



## Dialogue II

# Creative mission: today's challenges

*Wes White and Ian Galloway*

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**WES WHITE:** Once again, we have an opportunity to listen and reflect a little bit. Ian will start off.

**IAN GALLOWAY:** On occasions like this we run up a huge number of words! – but it's been clear that people have been wrestling with the same issues. What we have been engaging with is not straightforward – words can be simple, but they don't need to be simplistic: there's depth and reality to be wrestled with. I have found it very helpful that we have had metaphor to help us on that journey. I have learnt new words – *poiesis* for example. *Poiesis* offers a space for poetry. I loved the idea of leaving space for people to write themselves into what is happening, when a generous giving of space and choice takes place. I found that reflected in a number of places – a sense that people were grasping after a deep respect for people. In all that was being discussed or listened to there was this deep respect for people.

At one point it made me think back to the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus talking with this crowd of people. The crowd were not members of his Church, not people that he had signed up and not all had the same set of doctrinal statements. They were a crowd of people that had come because there were things they wanted to hear. Jesus said to them, 'You are the salt of the earth' and 'You are light for the world'. What he didn't say was, 'You *could be* the salt of the earth' or 'You *could be* the light for the world' if you do ABC and D, or if you spend the next ten years doing good deeds. He is in fact beginning with their humanity. You *are now* the salt of the earth, you *are now* the light of the world. I find that deep respect for people in Jesus.

**WW:** That's very helpful – the way you put that. Let me just tie into that, and draw on what you were saying about the *poiesis* metaphor. It reminds me of the word that Paul uses in the letter to the Ephesians that we are the workmanship of God, the *poiema*. We are the poem of God being brought to show his glory in creation. One of the things we began thinking about in one of the seminars is that mission really does call for the emancipation of the imagination, a freeing up of the imagination by God's Spirit, and the arts have a crucial role in that, to help people think. We are, however, such word-dominated folk. Yet so much of learning about and meeting with God can happen at deeper levels than the cognitive or the rational or that which is spoken in words. The arts help us create, help us speak in poems, in music or in the visual. Lou Davies used the term visual theology and I love that – a visual and artistic theology. That, I think, is part of mission today and the task is to emancipate the imagination, though, of course, only the Holy Spirit can do that. The area of visual or artistic theology, I would suggest, is part of risk-taking leadership. Imaginative adventures are messy and not easy to quantify. They are really out there for people to play with and create, in artistic imaginative ways – to use a phrase I heard in one of the seminars on creative dialogue, creative dialogue that has the missionary goal of helping people wrestle with their lives, their dignity, and Christ's place in their lives.

Alison Urie dealt with some of that in wonderfully creative ways in her seminar – and that seminar raised particular issues, I think, of how mission and epistemology cohere. How do we know? And who do we know? And where does that knowing come from? A creative epistemology is present when we wrestle with questions such as how do you know something? – and even, how do we know God? A creative epistemology is also community-based, not worked out in isolation as in academia, where it often ends in a declaration – we know this! We wrestle with this particular information, in an epistemology worked out outside of the institutional sphere – and that includes the church. I think this whole subject is really invigorating and encouraging. In our approach to mission we explore, in God's purposes, how we can go about encouraging a 'hope-trajectory imagination'. In other words, God's new creation in which we can build hope around imaginative discoveries. Where the arts create a

dialogue around epistemological issues that goes beyond the confines of both academia and the institutional church.

**IG:** I am reflecting on this. One of the differences between you and me is the confident way in which you talk about academic things! It's a long time since I was in an academic environment but, nonetheless, the tension you speak of is one that I recognise. Earlier today I was listening carefully to a discussion about young people and where young people operate. Among many other things today, this brought to light for me the tension that there is in mission. Is the church the end? Or is it the means? What do we convey to people? Do we convey this: that the outcome of whatever we do has to be church? Or do we convey the fact that we are part of an enterprise which is about transformed kingdom life? I can't think which side of that I sit on.

As someone who, for my whole adult life, has been a paid servant of the church, this has been a huge tension for me – all my life. To stand always with a foot outside, because that's where the people are that I want to be able to relate to. And I can't relate to them by having both feet over here in this religious place. As I was listening to Pam Mellstrom's session on youth workers, I was thinking of Scripture. Scripture doesn't say, 'God so loved *the church* that he sent his only son', nor does it say, 'I have come that they might have *the church* in all its fullness'! As soon as you say that you start to realise that actually it's not about fullness of religion but *fullness of life*. I was thinking about that and about mission and how we engage – and what the yearning is in our heart as we do so. I was thinking of that story in the gospel in which Jesus heals ten people and they go off rejoicing and then only one comes back to thank God. Jesus asks him, rhetorically, and where are the other nine? The answer is that the other nine are restored to fullness of life and return to their society and the people they love and are living their life. This is the territory of being engaged in stuff that doesn't have a feedback for God, in our eyes.

Actually, we seem to have got that story wrong. We think the main point of the story is *the one person who came back* who had recognised something, but Jesus' work of healing and restoring life to people was not limited to that. His work for the others who did not come back was ten times greater than his work for the man who did.

**WW:** I hadn't thought of that take on that text. I'll have to think of that a bit more. That, however, is interesting – that the other nine go out in the fullness given to them through miraculous healing.

I would like follow up your comments about the emphasis on youth. One of the questions raised at Pam Mellstrom's seminar was – what is the goal of youth work? Is it to get youth into church? And I think that may actually be the unspoken purpose. I think in missional terms we should see youth disciplined for leadership, but leadership that is kingdom-oriented beyond the church. I love that text in Matthew 16 where Jesus gives us the keys of the kingdom. The Church is given the keys of the kingdom and I would say let's make sure we give those keys to youth leaders, to help us move into kingdom-mission expansion. That's one reflection.

