while moving forward with an eschatological faith-based reality in view (that will lead to a vision and a mission statement),
- # While obediently participating in transformative action at different levels: personal, ecclesial, societal, ecological and scientific (a doing, liberating, transformative theology that leads to a strategy, implementation and an evaluation of progress).

Our objective is to define a methodology for doing theology in an African context. The plausibility structure of Africans is unlike that of Christendom and modernity. The dichotomy between faith and reason is Western in origin. God is not called into question in Africa. We argued that doing theology ought to be, among other things, a personal and congregational way of living in communion with God. Our theology should seek a methodology that leads to transformation, a faith-praxis with inculturation as a natural

by-product. We see inculturation as the continuation of the hermeneutical process of addressing and interpreting your culture, your changing contextual reality, with the gospel. The hermeneutical process, however, should be done from the vantage point of converts, not proselytes. Proselytes are like intellectual or theological slaves. Converts are born again Christians true to their own identity (culture), trying to discern, in a fallible way, how to make sense of the gospel in their life and their culture.

In essence then, we believe theology is about discerning the guidance of the triune missional God who leads us to bring the gospel to our people and culture. This discernment starts "on the ground" with an Isaiah 61:1-2, Luke 4:17-19 program. It starts "from the bottom upwards" and as such is inherently contextual, as all theology actually is. The point to emphasize is that we need a theology that does not dominate or manipulate the present situation and culture with "old" contextualized theology from previous centuries that actually addressed other agendas and is usually infected with other ideologies, as much of Christendom theology is. This approach is in fact applying the Acts 15 agenda.

The Continuing Conversion of the Church

Those of us who are asking the question about the continuing conversion of the church are by and large those in the mainline denominations who are struggling to escape the spiritual and ideological legacy of the Christendom paradigm to which we are the heirs. We see our children dying. Our situation is very much like that of Israel in Egypt. We do not want to be associated with the Pharaoh, but the fact of the matter is that Western economic, cultural (the information era) and political imperialism is but another form of revived colonialism. The morals and motives of the system in which most of us live and from which we benefit materially, are questionable. It seems as if the Christendom virus has adapted to a new time and age and is leading to a spiritual AIDS pandemic of enormous proportions. We have the statistics of the "death of the church" in Europe and the Christendom heartlands at hand. The light of many a candle is flickering and about to be blown out.

The critical question is: How does one escape the influence of a system? My own liminal perspective is that of a white Dutch Reformed Church member and observer in Africa, a Western-African. We were caught in the apartheid system, a system that in the end enslaved everybody. Nobody caught in an evil system is free. My church supported that system. The road to freedom was a long and difficult one. How did it happen?

The Acts 15 agenda and the Ephesian model is one answer. The prophetic voices in our church and the voices of those in other denominations and worlds were never silent. The leaders of the ruling party of this day, the African National Congress and the leaders of the African Independent Churches grew up together. Both challenged the existing system of the Christendom paradigm, though from different perspectives. They refused to be proselytes.

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and what happened there freed those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Our local Presbytery, our Seminary and our denomination at large confessed at the TRC. Some of us have been preparing the ground for this on a congregational level ever since 1986. The people and congregations who confessed and actually became involved in reconciliation and restitution are the congregations that are in the process of regaining their missional character and are being transformed by the presence of the Triune God. ■



Letters to the Editor

Responses to articles in the June, 2002 issue (Vol. 14, No. 2), “New Hope” and “The Prodigal Church” which can be found online at www.gocn.org/newsletter.htm.

I congratulate George on a GOCN issue that is more concrete than some others, always welcome. I appreciated Tim’s humble plea to elder brother missionals for less criticism and more acceptance of returning seeker church types. I liked a lot of David and Kristin’s elder brother-like article, but I missed any corresponding humble acknowledgment of what missionals have to learn from seeker church types, e.g. how to produce new converts in the first place, who can then be disciplined into missional life.

Brown Kinnard
Ecumenical Theological Seminary
Detroit, MI

Yes, older brothers do “sulk”.

