

EDITORIAL

Editorial Volume 5 Issue 1

Nigel Rooms

With this issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, we pass an initial milestone for our new journal of having published fifty articles since we began with our first volume in 2020. It has been quite a journey and we might stop here and rejoice for a moment and look back on our achievements so far. We have created a journal that is finding its place within World Christianity. In a recent survey of where our website is visited from, many thousands of times per year, we might have expected the UK, USA, Australia and Germany to feature in the top 10 places – yet South Korea, the Philippines, South Africa and India were also present (alongside 57 other countries). In this issue we continue this diversifying trend with seven articles authored from seven different countries on at least three continents representing a wide range of ecclesial traditions. Such catholicity is unified by a golden thread, running through many of the articles, which is the Church's requirement to seek first the Kingdom of God in all of its breadth and depth.

Jonna van den Berge-Bakker and Marten van der Meulen are both researchers in the Protestant churches of the Netherlands, a country which is well-known for its secularizing tendencies over many decades. They describe the first crisis of the local church in that country as its inexorable decline which leads to a second crisis, that of the church forgetting its true calling to be a “sign, foretaste and instrument” of the Kingdom of God. They explore in a simple, profound fashion the relationship between these two crises, noting that the first can lead to the second by focusing on paralysing “cramp” or, alternatively, active and busy initiatives to “repair” in the local church. They emphasize rightly, what organizational theorists have long advocated for, a focus on core purpose, or in their words, “calling”, without avoiding the sadness and lament for what we are losing through the first crisis. The importance of discernment in and with God emerges as a key practice along with recovering an eschatological, future-oriented perspective in ecclesiology which offers a wholly other horizon to the current crises.

The next two articles in this issue both illustrate in different ways, via case studies, responses to the crises of the church in the West and the behaviours that accompany

them. Alison Kolosova is an Orthodox theologian and missiologist, originally from Britain but now based in Russia and teaching in Estonia. She presents a fascinating study of an Orthodox parish in Bath, England which has been in existence since 1980. She points out that the Russian Orthodox Church faced its “post-Constantinian moment” in the 1930s, several decades before the rest of western Europe, and had to learn how to be church in a locality without the power of the State very close by. Out of this arose significant theological and ecclesial movements that can be traced even further back into the nineteenth century, and we are introduced to the authors concerned. Kolosova’s work here is important for subscribers to this journal for several reasons. First, for non-Orthodox readers here is a masterly introduction to the theological movements of Orthodoxy that have given rise to what we might call a robust missional ecclesiology that clearly has “legs”, as evidenced by the parish case study. The references alone will be worth reflecting on. Second, the practicalities of ordinary parish life where no stipends are paid and no building upkeep while creating a vibrant, living and fluid community surely point us to the future. Finally putting both together, here is a “thick description” of what church life looks like and is grounded on when the focus is on the coming Kingdom of God – as proposed by van den Berge-Bakker and van der Meulen.

The third article in this set is from Natalie Magnusson who presents part of her DMin thesis which researched her own Episcopal church in Jackson, Michigan. What strikes me, as an Editor who reads quite a lot of this kind of qualitative research within the Western congregation, is that it hardly matters what the starting point in the research question is, very quickly the researcher comes up against the same blockers to significant action as they dig down into the deep culture and behaviours of the Christian community. So, here where Magnusson begins with a question about this predominantly white congregation’s engagement in racial justice in their largely Black neighbourhood (surely a vital concern of the Kingdom), she quickly discovers some “deeply rooted theological challenges that inhibit our participation in the mission of God”. In addition, along the way she notices and admits to her own entanglement in whiteness and its toxic outcomes. Thus, the research demonstrates that in this congregation hosting and hospitality are expected to be offered, but hardly received; white privilege obstructs the ability to listen deeply to others; and what I call “practical atheism”, being unable to speak of the presence and activity of God in public, restricts the congregation’s imagination of what God might be up to as they address racial justice. This congregation, it appears, knows the “theory” perfectly well, but they find it almost impossible to turn that into practice across the boundary of their church in their neighbourhood. What Magnusson offers us here is practical theological wisdom for this and many other congregations on how to connect what they know in theory with their everyday praxis.

