



## A RETROSPECTIVE CHURCH

*It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way.<sup>[1]</sup>*

### The Journal and the Conversation- Reflections by Alan Roxburgh

Journal of Missional Practice (JMP), launched in 2012, is a partnership between *ForMission* (UK) and *The Missional Network* (NA). Its intent is to engage with Lesslie Newbigin's question about the nature of a missionary encounter with the West. Newbigin's writing about this missionary encounter had touched a deep nerve across the Euro-tribal churches[2] on both sides of the Atlantic. His writing spawned movements that sought to carry forward this *missional* conversation. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium *missional* language was being broadly used across Euro-tribal churches but it wasn't the imagination that Newbigin had seeded. The word *missional* became an adjectival modifier to the word church. This ecclesiocentric conversation was steered by churches anxious about their identity and viability in a West that deemed the Christian narrative irrelevant to its everyday life and understanding. JMP is an expression of the desire to address this situation by creating forums for re-engaging Newbigin's question.



The Journal pursued this agenda by keeping before it Newbigin's question: 'Can the West be converted?'[3] Although initially the editorial team valued thought pieces on the nature of mission in the West, it came to see that these were an insufficient way of to address the question. The Journal team began to attend to local stories of how communities of God's people were actually working out the question of the conversion of the West.[4] Subsequent Journal issues began to reflect this conviction.

At this time we also began to spend time together listening to Scripture through the practice of *Dwelling in the Word*. Through this practice we increasingly saw that in Scripture the Spirit was engaged in a dynamic of what we described as *preventing* and *fermenting*. We realized, especially around our regular dwelling in Acts 16: 1-12, that the writing of thought pieces alone could not be the primary means for addressing what we were experiencing through our dwelling in the text. Our central questions were being disrupted through what seemed to be the Spirit's *preventing* (Acts 16). The question: 'Can the West be converted?' needed to change from that of what the church should do to one of God's agency: *God is transforming our societies (the West) ...let us, therefore, seek out stories where that is occurring to discern and reflect on where to join with what God is already doing?*

From 2017 forward the *Journal's* focus has been on how to do that listening and share the stories we are hearing. In this re-focusing we are recognizing that we have to give far more attention to the ways the Spirit is disrupting and preventing if we are to understand the ways God is already at work missiologically in the West. One of the surprising and challenging elements of this disrupting work of the Spirit has been to make visible the ways in which an ecclesiocentric bias has deeply formed the missional conversation across the West. This has been a hard thing to recognize and, sometimes, even express in ways that make sense to many of those who are deeply invested in the Euro-tribal churches. Because of this the Journal is, itself, creating a dialogue around this question of mission in the West and what it means to be the church at this moment (ecclesiology).

This kind of dialogue took place in the Summer of 2019 in Birmingham at the annual Think Tank of the

*JMP*. Some of the fruit of those conversations has been captured in a piece written by one of the members of the *Journal's* Editorial Board, Dr. Paul Weston. Paul shares his reflections on this question of a missionary engagement with Western culture and the role of the church from the perspective of his engagements with Acts 16. What was being made clear to Paul in this encounter with the text were the unexpected ways the Spirit continually prevents and invites us to see the unexpected places where God is at work and, therefore, why our ecclesiologies have to be shaped retrospectively in response to this disruptive work of the Spirit.

For the *Journal* Paul's reflections are part of an ongoing dialogue in which we are seeking to understand what all this disruptive ferment of the Spirit means for being the people of God in the West today. In the spirit of this dialogue, another *Journal* member, Martin Robinson, offers his own reflections on the themes introduced here and Paul's own sense that we, contextually, engage with the Spirit's ferment in as much as our forms of church (ecclesiology) are, in his words, retrospective. What follows are, first, Paul's reflections and second, Martin's engagement with both of us. We present these in the *Journal* as an invitation to participate in this continuing conversation about how, as local communities of God's people, we engage with the ferment of the Spirit across the unraveling West. Our hope is to continue this conversation through grounded stories and webinar gatherings as this journal issue unfolds.

### **The Church as Retrospective by Paul Weston**

Changing perspectives on life is never an easy process. We all live inside particular sets of metaphors and mental 'maps' that make it difficult to shift easily into new and different ways of thinking. This is especially the case in ministry, where particular patterns of thinking can often become entrenched by repetition and practice. Take the question of 'church-planting.' Connecting our ideas of what "church" ought to be like with what God may be doing *beyond* our current boundaries is a place where assumptions are instinctively made, and pre-existing molds are very difficult to break. A dominant approach—at least in the West—takes for granted what we might call a *prospective* view of the church. Here we already have a clear idea of what 'church' will or should look like, and as a result our automatic aim in "church-planting" is to reproduce this whenever we reach out into new neighborhoods. We do it without thinking. This *prospective* idea of "church" can come about for a number of reasons, but usually at the back of them lies a very effective form of apprenticing that has been in operation from seminary onwards. "Church" takes a fixed and recognized form, determined by denominational affiliations, past experience, and—not least—the whole business of years spent keeping a particular model of church on the road. But it is precisely here that we need to be challenged. It is not because these practices lack worthiness or theological rigor. It's because our idea of what it means to be "church" often comes into play too soon in the attempt to reach people. We need to work with new kinds of maps.