And, younger brothers do have a taste for “gravy” (only lately has the economy pulled the plug on our collective sense of entitlement).

Neither brother comprehends fully the price paid for their kinship nor the suffering of the Father for the sake of the Family (not to mention his wrath).

It seemed to me that the note of “repentance” raised early on evaporated too soon. Yes, we may return to the Lord our God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But, there is a difference, I think, between liberty and license (I hope this is lament and not just sulking).

That God is quick to forgive moves us beyond sulking and beyond gluttony (I wonder whether older brothers are

sulking as much as mourning - another thing overlooked by our culture. Just as I wonder whether younger brothers vacillate between joy and presumption in the prospect of receiving the gravyboat.) Both are inversion. Not all indignation is righteous. Not all turning from the “market-place” is metanoia. It is not about sulking nor about gravy but about the Father’s embrace. Since the Kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, (God forgive us,) I will not be free of my sulking and others (likely) will not be free of their presumption.

I know my Greek is very poor, but.... Don’t I remember that “proskyneō” (sometimes in suggestive contexts, though not always) occurs in conjunction with “pipto” suggesting that neither chorales nor praise choruses, chant nor ecstatic ejaculations, prayer books nor projection screens come close to what God is asking of us?

I wonder if what Lutherans (you knew it was coming) meant when they used to talk (am I sulking or mourning?) about the Second Use of the Law might be an overlooked treasure? If we siblings looked more into the mirror of God’s righteous expectation and, thereby, saw more clearly our predicament (rather than judging what other siblings may or may not have been (for)given), might we finally see what the Father has given for us all?

Repentance is a difficult thing because it demands that I give up the scorecard. Neither my brother nor the market-place, but God is the measure of life and living. And, isn’t there a deepening cycle of continuing discovery? The more aware of my sin, the greater my grasp of what God has forgiven, which in turn increases my clarity about my prior condition, which in turn.... He who is forgiven much, loves much (and on the other hand....). A diagnosis shared by us all?

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! One day, the embrace.

Ivan Philip Nordstrand, Jr.
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Thank you, one and all, for the latest newsletter! I first encountered missional theology at the Center for Parish Development five or so years ago, and have been moving deeper and deeper, getting more and more excited by its authenticity. Downright *converted*, as you say.

I have the books. I am preaching the theology. I am leading my congregation to the best of my ability. But what I am hungry for is stories of churches who are engaged in the same endeavor—and pastors who are willing to network and mutually support one another in this often discouraging task of leading a people to the promised land.

I found it interesting that Tim Parsley’s conservative-evangelical seekers church of 700 and my near-tiny,

mainline, struggling for survival church have so much in common. All of us have been infected by the world's appetites and values. ALL of us are thinking "seekers" in one way or another. ALL of us deal with folks who only want fast food or junk food—and only for an hour or so on Sunday morning. Even in a liberal mainline church, very conservative theologies have crept in through books, t-shirts, friendships among laity, etc. so that we, too, deal with the conflict between God as judge, and God as father and/or party host.

So—thank you for letting me know that I am not alone in this endeavor, and that others are facing the same issues as I am.

Nancy Stimson
United Methodist Church
Monrovia, Indiana

I simply want to express my great satisfaction with the June issue of the newsletter and its focus on the transformation of a congregation from a seeker focus to a missional mindset. I am sharing it with one of our bishops, Roger Haskins, who is in a Ph.D. program in which his major project is working on the dynamics of change in churches. The insights in the June issue are purely excellent, particularly the aspect of going deeper and doing theological work.

Gerald E. Bates
Bishop Emeritus of the Free Methodist Church
Indianapolis, Indiana

Listening to People's Spirituality: WCC Consultation Looks for New Forms of Church Belonging

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9 July 2002

"Believing without belonging" was the theme of a World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation held at the end of June at the Christian Jensen College in Breklum, Northern Germany. The 50 participants, mostly theologians from the European and North American churches, searched for "new paradigms of church and mission in secularized and post-modern contexts," discussed new forms of religiosity emerging in many countries, and asked what kinds of spirituality churches are called to. "The western experience of church makes it possible for people to believe without belonging, and belong without believing," a consultation report notes. Yet it is the missionary task of the church "to nurture a deeper sense of belonging," participants said.

