



EDITORIAL: THE NEW COMMONS

In the last issue the Journal framed a proposal. In issue number 6 it argued that the Euro-tribal churches on both sides of the Atlantic were facing, missiologically, a situation that demanded that we change the conversation within which we have been operating for the past one hundred years or more. That conversation has revolved around an ecclesiocentric hub. Like the spokes of a wheel fanning out around the hub, all else became a subset of or the subject of this ecclesiocentrism that has only increased in intensity as the anxiety about the church's location in our changing cultural contexts has increased. Overall, the conviction that better applied forms of human agency and ingenuity (expressed in all kinds of hyphenated proposals about the church such as *missional, simple, liquid, sticky, fresh, rooted* and so forth) can fix or remake the church in the name of God, have been the regnant default across these churches and continues so to this day. We proposed that instead of asking the questions of how to fix, renew, change, remake (etc.) the church, the Spirit is pressing us to ask a fundamentally different question, namely, how do we go on a journey together. How do we discern together, what God

is doing ahead of us in our neighborhoods, in order to join with God there?

Issue number six shared stories of men and women in the UK and North America who are experimenting with just this question. Karen Wilk in Edmonton shared hopeful stories about such experiments. It is clear from these stories that this is no easy journey. Duncan, in London, invited us into the tentativeness and joy of this journey into place. Stan's story reminded us that the imaginations of people in too many of our congregations are deeply shaped by ecclesiocentric defaults that pre-determine outcomes despite the best of intentions. Karen in British Columbia moved into the neighborhood after more than twenty-five years inside a church world as pastor, makes clear just how much we miss when the demands of running and being church block our capacity to listen to, be with and dwell with the 'other' who lives beside us and across the street. Such listening only comes by changing deep-seated habits so that we can learn to live slowly. Too often we are caught in frenetic lives that suggest God's whole future for this world is dependent on our particular plans and actions - in this frame of mind it is impossible to live slowly and, therefore, to know God and the neighbor. These sound like simple, straightforward convictions but they're not. Our inability to dwell where we live, see the other who lives beside us or listen to those on the street or apartment where we live are some of the disturbing signs of how far, as God's people, we have been made captive to an ecclesiocentrism that is missing what the Spirit is saying to us today. Phil Daniel's story has to be a common one for too many of us as church leaders - a signal of how far we have strayed from being God's grounded people in the local.

Changing the conversation is risky, counter-intuitive work. It's not how we've been formed as God's people in recent history. The notion that God is out ahead of us in our communities seems quite alien because we have presumed for too long that God is, so to speak, *in the church* and our job is to *take God out into the world* in order to *bring people into the church*. There is a real place for calling and inviting our neighbors to join with us in worshiping communities. It is in the liturgical space of God's people in worship that we are formed in practices that are critical if we are to be a sign, witness and foretaste of the new creation. But we discern how to be that kind of church as we recognize and join with what God is already doing out ahead in our neighborhoods. As we journey with this God, like an Abram and Sara, ready to hear the stranger in our community we will hear again the Spirit's call into new forms of life and witness. Changing the conversation is about the places and ways we encounter God at work and the questions we learn to ask about what the Spirit is up to. This is what we were proposing in the stories of Volume Six.

In the current issue, issue number 7 we wrestle with some implications of this journey. Neighborhoods are complex places. They are often comprised of people with different convictions, politics, religious practices and socio-economic status than ourselves.^[1] In this sense, changing the conversation from the church to the community means that we are travelling (the Abram and Sara story becomes an important one for us just now) out of our established zones of safety (the social, economic, political homogeneity of most congregations where people drive to be with like-minded friends) into risky spaces which are outside our capacity to control. This means discovering not just how to travel back into these places from which we drive each day but learning to live, dwell, and be present in these

spaces as the places where we actually live. This is like the Spirit's invitation through Jeremiah to the people sent from Jerusalem (the sacred center of worship) to Babylon (the city that cared nothing for God's ways). They are invited to settle into the city, to make it their own (plant, build, have children, give in marriage), dwell there and, more than anything else, to seek its welfare (Jeremiah 29:4-7). We believe that in the call to change the conversation, the Spirit is now calling the Euro-tribal churches into this space. It is, as it was for the people of Jerusalem, a radical, world-changing journey that will change who we are forever. This is our calling. An implication is that we, as the church, can no longer be in control and no longer mandate the agendas in the neighborhoods where we live (which is probably why we retreated into our homogeneous congregations sometime in the late 60s of the last century). We are invited to learn new ways of being God's people where, practicing the habits of Luke 10: 1-12, we go lightly (leaving our baggage behind) in the way of Jesus into our neighborhoods. This is an invitation to seek the *common good* of the communities (seek the welfare of the city to which I am sending you), the neighborhoods where we live. This volume of the Journal explores what this might mean for us. We will explore what seeking the *common good* might mean, why it is so important in terms of Christian life, how it intersects with such things as mission and evangelism. There are many questions and this volume hopes to explore some of them as we share stories of ways God's people are already seeking the common good in the places where they live.

[1] We are aware of trends toward gated communities and places filled with people of great homogeneity. Most Christians understand that such places are anti-gospel.



Alan Roxburgh

TMN founder, consultant, pastor, teacher and writer with more than 30 years experience in church leadership, consulting and seminary education.

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