Threatening though this may seem, our situation is actually nothing new. Think for example about the basic differences between the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Whatever else we might say these parts of the New Testament represent different "phases" in the Christian story. In the Gospels we find stories about what Jesus did and taught amongst his earliest followers. They are about beginnings,

first contacts, seed-planting and the earliest nurturing of faith. They are *first-generation* texts. The Epistles on the other hand are *second-generation* texts. They are about those who have already come to some sort of faith and begin to describe what it means to be the community of Jesus in distinct and diverse localities. In a nutshell: in the *first-generation* texts the “church” is yet to be; whilst in the *second-generation* texts its presence is now assumed. But the point is this. What many working at the fringes in the West are discovering is that our situation is more like living in a *first-generation* situation, where the call is to an early partnering in relationships, the first nurturing of faith, and about walking alongside those who are taking first steps towards Jesus. We are not ready for “church” yet, certainly of the type we often imagine. If we are honest, we are not even sure what “church” will look like for these people, in this place. We are more likely to discover it as we go along, developing our understanding in small steps: or to put it another way—discovering church in *retrospect* rather than prospect.

In theological terms, the formation of “church” in this process is actually an offshoot of God’s prior movement in mission. Jürgen Moltmann catches this well in the words quoted at the beginning of this article when he says, “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, *creating a church as it goes on its way.*”<sup>[5]</sup> He suggests that there is a fluidity of form and shape that the church may take in a given situation, and that the eventual recognition that this is “church” comes about as an answer to the question “how has God been at work here?” As Bishop Rowan Williams puts it, “If ‘church’ is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other, there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style.”<sup>[6]</sup> This then is part of the re-orientation of imagination that we may need to learn: not so much church in *prospective* mode, as church in *retrospective* recognition.

#### **A Response by Martin Robinson**

I want to reflect a little on Alan’s language of “preventing/ fermenting” and Paul’s use of the terms ‘prospective/ retrospective’ and to do so from the perspective of a sympathetic observer and practitioner in the worlds of church planting and congregational consultancy over the last thirty years. Paul is certainly correct to suggest that the act of mission precedes that of the formation of the church. To desire to form the church too early in a mission prevents contextualisation and often quenches the creativity of the Holy Spirit.

I witnessed that process some years ago in a potential church plant on a working class estate in Britain. It was a creative collaboration between a non-conformist congregation and a local parish church. Neither of these congregations had many connections on the estate concerned but there were a few people with some interest. The response of one of the clergy was to say, ‘We need to start with a weekly eucharist in a community building.’ The reaction of the potential participants was fascinating, ‘what’s a eucharist?’ was the expression on their faces.

The clergyperson concerned was deeply passionate about the church and the mission of God and was a delightful person to work with. But clearly their desire to begin with a eucharistic community was a few

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steps too early. We needed to see what God was up to and how those who were being drawn into relationship with spiritual questions might want to shape their experiences together. For all kinds of reasons, this particular initiative, which showed great promise, was not able to go forward at that time.

By contrast, I have observed many attempts at mission that have engaged in that complex business of seeking the fermenting action of the Spirit and have sought to co-operate with that process. We can call that contextualisation, but it is much more than getting the form or model of church right. In fact it probably begins with the conviction that we never get the form quite right but we can dive into the complex web of relationships that God seems to initiate from time to time. This is more like free dance than architectural design.

The creativity of the dance never happens unless we take some risks. We have to get involved. We cannot end with a piece choreography, however well constructed. The dance has to start and that's where the tension between the Spirit preventing and fermenting is witnessed.

In the UK at the moment we stand at an important crossroads in mission. There are a number of denominations that are in 'free fall' in terms of the numbers of adherents, members, congregations and structures to support denominational cohesion. It is perhaps invidious to select any particular one of these denominations for examination but, purely for the purposes of illustration I want to use the actual figures from one denomination without naming it. Just under 50 years ago the denomination in question had approximately 200,000 members. By 2013 the figure was just under 60,000 and five years later in 2018 the number of members was under 47,000. The projections suggest that by 2036 the overall membership will be somewhere between 15,000-20,000. The slightly sad truth is that this outcome was highly predictable (and was predicted) at least 30 years ago. The response to this forecasting was a combination of inaction or inappropriate action.

Those on the inside of this denomination would argue that the figures don't describe some of the imaginative initiatives that are taking place around the edges of some congregations. They also argue that there are many other denominations experiencing similar decline. Both of these statements are undeniably correct. However, it is also true that there are a good number of denominations (or networks), some new, some historic, that are not experiencing that level of decline and in many cases are experiencing and projecting significant growth.

It is not the case that growing denominations have somehow stumbled upon a formula for success, a new model, programme or activity. But they have discovered that when they seek to engage in mission, even when they don't know exactly what they are doing, something often begins to eventuate. Sometimes they are prevented from taking particular directions. Other approaches begin to bear fruit. There are no prescribed paths, no familiar ways. There are some indications that the church in England is beginning to discover that God is working amongst many who are outside the church. There are deep questions about spiritual issues that are beginning to emerge. We are called to engage with these stirrings without knowing necessarily where that might lead. We are certainly called to be a sacramental community where we are located but what that looks like we might not know for some time

to come.

[1] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1977) 64.

[2] That is the churches which can be traced back to the ethnic and religious identities of the fifteenth and sixteenth century reformations.

[3] Lesslie Newbigin "Can the West be Converted?" *International Bulletin of Missional Research* 11, 1, 1987.

[4] This transition was described in 'Changing the Conversation' by Alan Roxburgh, *Journal of Missional Practice* Autumn 2015. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/changing-the-conversation/>

[5] Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 64, Emphasis added.

[6] Graham Cray (ed.) *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House, 2004) vii



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