



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

EVANGELISM AND A POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

*John Roxborough with Martin Diprose, Stephen Hewlett, Julie Wilson, and Peter Sampson
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It is time Christians gave up bemoaning secularism. For one thing it largely belongs to the past. For another it was not all that bad. The challenge is now to identify questions we should be asking about mission in a world which is not simply pluralist, but post-secular.

Positively, the changes in mood as the materialist side of secularism fades mean that meaningful religious conversation in Western societies is possible again. Those arts of religious dialogue the WCC sought to teach and which some were slow to appreciate we're never more needed, now that the vocabulary of religion is returning.

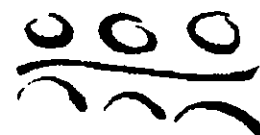
Today words like miracle, sin and grace are being found once more in the "secular" press. People of no obvious religious interest invoke the categories of theology or the experiences of religion. One acquaintance has asked "Are truth claims by their very nature religious, so that science itself always tends to become religious?"

More and more people see reality as incomplete without the language of spirituality, whatever they mean by it. Institutions once thought to be secular are providing for the new spirituality what they have long ceased to provide for Christian faith. In this situation it would be ironic if Christians found that they have learned to be so restrained in their own religious conversation that they are no longer able to take part in a meaningful and critical dialogue with a newly spiritual world.

In this loss of the secular there are dangers, however, and they are not all religious. In a post-secular society it is necessary to reaffirm some of the benefits

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and freedoms the secular ideal was meant to encompass. Secularization was, after all, not just about the loss of power of institutional forms of religion. In part it was associated with a move from magic to faith, and the setting forth of a level playing field between different religions. It was about freedom. It was about protection for religious minorities. There are those of a range of religious traditions who say that a truly secular state offers freedoms and fairness which history suggests neither Christendom nor Communism were able to sustain. As a result it is not enough to oppose secularism because it appears to leave God out of society, it is essential to ask what model of church and society is most appropriate for societies we find ourselves in. Credibility in evangelism still requires a letting go of the structures of power.

Evangelism in a post-secular society also means that while Christians still have to deal with logical positivism and enlightenment rationalism, they must also deal with the almost opposite challenges presented by the rebirth of spirituality in the West. We may find that even Christians, who claimed to be supernaturalists in a secular world, had a closed model of the universe which was inadequate. However if modernity may be a passing paradigm, it does not follow that its concern for reason, and its willingness to question and test, are suddenly obsolete.

Dialogue on these two fronts should be healthy. The contrasting challenges of secular materialism and uncritical spirituality should help prevent the tendency to embrace, not just transform, whatever alternative world-view Christians are encountering. Engagement with the diversity found in pluralism requires us to take ourselves more seriously as well as others.

In particular, Western Christians must now look to the wisdom of the church in countries with long experience of multi-religious situations. Christians in the Third World have typically lived in societies where the problem is not about believing in God or the spiritual world, but what these things mean in the face of the claims of Jesus. Here also, ancient spiritualities have adapted and survived

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A Parable of Utter Impoverishment

And I saw a great exodus from New York City. All the bridges, tunnels, and piers were jammed with the departing poor. And as they walked or limped along, they pushed their carts of precious little things.

And when the poor had all departed, God looked around and saw that they who remained in the city now breathed a sigh of relief. They could enjoy their precious little things in peace, without the burden of care for the destitute and the poor.

Then God in deep sorrow and tender compassion began to gather God's precious little things so God could journey with those who had been cast from the city.

And it came to pass that when God had gathered up the sunlight and rain, the seed-bearing earth and the life-giving air, God wept over the city and departed, pushing God's own cart of precious little things.

And New York City was no more.

Dr. James A. Forbes Jr.

*From God's Little Things
SCUPE Urban Congress, April 1996*

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EVANGELISM *continued from page 2* alongside science and technology. Islam in particular has something to teach Christians. No Muslim would ever confuse the world with God, nor cease to believe that God's world should be seen as under God's control.

