

Editorial

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Welcome to another issue of *Ecclesial Futures* and another fine set of original research contributions on the development and transformation of local Christian communities.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

This issue of *Ecclesial Futures* offers five original research articles. We start in the particular, in London and among the homeless. During a Covid-19 lockdown, Sally Mann undertook participatory action research over six months, engaging in ethnographic research of homeless people in a nearby park. She analysed her interactions with the homeless, using the work of Paul Ricoeur to thicken her reflexivity and thus inform her practice. In particular, Mann drew on Ricoeur's notion of "emplotment" and the ways in which individuals make sense of their identity, their relationship to others and their place in the world, in the telling of stories. Hence the act of listening and the reflecting back of repeated phrases, shifts in retold stories, offers pathways for changed sense of self. The stories that are shared might not be wholly accurate, but they can be transformative. In working with Ricoeur, Mann offers a fresh and grounded understanding

of “being with”. She demonstrates how attending deeply to the stories of the homeless invites those who feel trapped to explore a different identity, as known characters who belong in storied communities. Mann’s article is a fine example of how reflection can inform action and guide the development and transformation of local Christian practice.

We move to a second particular context, that of evangelistic activity by Ghanaian migrant communities in the United Kingdom. John Neate identified a significant gap between the stated evangelistic aspiration of the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK (CoP-UK) to “possess the nations” and the practical situation within its individual assemblies. He explored this gap using empirical research, including questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The research revealed very low levels of participation by White British people in CoP-UK and a paucity of cross-cultural friendships among the Ghanaian church members. Barriers to cross-cultural friendships included the fear of being influenced by different cultural values and concerns over how Ghanaian church members might perceive the building of relationships. Neate also observed a lack of positive feedback about White British culture among his participants. A feature of Neate’s research is his desire to not simply achieve an academic goal, but conduct transforming research that might actually shape ecclesial futures, in this case among the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost-UK. Hence Neate sought to model the relational approach he was seeking to explore and observed insights being crystallized among his participants through the research process. Alongside Neate’s research and approach, I also commend his bibliography, which gathers an impressive range of resources in understanding migrant missiologies and diaspora movements.

We move from the particularities of culture to the particularity of film. Rein Den Hertog works with the Polish film *Corpus Christi* and the ways in which the main character facilitates communal processes of interpretation and reconciliation. Hertog argues that the *missio Dei* is visualized in a particular social reality. Hertog uses the movie to examine contemporary ecclesial practices in his denomination, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (CGKN). The result is a set of challenges to the nature of gospel witness, ministerial identity and liturgical practice. From film and denominational self-reflection, Hertog then turns backwards and sideways. Looking to the past, Hertog notes several starting points in his Reformed tradition that encourage the ordained minister to understand themselves as a facilitator of processes of interpretation. Looking sideways, Hertog examines Michael Moynagh’s understandings of leadership as conversations, group processes and sense-making. The article concludes with three challenges: including ministerial practice,

ministerial formation, and lay participation in local communities. While these challenges are focused on CGKN, they provide thought provoking challenges for all those working toward communal processes of interpretation and reconciliation in ecclesial communities.

Our final two articles research another dimension of particularity in mission, exploring missiological reflection on how the human brain works. Nigel Rooms works with recent research in neuroscience and considers what Iain McGilchrist's interdisciplinary work in *The Master and his Emissary* might offer to the particularity of Christian spirituality. Rooms engages critically with two Christian responses to McGilchrist, one broadly Evangelical, the other Anglican. Rooms argues that the recovery of the apophatic stream of Christian spirituality and the importance of nurturing the gift of "beholding", in which the world as God's creation is a gift to be noticed. The embodied dimensions of this spirituality are traced, including heightened awareness of the here and now and an unselfing. What results are conditions which make possible an openness to the other and around which practices of hospitality, communal discernment and joining in with what God can form. Nigel works to integrate his analysis with his ministry as a spiritual director and mission consultant. His aim is to integrate the individual and communal as the local church participates in the *missio Dei*. (Rooms is co-editor of *Ecclesial Futures* and this team approach to editing means that academic standards of double blind peer review can be maintained, in order that readers can benefit from the original research being conducted by the journal's editors.)

