



REFLECTION: DESIRING THE NEIGHBORHOOD OR DWELLING THERE.

We welcome Stan Wilson's honest case study as a stimulus for discussion, particularly about how churches might form around different imaginations and practices in God's mission. His account of an attempt to lead people through bodily, active learning and to engage with neighbours in an inter-racial context, offers insight into just how difficult is this formational task, and what is at stake.

Wilson rightly pursued this experiment in missional formation by recognizing it is not achieved through 'right thinking' about the nature of the church and what it stands for. His progressive Mississippi congregation seemed already to affirm interracial cooperation, concern for the marginalised and

prophetic decision-making; the members had ‘articulated a desire for the presence of their diverse neighbors’. Wilson thus identified desire, the deeper motivation and willed response towards the ‘other’ as a key in generating missional action. This seems an important step for church communities wanting to move beyond a service-oriented approach to a more genuinely communal engagement.

Thus, Wilson undertook no seminar or set of readings with the group to facilitate a ‘paradigm shift’; there was no misguided expectation that cognitive engagement would yield the outcome hoped for, of ‘genuine neighbourly integration’. Rather, given what James K A Smith has helpfully explored in relation to how desire is formed, through visceral, embodied perception.^[1] Wilson led the group in an experiment involving bodily practices of spiritual awareness, liturgy and neighbourly life. The hope seemed to be that by *acting* in new ways, that desire for the presence of their neighbours might find expression in a changed church existence.

Nevertheless, despite several attempts, genuine integration remains an elusive reality. Sadly, this discrepancy between the multi-layered social fabric of many church communities’ *contexts* and the realities of the mono-cultural *gatherings* for Sunday worship is all too common.

For us, this account raised several aspects that might be explored. Firstly, our experience is showing that the hope for an outcome such as ‘the presence of diverse neighbours’ or ‘genuine...integration’, itself invites further interrogation. For the purposes of this discussion (and from so removed a context) we can only touch on this and defer significant critical probing, but we find ourselves asking: what does diversity actually *mean* in a given setting? Are truly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic communities in fact possible – and to what degree? When we desire integration, what is it we are imagining? Such questions are worth addressing, if a little awkward, for ‘diversity’ is surely desired in every healthy community. But rather like ‘inter-faith co-operation’ (or even ‘world peace’), the meaning of ‘diversity’ has become increasingly abstract; it seems to refer to something we all should want, or be, but are not sure what that is or how it is achieved.

Nevertheless, for now, we may affirm that *some* greater coherence between the social reality of the (actual, physical) neighbourhood and the social make-up of the church community (that gathers within it) is both desirable and possible.

In relation to this particular experiment, in Wilson’s own honest appraisal it revealed little *actual* change in perceptions and dispositions. This also suggests rich lines of enquiry for leading formational attempts of this kind: what our bodies are up to in particular contexts and cultural settings? In this, Wilson is on to something. As social philosophers Pierre Bourdieu and Merleau Ponty explore, within our bodies are predispositions bequeathed by our cultural and organisational settings. Our actions and intentions are skewed, not by conscious thought, but by the deep structuring mindsets acquired over years of practising – of *living* – in certain social settings. In other words, we are creatures of habit, but these habits are socially constructed and cognitively reinforced through cultural rehearsal. This helps to explain the paternalistic defaults Wilson’s community struggled with, even as they attempted to live into theologically held convictions about inter-racial relations.

Furthermore, although members of the congregation genuinely desired the aspirations of neighbourly engagement, that impetus seemed to be prompted by or originated *from the church* as the gathered physical expression of the community. This desire seemed to be formed from a cognitive and reflective basis, albeit through biblical reflection and some communal life, and nurtured by leaders. Thus we wonder if such actions and attempts to be neighborly and foster 'presence' still have more to do with the church's internal communal experience than arising from a deeper, more elemental bodily, day-to-day engagement with others in the locality. Reading this account, there was a sense in which that generous neighbourly vision was still a second order reflection: beginning with leaders' or members' stated desires it was then given 'legs' or concrete expression in various experiments. This is a subtle but important distinction, perhaps even suggestive in the language used: 'desiring presence' is quite different from simply being 'present'.