Looking at religiosity among those who do not attend church, the director of the Orthodox Institute of Mission and Ecumenism in St Petersburg, Vladimir Federov, reported that "in Russia many people perceive themselves as orthodox believers without being members of any constitutional church." His colleague, Anne-Marie Kool, a professor of missiology and director at the Protestant Institute for Mission Studies in Budapest, agreed that despite a great sense of mistrust inherited from their communist past, there was "a feeling of believing without belonging" among people in Eastern Europe. Kool is committed to a new contextual approach to mission that aims at "restoration of biblical shalom, reconciliation, as well as a loving, caring, healing community of Christians."

According to a recent study presented at the consultation, church attendance in Great Britain fell by around 20% between 1987 and 1999, while the number of people reporting spiritual or religious experience increased by more than 60% over the same period. But according to Simon Barrow, the secretary of the British and Irish Churches' Commission on Mission, "popular alternative spiritual practices in Britain today are radically dislocated from traditional ideas about God and religion." For him, these are, rather, "secular spiritualities." Considering the situation in their own countries, most participants agreed with Barrow's suggestion that "The huge gulf between authorized church teaching and the diffuse, often intensely individualistic, spiritual experience offers no obvious escape route from the continuing collapse of the hegemonic, Christendom form of church." Barrow characterized the churches' response as "technological and managerial rather than spiritual and theological. It is not based on the distinctiveness of resources like faith and promise of God's future." He called on churches "to engage in much more systematic, non-judgmental listening to the spirituality of those beyond their gates."

Barrow's arguments were supported by another consultation report which suggests that "new spirituality is affecting the population at large," and that many people would "no longer find themselves at home in church environments that are out of touch with the changes in their lives." The consultation pledged to take very seriously the new spiritual quest of people all over the world. There is "no reason to lament," it said. Rather, churches should respond to the new spiritualities by drawing on "all the spiritual resources in the long and rich Christian tradition," and "seek ways of presenting these more widely."

George Hunsberger, a professor at the Western Theological Seminary in Michigan, suggested that “our habit of always telling our Christian story as a success story is running out of capital,” and that churches which try to recapture their privileged role as chaplain, reconstruct the Christian moral fabric, or recruit loyal and faithful customers for religious services, are in danger. Instead, he feels, they should seek to “recover what it means for them to be missional,” and encourage people “to allow the gospel to reshape the way they think and live, forming new patterns that move away from those assumed in their cultural frames.”

Offering a Southern perspective, Jyoti Sahi, founder of the Art Ashram in Bangalore, India, criticized the European churches for “having become too involved with rational thinking and having thus lost contact with the symbolic and magical dimension of life.” He encouraged the Northern churches to open themselves to “the insights to be found among other faiths and religions.” “Christ does not belong to us. Christ asks us to step beyond our boundaries,” he said. This point of view was echoed by Korean theologian Hong Eyoul Hwang, a researcher at the Center for Theological Studies of Peace and Reunification in Korea: “Christians need to take the opportunity to learn from indigenous cultures and religions to face the challenges of post-modern society.” There is growing awareness, he said, that the poor are not just objects of exploitation but “the proud bearers of cultural and religious traditions with a truly holistic life-oriented worldview.”