Mike Harrison joins Rooms in an examination of how recent research in neuroscience might inform mission. This article offers a sustained reflection on character formation as participation in the *missio Dei*. The argument is that while behavioural attempts and Aristotelian approaches are popular, both in contemporary organizational practice and contemporary (especially secular) literature, they are theologically problematic. Harrison then makes a constructive turn. First, Harrison turns to developments in neuroscience and the ways in which the brain processes affection. Second, he provides numerous examples to outline the ways in which loving attachment relationship to the divine and accountability-in-community are responses to the loving gaze of the Divine. While there is plenty of scope for further research into the lived realities of communal formation, Harrison provides an original and theologically formed meditation on embodied ecclesial practices.

What is instructive is to realize that, in different ways, all our articles are working at this interface between the individual and the communal in contemporary mission. Mann's individual listening to the homeless results in

transformations in communal belonging. Neate examines how a denomination might nurture cross-cultural friendships through encouraging more relational ways of being that transform the evangelistic sense of self. Hertog demonstrates how cinematic analysis can provide mirrors on what it might mean to shift from individual and clergy-centric identities to communal processes of interpretation. Rooms theorizes how the spiritual practice of beholding can form local communities in discerning what God is up as they participate in the *missio Dei*. Across diverse contexts, these articles provide challenges and evoke possibilities in the development and transformation of local Christian communities. I commend them to your reflecting, thinking and acting.

PARTNERSHIPS

As a journal, we continue to be delighted with the unfolding partnership with Radboud University Press and Open Journals. Through Diamond Open Access, original research is available free to authors and reader. The shift of *Ecclesial Futures* from print to online has brought significant increase in access, evident in downloads of abstracts, complete articles and book reviews across all the issues of *Ecclesial Futures* to date, current and archived. We have also been delighted to see people offering to be reviewers through the online platform (<https://ecclesialfutures.org/>). Their reviewing expertise is already evident in several of the articles in this issue.

Ecclesial Futures partners with Churches Together in England to offer an annual MA prize in Mission. Every year, a group of mission-minded scholars across England read MA level dissertations from students completing their studies at a UK based college or university around the topics of mission, evangelism and church planting with a particular focus on mission in the UK context. In 2022, as a journal we offer our congratulations to Owen May for his MA dissertation *A Theology of Mission for Scriptural Reasoning – Guesthood: The Good Samaritan, The Incarnation, and Mystery*.¹ Owen, who studied at Cranmer Hall in Durham, was delighted to have won, noting, “What is really encouraging is that more people are becoming interested in relationships between those of the Abrahamic faiths and finding ways into deeper understanding and friendship.”

1 Owen May, *A Theology of Mission for Scriptural Reasoning – Guesthood: The Good Samaritan, The Incarnation, and Mystery*, MATM dissertation, Durham University, 2021. <https://cte.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/06/A-Theology-of-Mission-for-SR-Owen-May.pdf>.

Another partnership important to *Ecclesial Futures* is with the Christian Communities and Mission Study Group of International Association of Mission Studies. We are delighted to have an activity report from the recent IAMS Assembly 2022. Such reports remind us of the global nature of research into the development and transformation of local Christian communities. The report also points to current gaps in the field. These include improvised theorizing of approaches to the “other”, the cultural embedded nature of listening, empirical study of partnerships and the possibilities of learnings from other culture. We invite you as researchers to consider ways your work might respond to these current gaps. We also continue as a journal to actively seek submissions of original research from diverse cultures and contexts. We also seek reviews of book from across the breath of the worldwide church.

THANKS

Thanks to each of the blind peer reviewers, who continue to provide constructive, thoughtful and engaged feedback. Thanks to my co-editor Nigel Rooms and to Patrick Todjeras (who remains eager to receive book reviews). Thanks to our copyeditor Christopher Pipe and the team at Radboud University Press and Open Journals for their skill and care.

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