

Editorial

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WELCOME TO THE FIRST issue of *Ecclesial Futures*. This journal is a new venture in missiological publishing with which we seek to fill a “gap” in current literature for academics and practitioners around the question of the future of local Christian communities in relation to the world as it is, not the world as it was.

BACKGROUND

Our new journal brings together, at least in the initial phases, two groups of scholar-practitioners. The first is an invitation-only annual conference of around twenty to thirty people who have called themselves the *International Research Consortium: Researching Missional Congregations* (IRC). They include people from the USA, Europe, and Africa and cross several denominations, mainly Protestant. They meet to share existing research projects and form a learning community around how local churches can be transformed by working with the theological concept of the *missio Dei*.

The second is a “study group” within the *International Association of Mission Studies* (IAMS),¹ which is the internationally

1. See IAMS 2016.

recognized association for missiology. IAMS has a growing membership in the hundreds and is truly global and ecumenical, combining people from Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox denominations. Most of these denominations are represented on the journal's Editorial Board, though we do want to see this expand this in future.

OUR APPROACH IN *ECCLESIAL FUTURES*

We understand local Christian communities as (a) the hermeneutic of the gospel and (b) meeting God's future as it comes towards us in the shape of the reign of God within the particular time and place that each finds itself. This requires these communities to be in a constant level of transformation as they orient themselves towards God's preferred and promised future for them in a rapidly changing world. We believe study and research in how local churches change to be increasingly faithful in their everyday apostolicity is urgently needed.

We define local Christian communities broadly to include traditional "parish" churches and independent local churches, religious communities and congregations, new church plants, so-called "fresh expressions" of church, and "new monastic" communities.

The sources of this work theologically are threefold at least:

- (a) The *missio Dei*—we believe the *missio Dei* to be axiomatic for ecclesiology, that is missiology precedes ecclesiology. A large proportion, possibly worldwide, of local Christian communities and the systems that support them were formed in modernity and therefore with the culture and norms of modernity, Christendom, and colonialism (although see the discussion below on the limits of this assumption). If adopting the stance of the *missio Dei* is indeed a paradigm shift as Bosch (1991) claims then it is no surprise that there is deep resistance to the implications of this "about face" within such communities and the systems that support them.² Research-

2. While there is wide and critical acceptance of the basic tenets of the

ing how and why Christian communities may make this paradigm shift as they embody the *missio Dei* is vital work.

- (b) Andrew Walls (e.g., 2002) has traced the history of the waxing and waning of Christianity over the centuries. His work clearly demonstrates that local Christian communities can both flourish and they can die, never to be seen again. For example, there is no Christian community in North Africa contiguous with that of the one present at the time of Augustine of Hippo. Given this historical reality and the current decline and fragility of the Church in many parts of the world we need to know much more about how and why some churches meet their end and some live, sustaining themselves through generational change. Thus, while we appreciate the contribution of congregational studies, ecclesiology, sociology, and ethnography and will need to draw on all these fields in our own work, we do not believe they are sufficient research methodologies in themselves for the situation local Christian communities find themselves in. Rather we require an orientation to the future of how God is both calling and sending the Church in our time and place to witness to the coming kingdom.
- (c) The “missional church” movement, arising from the work of Lesslie Newbigin and later the “Gospel and our Culture Network” (GOCN) has been working on these questions over twenty years, particularly amongst Protestant mainline denominations in USA and elsewhere. There is a large amount of literature published over those two decades, too large to cite here. A recent example might be Gelder and Zscheile (2011). While this movement has no monopoly on these questions, our work will need to stay in critical contact with developments in “missional church,” while broadening the concerns across the whole spectrum of denominations from the World Church engaged in mission.

missio Dei amongst theologians and missiologists, there is also good evidence that its receptivity in local Christian communities is extremely patchy and fragile across many denominations (Clark et al. 2010).

Further implications of local Christian communities taking mission seriously and areas of contestation in this field (which may prove fruitful areas of research and publishing) are:

- (i) The return of the *locus* in which theology is generated “in, with, to, for, under, and against” the local church (and therefore away from the monopoly of the academy).
- (ii) The relationship between ordained and lay leadership in local Christian communities.
- (iii) How and where leaders are identified, discerned, and theologically educated for mission.
- (iv) The relationship between a local church and its “world” or context. Issues of contextualisation or as some prefer “cultural negotiation” or “intercultural mission” require urgent attention.
- (v) The place of local churches formed outside of Christendom and modernity in this debate—we add a further paragraph regarding this here below, especially in relation to “missional church.”