The new spirituality of the West may have shades of its own religious past many thought had passed away. A rediscovery of our own primal traditions may carry a tinge of embarrassment for some, but it is in missionary engagement with such worlds that the Gospel has been most successful and most at risk. For the re-evangelization of the West, it is now possible and necessary to run that risk again. □

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WISDOM AS KNOWLEDGE AND OBEDIENCE

Ellen Davis
Alexandria, Virginia

Gen. 2:25-3:24

What we see in this story is the end of Paradise and the beginning of the world as we know it: a world in which human life is marked and often dominated by shame: "I was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid." A world in which we most often choose to blame someone else rather than take responsibility for the evil that we ourselves have done: "The woman that you gave to be with me—she gave to me..."; "The snake duped me...." A world in which human life is fraught with fear, pain and frustration in every sphere. With penetrating accuracy, the storyteller shows the beginning of alienation in what would be the two chief areas of intimacy in our lives. First, sexuality. The original perfect correspondence between men and women is now twisted into a hurtful asymmetry. Countless women

through history have experienced as truth the divine pronouncement:

Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.

Stranger, perhaps, to our ears, which are not well attuned to the mythic language of Genesis, are the curses which speak about our alienation from the natural world:

I will put enmity between [the snake] and the woman, between [its] offspring and hers.

If you haven't worried about snakes lately, nonetheless the drought and

sense of guilt. Rather it identifies with perfect clarity the nature of the first and enduring sin. Quite simply, it is this: the separation of wisdom and knowledge. We see it in that glimpse inside Eve's head the instant before she eats, one of the very few narrative moments in the whole Bible when we are told exactly what someone thinks: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate." When she saw "that the tree was to be desired to make one wise," Eve was fooling herself,

*"For wisdom is precisely these two things together:
knowledge of the world and
obedience to the God who made the world."*

floods and hurricanes and killer heat of recent years leave us uncomfortably aware that nature is never tame and often enough openly hostile.

The first human sin spreads like a stain, from Adam even to the fertile ground from which he was formed, adam from adamah:

Cursed be the ground because of you, by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you....

If you come from a rural back-ground, it's probably not hard for you to feel something of the personal pain, even the stab of guilt that an Israelite farmer would have heard at that cursing of the soil because of human sin. If, like me, you are an urbanite, you have to work harder at it. But sadly, it is becoming easier for all of us to feel that we bear some responsibility for the cursing of the soil on which all our life depends. The recent national scientific report linking global warming with human activity comes not as a surprise but as one more piece of compelling evidence that the earth is sick, and we are not innocent.

It is the mercy of God that the Eden story does not leave us with a vague

because as the Bible everywhere makes clear, you cannot have wisdom apart from obedience to God. For wisdom is precisely these two things together: knowledge of the world and obedience to the God who made the world.

We were not created to be ignorant. Intellectual curiosity is surely one of the most distinctive and appealing marks of our humanity; as far as we know, no other creature can ask the human two-year-old's persistent question, "Why?" But the Eden story shows that the desire for knowledge is susceptible to a fundamental distortion when it is not disciplined by obedience, by acute listening for God's will (for that is what "obedience" means, "acute listening"). When Eve and Adam ate the forbidden apple or quince or whatever it was, they exchanged the possibility of wisdom for the cheapest shred of knowledge: "They knew that they were naked." It is a bitterly ironic statement, one which we can perhaps understand better than we would like, as Western society slowly wakes up to the painful fact that our grasping after ever more powerful forms of technological knowledge has not left us wise but

rather dangerously naked and afraid, alienated from God, blaming one another.