In setting out on the journey towards *Ecclesial Futures* it was axiomatic that we did not know exactly where we would be going, given the amazing state of flux that the world is in. The next two articles in this issue engage with the ever-advancing field of digital technologies and their implications for Christians and the communities in which we gather. David Hirome, currently studying in South Korea, does us a great service by reviewing developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in its many forms in a very helpful overview for those fairly new to this field (like myself!). He places the explosion of possibilities from the amazing power of contemporary computing into dialogue with theology, especially theological anthropology. This raises key questions about how ‘human-like’ the software and what it creates can be, when it can emulate and even surpass actual human capabilities. His work exposes the limits and biases of AI in its many forms while demonstrating the importance of understanding embodied human beings in a holistic and relational manner. He shares the serious implications of this endeavour for missiology and makes practical proposals for churches as they catch up with the possibilities on offer. My hope would be that this article stands as a “first word” in this journal on the subject and that others may take up the challenge of missional engagement with AI.

Geneva Blackmer, writing as a university-based researcher from Germany, addresses the question of what kind of human relationality (which Hirome emphasizes in his work) is possible when worshipping in digital worship spaces. She first addresses the question of the theological efficacy of “online church”, providing a robust theological defence of it from the literature. However, what happens in these spaces in terms of inclusion must go beyond simplistic questions of accessibility. Thus, Blackmer reviews research literature on what digital engagement can and cannot offer to different sorts of non-religious communities from around the world. She also proposes that the theology of disability informs the question of inclusion in digital spaces. She is therefore able to helpfully complexify the ability to gather, communicate and form community online. This is important critical and highly informative work and is a precursor for further research that she is involved in which might confirm some of her initial hypotheses in actual digital religious communities. We look forward to reading that research, should it come our way, in due course.

When we set out the kinds of article that we might hope for in our journal proposal in 2019, one of them was research and reflection on the systems that support local churches which are often termed church bodies or “judicatories”. While we haven’t had so many articles in this genre, I am pleased to introduce the next article from Stéphan Van der Watt which is firmly situated within the public role of the Reformed Church of Japan. Van der Watt, from South Africa, ministers and teaches in Japan. Here he presents reflection on a recent Reformed Church of Japan document – a

Peace Declaration. When the Church, especially when it is in a very small minority as it is in Japan, withdraws into itself out of public space it is very quickly endangered. It is therefore refreshing to read of this prophetic engagement with peace, not just in Japan, but with implications ecumenically through the World Council of Churches and globally via the United Nations. Of course, it is a small, even tiny contribution but as we know the Kingdom of God, which is a theme of this issue, begins with a mustard seed. Van der Watt helpfully reviews contemporary thinking in Peace Studies and pacifism as well as placing his reflection within Japan's Constitution and history of atomic devastation in World War II. There is something quite unique here which I commend to readers.

One of the two main sources of material for this journal is the *International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures* (ICEF – see www.ecclesialfutures.net); the other is the *International Association of Mission Studies*. What happens at an ICEF conference has been rather hidden within its invited membership until now, so I am very pleased to be able to conclude this issue with our first conference report from its meeting in 2023 in San Francisco. What is also good about the piece is that it is a collaborative work by four of the participants, including the local organizer, so we hear different voices and perspectives – and some summaries of papers that were given at the conference. Each ICEF meeting now has a specific theme around which the consultation happens – here it is “faithful innovation” – a not uncontested approach in churches today. There is rich reflection on offer here, and rather than repeating the arguments I simply commend the piece to our readers.

About the Author

Nigel Rooms, Church Mission Society, Oxford, UK and The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, UK. Contact: nigel.rooms@churchmissionsociety.org