Having seen other 'third space' experiments here in Auckland, the challenges are similar. No question: the desire of middle-class, largely white, affluent, gathered churches to be connected with or bless their local (or adjacent) neighbourhoods, is a good one. It is grounded in scripture and is 'outward looking'; it seems churlish to analyse or criticise such generous impulses. But the language of desire and mission - whether arising from information and cognitive questions, scripturally-informed convictions or feelings, *still starts with the church*; it still originates within that particular Christian community, the members of which tend to remain the subjects or agents acting upon or towards the 'other.' And although such initiatives often generate important outcomes and may even move towards forms of partnership, the church in its embodied particularity (its 'presence') still invites or initiates the 'other's presence'. Certainly any church, such as Northside, might transcend what Wilson refers to as 'paternalistic patterns of engagement' and notions of charity, towards a desire for more active and personal engagement. But that movement still seems to start with an idea ('engagement'), rather than a bodily reality; it interprets what 'being neighbourly' means from that inhabited, particular experience. Thus, the language of desire is a good beginning, but perhaps only reaches towards the more radical transformation required, and suggestive in this article: actually *being* 'members' of one another. This is deeply challenging, and quite probably some of the original shock value in the parable of the Good Samaritan was because those who passed by the suffering man *had a genuine, religiously-informed desire to be a neighbour*. They just had to give up too much for that desire to be enacted.

In addition if we are going to use the language of agency and 'attend to the context', acknowledging that our neighbours are themselves subjects means allowing that agency to inform our self-understanding and have a bearing on our identity as a church. Any given context and its inhabitants might be describable in sociological terms and census data, but are not theoretical passive entities to be acted upon or into; they are complex entities within which human subjects act out *their* own desires and values. Furthermore, those values - such as the conclusions drawn from certain passages of scripture for example, might be very different from our own. Like us they have the creaturely capacity to be both wondrous and sinful, so neighbourly encounters and genuine engagement is not always tidy, or pretty! Wilson's account of the conflict over the redeveloped house and the fracturing of relationship with another church of the community evidences the messiness that occurs when worlds collide. Taking seriously the agency of the other includes their readiness - or not, to engage with us.

We also need to acknowledge that the drive-in church culture Wilson describes makes such a task even harder. Northside, like many we have experienced, seems to identify as a social body through a shared set of values rather than as a church of that 'place'. People were attracted to the progressive opinions and higher style of worship. One issue addressed in this experiment was the disposition of participants towards internal and cognitive forms of spirituality that can exist anywhere; habitual ways of being, or practises that are self-perpetuating when people jump in cars to gather with others who are like them. It is very difficult to dismantle such a congregation's homogeneity, even if it meets in a location characterised by a mixed social context.

In the early 1970s, Rollo May wrote of the need to develop 'the capacity to listen with the body', to learn to value it as the means of empathy with others.^[2] Similarly, theologian Edward Farley has observed the loss of the 'powerful aesthetic dimension' in the life of faith, as if faith has little to do with 'the most concrete way in which human beings experience their world'.^[3] Wilson's account of the disappointing effects of one church's attempts to 'listen with the body' shows how difficult this capacity is to cultivate in faith communities. It also demonstrates its importance, for as Wilson shows, missional engagement that does not attend to bodily situated-ness in the context is, arguably, not engagement at all.

The joyous invitation to people of faith to rediscover the aesthetic, bodily experience came home to us this morning, as we heard afresh some of Jesus' parables: what if kingdom-oriented actions and postures were to *begin* with the touch of the tiny mustard seed; the smell, sight and taste of the yeast? If we are so accustomed to interpreting Jesus' words from the recollected meanings in our cognitive stores, in terms of their spiritual or personal lessons, we might lose the immediate force of the material elements within the parable. Spirituality that preferences the mind has an aesthetic discovery to make; indwelling our own, deep desires and knowing what already shapes our habits, from what is already within us, is necessary for us to change how we eat, or worship, or be neighbourly.

Some people are already more attuned to aesthetically experiencing the world and the things of faith, certainly children are amongst our best teachers in this regard, as Jesus seemed to think. Who can play? or dance? or draw to save themselves? Probably, some of those our churches are trying to 'reach' are more attuned to listening to their bodies and being, simply present. In Wilson's account, the young men from the neighbourhood who shot baskets no doubt had something to teach as well as receive, but their interaction with the church community came across as somewhat one-sided.

In *Silence and Honey Cakes*^[4] Rowan Williams has suggested that it is only through the body that the soul will be saved; a corollary might be that it is only through bodily, neighborly presence that the neighborhood - indeed the church, will be saved. Without sustained dwelling in the streets of the neighbourhood *with* the neighbour; without a tactile, physical engagement that listens to and deals with the every-day and is part of the community's joys and disappointments, fears and hopes, perception can remain detached and missional engagement artificial. The habits of disembodied spirituality reinforced by a gathered church culture proved too compelling, even for this ably led experiment in missional formation. Perhaps, like Nicodemus, it is only by being 'born again' that many of our western churches

will discover a new, truly missional, life.

Reflection on 'Cultivating Desire in Mississippi' by Stan Wilson. *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue no. 6, 2015. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/cultivating-desire-in-mississippi/>

[1] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013)

[2] Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, (New York: Norton 1975) p15

[3] Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001) p vii)

[4] Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: the Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion, 2004).



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