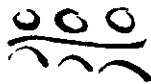
So far, so grim. But the good news is that this third chapter of Genesis shows only the bad beginning of our history with God. In some ways, of course, we have not left that bad beginning behind; as I've suggested, this is still a fair depiction of our groaning world. But there is much more to the story. The rest of the Bible is an attempt—God's attempt—to call us back to obedience, so that all our striving for knowledge may emanate not in death-dealing alienation but rather in wisdom. Wisdom, the binding together of knowledge and obedience—it's no coincidence that the sages of Proverbs speak of wisdom using the language of Eden: wisdom "is a tree of life to those who hold her fast" (3:18).

Our world's history begins with the forfeiting of wisdom in Eden. It culminates when wisdom is finally fully reclaimed for humanity; and that happens at Calvary, as the Apostle Paul insists: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1.22-24). Jesus Christ, the power and wisdom of God—the one human being in whom realistic, unblinking knowledge of the world is joined with unshrinking obedience to God; knowledge and obedience so entirely united that in him we see the very wisdom of God.

"We preach Christ crucified"—the only wisdom vouchsafed to the church is the word of the cross, and that message is utterly simple: it is the power of willing sacrifice that holds us all in life. If that word of the cross is the one thing that we who are engaged in theological study are really striving to master, then we will necessarily change, all of us. More and more our learning and our work will be shaped *vocationally*, and not along the lines which we euphemistically call "professional development." For every Christian, vocation means hearing

ourselves called into action not by the demands and rewards of the system, but rather by the genuine need of the other. But for us in pastoral ministry or preparing for it there is a special aspect to that vocation. We are called to serve God with our minds—that's why we have this education—and so the need of a world desperately ill from the promiscuous exercise of knowledge clarifies our vocation to intellectual sacrifice. Intellectual sacrifice—I do not mean giving up our minds—God knows we need hard thinking in the Church. Sacrifice means "making holy," and intellectual sacrifice means giving our minds over wholly to the things of God, despite the considerable pressure, in our society at large and also within the Church to be a little more practical. The wisdom of the cross is in the truest sense practical wisdom; it is realistic knowledge of the world revealing how I may best spend myself in God's service.

Yet we must ask the practical question: who in this fallen world will hear it, this word of the cross which Paul frankly says, "is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1.18)? Some may listen to this new foolishness simply because it is new. Many years ago, when I made my decision to go to seminary, a close friend said wearily: "I'm sick of Christians doing the same thing everyone else does and telling me it's different." The whole world is weary and sick and cannot be healed by a Church which displays the folly of hypocrisy, doing the same thing everybody else does and calling it different. But imagine, imagine if the Church were conspicuous instead for setting forth the perfect folly of the cross, at the same time both reckless and knowing—spending ourselves without counting the cost, yet wisely, in obedience to God's call and in response to the genuine needs of the world. May we see it in our time, may we give to it our strength, O Lord. □



TO SHOW FORTH...

*Coleen Smith Slosberg
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Isaiah 65: 17-23

I sat in a local restaurant one day last August at breakfast with a former student from Western Michigan University. He had graduated some three years ago and was now returning to the west coast for his second year at seminary. Before he left for what might be a very long absence from Kalamazoo, we met to share a final meal together.

I did something strange. I am not used to praying in restaurants. It smacks to me of a pietism which is uncomfortable to my Vermont Congregational upbringing. And so it was strange that, when our food arrived, I looked at my companion and asked if we might pray before our meal. He took my hand across the table and asked God's blessing on our being and on our doing, on the separate journeys we would take before we shared another meal again. There are some moments which need to be put into the context of God's care for us and the moment of uncertain parting is one of them.

Sitting with him on that heavy August morning was to hold in my hands a metaphor for what campus ministry is at times. Here was one who had entered my study and my life at some quite early age, he being only 17 at the time. It was the first week of school and he was fresh to the campus from the Upper Peninsula. His home church would fit into my study, he told me. I had trouble picturing a church that small. He walked into my study and into my heart and grew there, for six years. He went through metamorphosis and now there sat before me a man flowering into a pastor and preacher and teacher and priest. He was the future of the church and I was optimistic.

