



REFLECTION: WHOSE WHOLENESS AND WHOSE HEALING

In his case study, *Cultivating Desire as Missional Practice*, Stan Wilson has written an insightful, honest, challenging, and inspiring description of some of the important work his church (Northside) has been doing over the last number of years. There is much to learn from the description of this experience as Wilson offers a sound example of the type of leadership needed in inviting a congregation out into missional practice.

The first aspect of this case study that I appreciated was Wilson's use of church memories in beginning to cultivate a shared imagination for God's mission in the context of his church. This shared imagination begins, wonderfully, with Wilson's awareness and understanding of the formative histories of Northside and its context. His description of the racial unrest during the early years of the church and Northside's

courageously faithful response within the context, as well as the story of Brogan and his neighborly presence, provide narratives of identity that God might use in calling Northside out into further missional life. Understanding and reminding God's people of formative histories, both from the biblical witness as well as from a church's tradition and congregational story, go a long way in cultivating a shared imagination for mission. These stories can provide needed courage for missional life, as remembering God's faithfulness and call in the past, tends to move churches more boldly and creatively into mission, trusting that God will be faithful again.

Another aspect of this case study that I appreciated was Wilson's work at changing the conversation within his church away from paternalistic patterns of understanding mission- something we do *for* neighbors- toward a desire to enjoy the presence of neighbors. Paternalistic patterns of mission are a challenge for many euro-tribal churches in the west, including my own church, and Wilson offers some creative ideas about changing the conversation around mission. I especially appreciated his use of embodied and corporate church practices like utilizing the church calendar, Lectio Divina, and Eucharist in trying to help Northside understand God's mission as something far greater than offering charity to neighbors in need. Utilizing these practices, and others, within a direct conversation on the challenges of paternalism is something that many churches like ours should consider implementing.

I also appreciate Wilson's honesty in naming the challenge Northside faces in practicing the type of missional life that they desire. While awareness of formative histories and shifting language can go a long way in forming a shared imagination for missional life, moving towards practices of shared missional imagination is much more challenging. As Wilson notes and I have learned in my own experience with missional leadership, old habits are hard to break.

Reflecting on these challenges within this case study led me to a couple of different reflections. First, I wonder if there are underlying challenges in the theological convictions of the initial question that Northside tries to address, namely, 'What is one small gospel ministry of healing and wholeness that Northside can offer our neighborhood?' Language of 'offer our neighborhood' exemplifies the paternalistic challenges that Wilson describes, but given his honest critique of the final experiment, I am confident that he recognizes this.

My larger wonderment has to do with the convictions of *healing* and *wholeness* connected with gospel ministry. Both of these convictions, often connected with current articulations of the gospel, conjure images of being complete or whole, but they also can imply images of being finished or closed. In reading this case study I found myself asking, 'Whose healing and wholeness are we offering?' Presumably, it would be the members of Northside determining the shape of the ministries of healing and wholeness. I wonder if there is an underlying conviction in that question that asks the neighborhood to become like us, or our vision. When we come with hopes for our presumed healing and wholeness, does this leave room for the difference and otherness that the gospel entails? Perhaps the story of home improvement that ended in increased distrust and division is an example of differing views of what wholeness and healing look like. I would suggest that missional practices might be encouraged by leading with theological convictions such as, the kingdom of God breaking in through

the broken body of Christ, the 'otherness' entailed in the Trinity, or the work of reconciliation.

A final question raised for me has to do with the goal of moving from paternalism to a desire to enjoy the presence of neighbors. While this would certainly be a positive shift, I think that it can still leave neighbors in the position of *objects* of mission. I think that a vision of working alongside neighbors as *subjects* of mission, both in envisioning and implementation of mission, will move a church further towards missional practice and life. Wilson makes wonderful observations about deep-seated habits of working for our neighbors rather than simply enjoying their presence, but perhaps *koinonia* is another theological conviction that could be explored leading to habits of working alongside our neighbors towards shared mission.

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