For Dietrich Werner, a theologian at the North Elbian Centre for World Mission, the consultation showed that the question of gospel and culture has now entered the debate of Northern theologians, while the challenges of modernization and secularization are being taken up by Southern ones. “More and more, we realize that globalization has not only economic and social consequences, but cultural and religious ones as well,” he said. ■

Ministry at the Margins

Continued from page 2

re-evaluate the process. Reading Biblical accounts of the early church made me freshly aware of the inclusive community life of the early Christians. The people were amazed by the love Christians had for one another, a love that broke all the normal social barriers. The degree of their caring and being present in times of need for the wider community was phenomenal. They

Reading Biblical accounts of the early church made me freshly aware of the inclusive community life of the early Christians.

consciously lived out the values of Jesus as a distinctive prophetic community in genuine mission, “a prophetic minority—salt, yeast, and light—distinct from the social milieu of which it is part, yet assuming a new kind of responsibility for its host society....”¹¹

I have had to incorporate this understanding into my ministry because the North American cultural values of success in terms of numbers, happenings, and products seems to get into our mindset in antithesis to the values of the beatitudes. It has meant for me, a former engineer, a great process of change. Change from being program to process oriented; from being directive to transformational; from having goals in terms of achievements to obedience despite the pain involved, for there is struggle, pain, anxiety, a desire to run, death to self, and need to trust God for provision. Thomas Kelly writes: “It is an overwhelming experience to fall into the hands of the living God, to be invaded to the depths of one’s being by His presence.”¹² Is this not what is needed, leaders invaded to the depths of their being by His presence and

thereby enabled to live out Gospel truth and values?

These days I am taking on the analogy of my farmer neighbours, i.e. plant the seed and entrust it to God. Different community involvements are giving new insights into rural culture. My wife is the local news reporter for the County Community Press. I was recently elected to the Board of the District Gas Cooperative. Our Summer Vacation Bible School is seen as a multi-generational community event as much as a church one. We live simply. Where churches are dying and closing, we have begun three small community churches (fellowships) at the three corner-points of the county each thirty miles apart. Douglas John Hall is encouraging when he writes that “today we are constrained by the divine Spirit to rediscover the possibilities of littleness. We are to decrease that Christ may increase. We cannot enter this new phase without pain, for truly we have been glorious in this world’s terms. It seems to many of us a humiliation that we are made to reconsider our destiny as “little flocks.”¹³ Working with small groups has made it necessary to bring the vulnerable and marginalized to the core of church life along with their humble wisdom and challenge to the way we do church. Each of our groups has its own flavor and is developing according to the needs of the group as it goes along. People are opening up to care for one another in deepening ways, helping one another to be overcomers in the face of many trials, disappointments and opposition.

As I reflect over my experiences and research, it becomes very apparent that there is a need for further investigation to find and support the innovative living and ministry of pioneer-prophets working at the margins of society. Sharing and documenting experiences of such frontier ministry would help others in every cultural setting who are experiencing God’s refining process to enter into His

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Rest, as they move from anxiety to trust; wondering to confidence; doubt to faith. It is my prayer that those who are working at the margins—including pioneer-prophets, outsiders to the systems, and church planters from different cultures—would become involved in intentional networking with a view to gathering together in person. It would be wonderful if resources within the Kingdom of God were made available to enable such a coming-together, to support those working on the frontier, and to bring the voice of the margins to a wider audience. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Ann Wilkerson-Hayes, “New Ways of Being Church”, in *The Gospel and Our Culture (GOC)* Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2001, 7.
- ² Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Trinity Press International, 1996).
- ³ David Kettle, “The Haze of Christendom”, in *GOC* Vol. 14, No.1, March 2002, 1.
- ⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (OUP, USA, March 2002).
- ⁵ Craig Van Gelder, “Response to ‘Haze of Christendom’” in *GOC* Vol. 14, No.1, March 2002, 5.
- ⁶ Brian McGaffigan, “The Need for Change,” *Strategies for Today’s Leader: A Practical Guide to Growing Your*

Church, Vol XXXIII, No. 4, 4-6.

- ⁷ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 33.
- ⁸ For an understanding of Rural Christendom see the book by Charles Roads, *Rural Christendom*, Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1909.
- ⁹ Hall, “Moving Beyond the ‘Haze of Christendom’”, *GOC* Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2002, 4.
- ¹⁰ Hall, *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975).
- ¹¹ Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 36.
- ¹² Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, (Harper and Brothers: New York and London, 1941), 56.
- ¹³ Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 66.