Preparing for the Future: The Issues of Gen X Pastors

There is a lot of interest these days in Generation X on the part of advertisers, educators, the media and increasingly churches. In short, Gen X is hot. What are the issues of Generation X as seen through the hearts and minds of Gen X pastors? This spring, the Perkins School of Theology convened a five day consultation of 25 Gen X United Methodist pastors from across the nation. Their geographical differences were not as defining as their common generation concerns. The consultation focused on four issues:

(1) What would churches have to know and do to minister with Generation X?

Some guiding principles would be leadership revisioning, worship as celebration, rediscovering discipleship, and Xers as agents of change. The first priority is no longer how can we help them know us and the gospel, but how can we know them in order to help them encounter the gospel. Ministry is not that which is done for Generation X but that which is done with or by Generation X. It will mean that in the church, pastors will have to let go of control.

(2) What would pastors have to know and do to minister with Generation X?

Four areas would include authenticity, authority, community and context. Spiritual formation is a key issue in the education of pastors. It is also critical to encourage mentoring relationships. Xers are saying to pastoral leaders "love me," "show me," "guide me," and "work beside me."

(3) What do Boards of Ordained Ministry need to know to work with Gen X candidates?

The purpose of the Boards is to provide effective spiritual leadership. This way of conceiving of the Boards' work is to move it from an administrative responsibility to a spiritual task requiring discernment more than simply testing candidates. The whole process must reflect this focus on relationships and the willingness to risk authentic encounters with one another.

(4) What do theological schools need to do to work with and prepare Gen X for ministry?

Changes are needed in curriculum dealing with the purpose of the church, worship, evangelism, visionary leadership, world religions, social action, and apologetics. Focus on spiritual formation, be more willing to use pastors and adjunct faculty, and consider new delivery systems using technology and alternative models of teaching.

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But I also hurt. For before me was a son whom I had nurtured and watched in his growth. Now he was leaving to go thousands of miles away and continue that growth in the company and under the guidance of others. And I knew again that paradoxical gift of all our children, biological or spiritual. I had been a part of his formation, of his transformation, and now he spread his

wings and flew away to places far from me. And at the very moment when I wanted to close my fists and hold him tight, God's blessing on his journey bade me to open wide my hands and let him go where God would lead even if that going was far away from me.

How often can I do this? I wondered silently. How often can I take these becoming-beings into my heart only to

let them go again? How often can I watch, encourage, be part of their transformation only to bring them to the time when they must go on without me as all children must. There will be others: mothers, mentors, friends to guide them on their way. And others will walk into my study to ask my guidance. An unending stream of life and growth and change, of hello and

good-bye, of good-bye and hello, much like life on the outside of the university except that this goes by so quickly, this transition from youth to adult, from changeling to priest.

There are those who take with them my heart when they leave campus but others on whose lives and thought the years of ministry and mission, of preaching and teaching seem to leave no mark. They leave the ministry quite unchanged or rather more set in the concrete in which they came to us. I recall a conversation at an early morning board meeting dealing with racial unrest on the campus. What to do? was the question. How did we as a campus ministry involve ourselves in the events of the campus? One student spoke up. "We must have nothing to do with it for if we get involved, we may be perceived as

about personal salvation, about being good so you can go to heaven. And being good means getting A's. How have I failed?

But then another part of the picture winks into focus in this board meeting where students would "stay out of it" for fear of frightening potential members away. They are answered by board members who hear those words and cannot let them stand unchallenged. "Surely," they say, "we cannot be unmoved by the events of this time. We must become involved for as likely as pushing people away, we may attract some to the action we are taking." And underneath the whole discussion is the assumption that, whatever we do, it will be judged in terms of how many people we will attract or push away.

Beneath it is the assumption that we

us, changelings in the midst of change, growing from childhood into adult life, looking to us for models and direction in that growth. And to look to the campus ministers is to live with a dangerously narrow vision, for whatever the campus pastor may be—preacher, teacher, mentor—we are not a community. We may touch individuals but that touch is not the touch of community.