This fifth point above is an important issue for the worldwide Church. A lot of existing research is emerging out of the challenges of mission in the Western world, but many practitioners and theologians in the non-Western world are also passionately interested in the mission of the local church and reimagining ecclesial futures (cf. Bolger 2012). In order to discuss “ecclesial futures” in the non-Western world, we need to develop a missiological approach which seeks to contextualize the missional church debate in non-Western churches. This is because the Western and non-Western Christianities do not always share the same historical background. While Newbigin’s critique of the Western churches and the subsequent discussion about the missional church among his followers (GOCN) emerged out of the new historical background of post-Christendom in the West, some non-Western Christian churches do not share such an experience of Christendom and post-Christendom. Thus, when we talk about the ecclesial futures

in non-Western churches there is a whole new task of listening, research, analysis, and theorizing.

A CALL FOR PAPERS

Having described above our theological and missiological approach we now call for contributions to the journal. This first issue presents, we think great examples of the kind of articles we welcome and we hope to range much more widely in time. All articles are peer-reviewed, around six thousand words long and will make an original contribution to the field. The co-editors are very open to discussing with potential authors their ideas for submissions and are happy to correspond until something suitable emerges for peer review. We would also really like to encourage new authors who have not published before—and to this end some members of the Editorial Board are happy to mentor potential writers in the process of submission to peer review. Here are some titles/content of the kind of articles we would love to publish. They are just a sample of course.

- Longitudinal studies in congregational development over five to ten (or more) years
- Diagnoses of why different churches flourish or die
- Ethnographic studies of the cultural changes required in flourishing churches
- Methodological treatises on how to research in this field
- How local churches can learn to experiment and fail
- How might a whole denomination transform itself towards embodying the mission of God?
- Astute, hermeneutically-aware bible scholarship on the future of the contemporary church
- Implications for theological education of the local church “as the hermeneutic of the gospel”

- Contextual studies of transformative churches from wide-ranging places—from the deeply secular to say, animist/shamanist contexts and everything in between
- What kind of leadership is required for the local church to embody the mission of God?
- What does a local church need to know before it can engage in mission?
- Systemic studies of local churches and the systems that support them

We envisage original research papers, review papers, case studies and occasional conference reports. The work will come from Masters, Doctoral, and post-Doctoral researchers as well as practitioners. It will originate in seminaries and university theology departments as well as the judicatory bodies of particular denominations and local churches themselves. We expect papers to come from all corners of the world since the church exists in very many places.

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

The body of this issue is five articles from three continents and from at least five denominational backgrounds. Without exception they are all working with the *missio Dei*, each with their own critical approach and at the same time “thickening” our understanding of this key foundation for the so-called “missional church.” At the heart of the issue are three articles presenting field research. These are excellent examples of the work we would like to showcase in the journal. What is interesting to me is how provisional such research turns out to be—presenting a snapshot of a much longer journey, always raising more questions, never giving easy answers. We are “consciously incompetent” in this time to know what “church” might authentically look like—my hope is that this journal will contribute to deepening and widening our vision for what the church might be.

Nelus Niemandt is a long-standing and well-respected missiologist from South Africa. He has been involved for many years in the drive of the Dutch Reformed Church to become a church shaped by the *missio Dei*. His article opens this issue as it presents the theological and missiological “big picture” for readers of the journal. His research concern is giving content to the *missio Dei* since it can easily become the blessing of all things and therefore somewhat devoid of content. Niemandt notes the importance of “flourishing life” in recent theological literature and official Church documentation and connects this directly to the mission of God in which the Church³ participates. What is especially helpful is that he then goes on to explicate church *praxis* which arises from this missional stance. The article stands as a marker for what this journal represents and sets us off in the right direction—notably facing towards the future and the *eschaton*.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) is declining like many other mainstream western denominations. Kris Stache, a Lutheran theologian based in Dubuque, Iowa wanted to do something different in a research project as she set out “to explore the stories, metaphors, and texts that shape a ministry leader’s understanding and practice of visionary leadership in the ELCA.” In her article Stache presents important field research (thirty in-depth interviews with specifically identified and chosen “visionary” leaders) which, for me as editor, puts further “flesh on the bones” of the *missio Dei* as set out in the first article—we have here in fact many actual on-the-ground descriptions of “flourishing life.” Stache’s approach is to encourage these key leaders to tell stories which point to the presence and activity of God in their ministries—noting how they witness the *missio Dei*. What emerges is a wonderful testament to asking the right questions of the right people! These voices, as they speak about the activity of God in their communities and through their leadership need to be heard. As Kris notes there is true holiness here in the stories they