I've heard some things today that reminded me a lot of the importance of what I would call *Christ's confidence*. The need to actually have confidence in Christ himself. One text comes to mind: that wonderful Pauline hymn in Colossians chapter 1, that has at its core 'that in everything, he might be pre-eminent'. Once again, the image of God, the *imago Dei*, in Genesis 1 cannot be separated in biblical narrative from the epitome, the quintessential image, which is Jesus. The hymn in Colossians brings that out: Christ is the image of the invisible God, and the hymn culminates with, 'that in everything he might be pre-eminent'. I love that very deliberate word '*might be*' – it's in the subjunctive, the aorist subjunctive. As we live that out we have the confidence to offer people Christ as *pre-eminent*.

I think that at the heart of mission is a proclamation of Christ. This is the evangelistic side of mission which is part of it and also critical to it. We are to proclaim Christ confidently and demonstrate and speak the good news of Christ confidently so that he is brought to our culture in terms of mission. This is not only a very strong and high Christology – I heard today some things in a couple of the seminars that reminded me of the strong need to say, 'we need the work of the Holy Spirit in mission'. The Holy Spirit revives us, and his empowering is essential. The Holy Spirit is needed as much today, if not more so, as we see in the missional impact of the first Christians in the Book of Acts. They are being led and empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. I think healthy mission is really measured in part by an experiential

relationship with God that the Holy Spirit offers. The people around me in my circles, both refugees and asylum seekers and others, are hungry to actually experience God. I think that's where the Trinitarian truth of God at work in the world through the Holy Spirit is so critical.

The Upper Room, the mission that I work with, is part of a network of churches across Europe. One of the things we find helpful is to try and enumerate what we call key kingdom advances and markers. Can you actually mark something that says the kingdom is advancing? Because of this? As we see this? One of them is signs and wonders which are the result of the Holy Spirit coming in ways that we cannot predict and we cannot strategise. You couldn't take a class in theological school for this, for the work is dependent upon the movement of the Holy Spirit. In our mission, these signs and wonders are not always as dramatic as Jesus' healing of ten people – for that is *a miracle*. Instead, we look for evidence of God at work in the present in signs and wonders. Changed and transformed lives are a sign of the wonders of the Spirit. Theophanies – the ways in which God shows up in a conversation, or a song or a person, or even in a sermon – are a sign. These are sacred intersections where where the sacred and the material world come together and, finally, there are things that are simply what we call unexplainable, when God works by his signs and wonders. I thoroughly believe that in mission today we need a proper respect for the Holy Spirit at work. We are often so limited, we must allow God, by his presence and his Spirit, to take over.

**IG:** I do think that takes us beautifully back to that whole area where we are able to take a little bit of the weight off our own shoulders. In a sense, it's not up to us. We do not have to somehow grim-facedly create something that persuades or convinces. Instead, we look at where God is working among people, between people and in our communities. When we do that, we can set aside our anxieties and our fears, and be part of what is happening and acknowledge it. I think this means, whatever our structures and our communities, that there is more of a sense of possibility. I was thinking the other day about that text in the Scriptures where Jesus says, 'don't be anxious, don't worry, take the weight off, put your feet up, seek first the kingdom and many of these other things will also be added'. That's my experience

of church, that's my experience of how things work. It's not being anxious about the money, not being anxious about where that person is, or this person is, on this occasion, but looking all the time at the potential for transformation and change. And lots of other things will be added.

**WW:** To step back a little. We touched this morning on 'the fear question'. Without escaping the reality of hard issues, without negating their importance, with a healthy pneumatology, we can say we do not have to be afraid, for God is at work beyond us. His Spirit is out there and moving. Something I heard in one of the seminars is, I think, hugely helpful here. It relates to what we talked about this morning when we were mentioning the *imago Dei*. Genesis chapter 1 precedes exegesis of chapter 3, and in chapter 3 we have the reality of sin in the disruption and corruption that follows. In one of the seminars, the question of the place of the church in healing was raised, especially in the light of the post-modern malaise in the West. Much of post-modernism, in my opinion, offers a wonderful view of cultural truth, but there is a malaise that can come with it. This leads sometimes to angst and depression – but the church can offer healing. The work of Michael Paul Gallagher was referenced in the seminar. He argues that we need to address the wounded imagination of this culture, and wounded memory. There are many stories and experiences that people with deep wounds bring. There is a wounded sense of belonging: Where do you belong? Where are you accepted? Where are you loved, supported, shalomed, surrounded? Now, the church can be truly a mission place of healing. It was in this vein that Pope Francis spoke of what he called 'the dream of a missionary option'. I like that. He is being kind and generous in calling for the missionary option, though of course I think the church is not church without mission. It's not really an 'option', it's a call to live out mission which is built into the framework of the Trinitarian base of the people of God. But I appreciate what he means by that. The seminar today went on to argue that to make that happen, to help the church become a place of healing, one of the things we must realise is that we cannot leave ministry to clerical professionals. We must try not to leave ministry in

the hands of clerical professionals if we really want to bring full life and healing.

**IG:** To close our discussion – we sent some people from the Gorbals to meet Pope Francis. Some of the group had been homeless and one or two of the group had been brought up not to see the Pope as their best friend! Yet meeting him was a life-transforming event. The depth at which that prejudice was met and changed was fantastic. So, you know, you can change, people can change really deep down. They're healed – *and that's a great thing.*