"It takes a village to raise a child," says a Kenyan colleague of mine. It takes a village and that includes more than the campus pastor and the gathering of changelings which inhabit the campus. It seems to me that the village of campus ministry, the community sent to show forth, must involve more.

We are a people sent forth... And that includes the people who form the

"We are white, not black. Let it alone, Slosberg. Don't involve us."

radicals. It may frighten away some students who want to be here." This sentiment was echoed in student gatherings again and again throughout the long weeks which followed. "We are tired of talking about it, hearing about. Let it be, they will sort it out. Racial issues have nothing to do with us. We are white, not black. Let it alone, Slosberg. Don't involve us." And then I hang my head and ask my clergy cluster how I have failed. These are the people who have listened to my preaching, attended to my teaching, been the people to my pastor, and yet the beliefs I have, the thoughts I hold dear, the truths I have tried to speak mean nothing to them. "Leave us in peace," they say, "do not challenge us, do not confront us. We have too much to worry about, what with tests and papers and projects. And our parents are coming to visit this weekend and we have work to do."

How have I failed? They are no more changed than when they came. This community has done little but to nurse their adolescent wounds and coddle them into thinking that God is

are vendors of religious goods and services. We have something to sell: religion. We have a board of directors which hires a product manager (the campus minister) and then oversees production. This discussion revolves around which brand of religion, which flavor of ice cream will sell the best for in the end we will be judged by the success of our product. How many programs do we have? How many students show up at worship? How many widgets can we sell?

But then another voice rises out of the chaos. "We are not about what will sell," this collective voice reminds us. "We are about being faithful...*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a life time...*" We are about being the people of God on earth. We are a people sent to show forth the nature of God.

We are a people sent to show forth...But who are these people? Who is this community? Is it the students with the campus pastor or is it bigger, much bigger? The students come to

board of the ministry and all people from the supporting churches who wish to be part of it. It includes the people for whom showing forth the nature of God is important and all people who wish to be the people sent forth. This is a radically different vision of campus ministry. Picture this: We at United Campus Ministry gather together all those who would join us, students and faculty and staff and local church members who are interested, and we ask "how?" How do we show forth the nature of God in the midst of this campus? Do we take a stand in protesting racial injustice? Do we gather weekly for prayer and invite others to take time from their work to gather with us? Do we study together to understand the basis of our faith? Do we do a project for Habitat and invite others to join us?

This vision changes everything. Instead of being a business in the business of serving the campus we become a community which chooses to live a certain way in the midst of campus. We gather together folks who would become part of this community

and we invite others to join us. Not to replace the local church commitments but to stand with a foot in both places. And together we will be a community, nurtured and supported by our home churches, which struggles to show forth God's nature in the midst of campus. It is not an easy job for we are an uneasy institution, the church. The nature of God which we would proclaim is a nature which invites both hope and fear. For we would proclaim what the world does not want to hear. Our God sends us forth to proclaim life in the face of death and service in the face of self-service. Our God sends us forth to proclaim the value of the individual in the midst of institutional economy and the need for vocation in the midst of career. We are the irrational ones who say that life is more than things and love is more than emotion, that salvation is more than personal and God, God is more than a fairy tale.

