



THE EDITORIAL THINK TANK: A REFLECTION ON TWO MEETINGS

The Journal of Missional Practice was launched at the House of Lords, January 2013 and was from its inception a partnership between ForMission (formerly Springdale) in the United Kingdom and TMN in North America. That partnership was partly born out of friendship between individuals but more particularly by a common interest in the work of Lesslie Newbigin, the attempt of the *Gospel and Our Culture* programme to produce a wider debate about mission in the West, and the subsequent development of what has become known as ‘the missional conversation’.

To help the Journal frame those concerns the principle participants have been joined each year by some additional friends and colleagues who together form an editorial Think Tank that offers both a critical and a constructive edge to the development of Journal themes and thinking.^[1] Although there is an

attempt to follow a pathway from one Think Tank to the next, there is usually a sharp difference in the life of these temporary communities from year to year. That is partly because of the difference in location and in the personalities that are present but also because the Journal is interacting with the constant changes in the ecclesial and missional landscape.

One notices the difference of weight between Think Tanks held in North America as compared with the United Kingdom. The physical context provides a fascinating shift in the participants' awareness of the practical and theological issues. This brief piece offers an overview of some of the key issues that two of the previous Think Tanks have wrestled with.

Maryland 2014

This occasion centred on an attempt to survey the landscape. Where were we as a Journal team, and were the questions raised by Newbigin some forty years ago still the questions that consumed us? It is difficult to ignore the fundamental question of the church and its relationship to the culture(s) in which it finds itself. In this sense, Newbigin's question 'Can the West be Converted?' remains an important question. We recognized the ongoing importance of Lesslie's analysis of the 'other faith' represented by the Enlightenment. His epistemological interests seem as vital as ever.

The concern, articulated by Newbigin, to engage with culture, rather than only to examine the church, seems to have faded since the conclusion of the Swanwick Consultation in 1992. To a certain extent the preoccupation with the church rather than with culture has been a feature and a consequence of the direction taken by the missional conversation. From the point of view of the Journal team that shift represents a major mistake and to the extent that it can, the Journal wishes to contribute to a reversal of that shift.

A good deal of the Maryland retreat was spent looking at the differences in the missional conversation as it is manifested in North America as compared with the UK. Comparing the two conversations we recognized some common themes. In particular:

1. The place of God in mission and the significance of Trinitarian theology, pneumatology and eschatology. In other words, the initiative of God, God's ongoing presence with us and God's presence at the goal of history are our primary steer. The agency of the church, its models and programmes are of secondary concern.
2. An over-concern with what might be called 'fixing' the church in order to engage in mission, as compared with recognizing that in the economy of God the church is a hugely important participant in the drama of *God's* salvific relationship with creation.
3. A recognition of the importance of the new multi-cultural context of the west. The arrival of many other Christian communities and traditions can be confusing, disturbing and hopeful.
4. Affirming that God needs to be at the centre of our practices in order to help us create a new reality about the community of the church and therefore mission itself.
5. We see a growing concern with local context, variously expressed as neighbourhood, locality and/or

parish.

6. We engaged in an extensive debate about Newbigin's thought and its relevance and about the continued value of language around the missional conversation. There was a note of hesitation around this issue, which might have been felt more acutely by North American participants than by UK attendees.

That last issue led to a recognition that there were some important differences between the UK and the North American scene in terms of the missional conversation. We tried to tease these out. To a large extent the difference in the context between a European setting in which the church has been on the defensive for a very long time, as compared with a North American context where the church has felt pressure but still commands huge resources, has brought a disparity in response.

In general terms we saw the UK scene as more co-operative across traditions, as assuming the importance of the local, and as being surprised at some of the recent developments in mission. In particular the role of the Anglican church in driving some of the most innovative change has been both unexpected and delightful.

By contrast, on the North American stage, church systems are experiencing complex challenges and that is relatively recent compared with the UK. These challenges are producing the kind of anxiety that was known in Europe some decades ago. That is not to say that North America will mirror the European experience but there clearly are some learning points.

So what did we learn from all of this in terms of the future direction of the Journal? Two significant themes emerged. First, we opted to resist the dominance of the abstract and the generalized. We will base our learning on local praxis. Second, we wanted to work hard to raise some of the issues that flow from multi-cultural settings and contributions, however challenging that might be for an entirely white, middle class, though not completely male, team.

Within that context we wanted to affirm again the contribution of Newbigin. We agreed to seek a retrospective piece and that has been published in a recent journal issue.

Swanwick 2015

To be at Swanwick for some of us was to be reminded of Newbigin and the *Gospel and Our Culture* Consultation held at that place in 1992. Much had been hoped for at that time and there was a sense that the story is still alive even if the hopes of that time have not been immediately fulfilled.

As we gathered at Swanwick in the Spring of 2015 some of us were acutely aware of the loss of Jannie Swart who had been present with us in Maryland. Jannie had been emerging as a significant missiologist both as a thinker and as a practitioner. A massive heart attack a few months earlier had caused his tragic death while still in his forties. Jannie's work on Newbigin's early career, as well as his reflections on the contemporary scene had been immensely valuable to so many of us concerned with the missional agenda.

At Swanwick we re-engaged with the question of the church in mission but from a rather different perspective. We acknowledged the tendency to want to 'fix' the church or even worse to 'fix' the culture through programmes or expert planning and tried to put that desire on one side. Beyond that we affirmed a number of positives about the church located in mission.

We wanted to find ways of describing the church acting as a 'sign and a foretaste of the Kingdom'. In particular we wanted to affirm the local as 'mediated space' in which an alternative narrative is lived out.

1. We recognized the need to change the conversation or even create a conversation between church and neighbourhood. The creation of conversation is not in itself a plan or a programme so much as a posture of openness and listening.
2. We asked some questions about what a broader missionary encounter with our culture might look like.
3. We talked about the importance of biblical frameworks such as the Luke 10 story of the sending of the seventy. In that context we saw the significance of meeting places: wells, weddings, fishing/work, roads and meals.
4. Within the context of conversation with neighbourhood we talked about worship and its significance as a space where an alternative narrative is explored and lived.
5. The primacy of the local as a place to explore what God is doing in our context resurfaced in all our conversations.

The work of Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*^[2] became a major reference point to which we returned a number of times in our discussion. In a sense, Taylor names the secular 'giants' that we encounter in our engagement with mission. His work reminds us of the extent to which all our imaginations need to be re-cast from our post-Enlightenment practical atheism.

We wondered whether future issues of the Journal might be able to name the giants that we encounter alongside celebrating and featuring local stories. Naming the giants may minimize their power. Anchoring our response in local narrative allows us to recast an imagination about God such that we can be re-encharmed with more beautiful music, with a sense of the Divine.

^[1] We are grateful for these participants. Present at Maryland: Michael Binder, Mark Lau Branson, Graham Cray, Craig Van Gelder, John McLaverty, Lynda Robinson, J R Rozko, Jannie Swart, Fiona Watts, Jamie Wilson. Present at Swanwick: Ash Barker, Mark Lau Branson, Sam Ewell, Angela Gorrell, Roy Searle, Paul Sparks, Bob Stradling, Paul Weston.

^[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (London: Belknap, 2007).



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