3. In this journal we will stick to the convention of capitalizing Church when referring to the institution or Church body and church when the local manifestation in a Christian community is in mind.

tell. Overall, while there is no “magic bullet” for decline there is clearly a “future and a hope” for the ELCA if the six ways that God is working through these leaders can be “passed-on” to others.

We now jump straight in to so-called “fresh expressions of church” with Sabrina Müller from Zurich, Switzerland. The fresh expressions movement is one of the Church of England’s responses to the post-Christendom decline of the Church and Sabrina studied it for her doctoral research. The particular aspect of this ecclesiological shift she addresses in this article is the notion of the “mixed economy”; that is, how do these new forms of church exist alongside and even in harmony with what has been present for centuries. In a journal focused on the future, the third submission in the first issue is a historical survey of how fresh expressions came to exist and be accepted as a fit and proper ecclesiological form of church. This is no accident however since what we learn from Müller is how institutional change happens in an overall Church institutional system. She then connects that learning with the reception of the principles of fresh expressions on continental Europe which broadens the scope of her work in fascinating ways. There are three things that commend this article to me. First the physical border crossing nature of the original research—as a Church of England priest it is wonderful to have an outside view on my own context. Second the theological borders that are also being crossed by this work—missiology and practical theology looks very different even across Europe and it is important to have the questions the fresh expressions raises aired in this way. Finally, the article leaves us wanting more from Müller given the breadth of what she has been capable of here.

Crossing another border into Germany we now meet Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras from the University of Griefswald. Their robust and in-depth field research is presented here on new forms of church in rural Germany. Once again the background is overall Church decline and in some places reactionary responses offering only denial concerning the reality of what is happening. However rather like Kris Stache, Herbst and Todjeras go looking for places where something new and visionary is happening and

subject these initiatives to their intensive research methodology. The interventions they discover demonstrate an incredible range of both missional and innovative approaches. These are categorised in really helpful ways. In a connection with Müller's paper they discover differences in leadership between their research and other research on fresh expressions and the mixed economy which raises, of course, more research questions. They conclude with several really helpful recommendations for how these innovations could be encouraged across the whole Church.

Last, but no means at all least, there is a really important article from Scott Hagley which asks what we are doing theologically when we research in and with missional congregations as they attempt to embody the *missio Dei* in their life together. In interesting ways this article sums up this issue, critiquing several parts of it and offering many new paths for the journey ahead. Hagley is a scholar-practitioner based in Pittsburgh, PA, and he is able to move seamlessly between the complexities and questions of both Trinitarian theology and post-modern ethnographic researching. This paper will repay reading, re-reading and inwardly digesting as Hagley utilises Jenson's Trinitarian understanding to develop a pneumatological solution to questions raised about the triune God's relationship with the world. Drawing on the work of Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mary Fulkerson in ethnographic research, Hagley provides concrete proposals to enable a congregation's self-understanding as a missional church as they participate with the Spirit in their public worlds.

We present a handful of book reviews in this issue (which we hope will develop with the journal in future issues), covering material published in our field—and readers will notice from further afield. Thus, one of the reviews brings thinking from studying online innovation and creativity to churches participating in the mission of God.

As I close I'd like to thank a few people. My co-editor, Steve Taylor, for constant encouragement. The publishers at Wipf & Stock for taking us on as a new and untried journal. All those institutions, who need to remain anonymous, but who generously

funded the start-up of the journal. The Editorial Board all of whom reviewed the papers presented here with acumen and alacrity making substantial improvements to them. Patrick Todjeras who has put the book reviews together at very short notice. You, our readers who have picked up the journal and hopefully learnt from it. Please spread the news and consider writing an article or review a book for us. Do be in touch with the editors with your comments, thoughts, and questions; we would love to have feedback on this first issue.

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