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth..." We the church, are a people sent on a mission to the world outside the church. How are we at United Campus Ministry going to be the people of God on campus? And how will you in the churches, presbyteries and synods join us in this discovery? □



NETWORKINGS

- During the first week of June, the GOCN Ecclesiology Research Project team met to present and review the first drafts of chapters for the volume the team is writing together. The team, headed by Darrell Guder, has been working together for two years to develop a compelling vision for a "missiological ecclesiology" for the churches of North America. In the first stage of the project, the team surveyed the current position of the churches in our social and cultural setting and the challenges that poses for us at the present time. Then the team held intensive conversations with key voices shaping a new approach to ecclesiology. Finally, an outline of a book was developed that would make the case for an essentially missionary way of seeing the church and cast a vision for living that way in our present circumstances. The team is now revising the first draft of the book and meets again in August to review the second draft. Work on the volume is expected to be completed by this fall and published in 1997. Funding for this project has been provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

- The **Coordinating Team** of the GOCN has been expanded recently to provide a wider circle of people to plan and guide the various activities of the network. The fruit of several years of work in Work Groups and Consultations and the momentum from the Conference held last March in Chicago have paved the way for a range of future activities, including an annual October Consultation, an expanding series of publications and resource materials, and new initiatives in the development of regional conferences and seminars. The Coordinating Team which guides those developments includes Lois Barrett, Jim Brownson, Darrell Guder, George Hunsberger (General GOCN Coordinator), Tricia Lloyd-Sidle, Mary Motte, fmm, Alan Roxburgh (Canadian Coordinator), Craig Van Gelder, and Charles West.

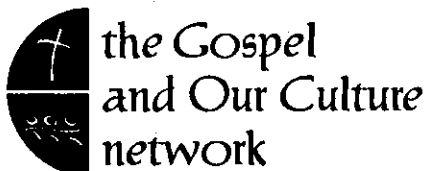
- **"In the World"** is the title of a conference sponsored by *Touchstone* magazine and scheduled to be held August 1-3, 1996, in Chicago. The subtheme of the conference is "The Gospel of the Resurrection in a Culture of Death." Featured speakers include James Hitchcock, Ashley Woodiwiss, David Mills, S. M. Hutchens, Janine Langan, and Patrick Henry Reardon. The ecumenical conference will consider "how our allegiance to another Kingdom affects our conduct 'in the world'." For information about ideas and materials emerging from the conference, contact The Fellowship of St. James, email FstJames@aol.com, phone 312-267-1440.

- Another conference, scheduled for October 10-11, 1996, in Louisville, KY, is designed "to focus attention on the contributions of congregations and parishes to American religious life." Sponsored by the Louisville Institute and targeting religious leaders and scholars, the conference is called **"Leading Congregations that Matter: Forming Publics, Forming Persons."** Speakers include Nancy Ammerman, Brenda Brasher, Jeffrey Burns, Linda Clark, Pamela Couture, Nancy Eiesland, Charles Foster, Carl Dudley, Robert Franklin, Patrick Keifert, Lowell Livezey, Penny Long Marler, Don Miller, John Mulder, Ruth Wallace, and James P. Wind. For information, contact The Louisville Institute, email jwlewi01@ulkyvm.louisville.edu, phone 502-895-3411.

- The 20th anniversary conference of the Roman Catholic organization **Call To Action** is scheduled for November 15-17, 1996, in Detroit. Keynoters Hans Kung and Miriam Therese Winter will join many others in addressing the theme, "We are the church. What if we meant what we said?" An extensive pre-conference workshop on November 15 will focus on "Small Faith Communities." For information, contact: Call To Action, phone 312-604-0400.

GOCN MATERIALS AND EVENTS

- Audio tapes of presentations at the **Confident Witness Conference** (March 1996) can be ordered from AVEN, 12310 31st Avenue NE, Suite A, Seattle, WA 98125, 1-800-810-TAPE, fax 206-440-7990.
- The book entitled *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (ed. by George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder), can be purchased from Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company for a 20% discount price of \$20.80. Contact the GOCN office for a copy of the discount order form.
- The next GOCN Consultation is scheduled for October 24-26, 1996, in Chicago, and will deal with the theme "**The Postmodern Condition: Understanding the Gospel and Being Missionary Congregations.**" The consultation is being directed by Craig Van Gelder. For advance registration information, contact Judy Bos, email judybos@hayburn.com, phone 616-392-8555, fax 616-392-7717.



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