



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

MISSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

A Major New Initiative in the GOCN

George R. Hunsberger
GOCN Coordinator

A vigorous project has been inaugurated within the Gospel and Our Culture Network to encourage living expressions of the vision articulated in the forthcoming book, *Missional Church*. The project is entitled "Transforming Congregations Towards Mission." The three-year project envisions activities on several fronts designed to encourage and foster the renewal of the missional character of tangible congregations. The project, designed by the GOCN Coordinating Team, is made possible by a recently announced grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. in the amount of \$365,000 spread over three years.

The book that provides the foundation for the project, *Missional Church*, is itself the fruit of three and a half years of work by a team of six who had the goal to articulate a genuinely missional understanding of the church for North America. A recent invitation for local groups to discuss pre-publication manuscripts of the book, and identify the potential of the vision and the resources required to assist churches to live into its implications, has spawned a number of responses. Groups are underway in eight places across the continent, including Hudson Valley NY, Jackson MS, Denton TX, Louisville KY, Johnson City TN, Zeeland and Holland MI, Sioux Center IA, and Kalamazoo MI. More groups are in the process of forming. Registrations for the upcoming October 23-25 GOCN Consultation in the Chicago area indicate that a large group will gather there for the same kind of conversation about the book, in that case stimulated by formal responses from Howard Snyder, Bill McConville, and Jim Hudnut-Beumler and dialogue with the six authors of the book.

Based on the vision of the book and assisted by the fruit of these avenues of response to it, the project has three facets.

1. *Hearing the Gospel Today*. The purpose of this part of the project is to

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THE GOSPEL IN POSTMODERNITY: FINDING A 'CENTER'

William Stacy Johnson
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Increasingly the church in North America labors in a "postmodern" context. Postmodernity represents much more than a passing fad among radically chic academics; it is a wide-ranging set of cultural shifts that are fast becoming second-nature for many of our parishioners. Like it or not, these shifts will profoundly affect the

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provide theological resources for churches seeking the faithful form of their mission in North America today. This contextual theological reflection on “the gospel” aims to fill a gap that exists in current church growth strategies, church transformation consultancy practices, and congregational studies literature. A work group will be formed to engage in research and reflection on these questions: a) What is the gospel for the people of our cultures today? (addressing especially questions of human community in church and world, God’s justice and human powers, divine

redemption and human hopes); b) How do we approach the interpretation of Scripture in and for a pluralistic culture? (formulating a “missional hermeneutic”); and, c) How does the church live by faith in the truth of the gospel in a world of suspicion and relativism? (addressing both the epistemological and ethical dimensions of this question). A published volume and study materials to assist local congregations in this sort of theological discernment are the anticipated outcomes.

2. *Developing Congregational Models.* The purpose of this facet of the project is to identify and define tangible congregational models of a missional understanding of the church and provide resources for implementing it. The team working on this part of the project will pursue the following assignment: a) delineate what are implicated to be distinctive dynamics that are characteristic of genuinely missional congregations; b) locate congregations that exhibit those features and discern through on-site investigation the processes by which they came to possess them; c) produce in published form a depiction of the character and meaning of

those dynamics in their concrete situations and a display of the manner in which they developed; d) prepare educational resources useable by congregations seeking to learn from existing models how the dynamics of missional formation take place.

3. *Engaging Systems Implications.* In this part of the project, a forum will be created within denominational systems to engage the larger systemic implications of a missional church vision. The purpose is to gain clarity about the systemic strategies neces-

sary to effect fundamental and pervasive change towards mission. The team formed to pursue this goal will: a) hold a small consultation among persons who are program staff in regional and national parts of their various denominational structures to identify the systems implications of a missional church vision; b) hold a small consultation among theological educators from seminaries related to various denominations to identify curricular implications of a missional church vision; c) facilitate a number of structured three-way conversations, each within a particular denomination, between national or regional staff, seminary personnel, and local church pastors and leaders within that

denomination, with a view toward developing partnership for missional transformation; and d) summarize and reflect on the findings of the consul-

tations and three-way conversations for the benefit of others in comparable church systems.

In order to insure the usefulness of resources produced in each aspect of

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the project, an editorial team will be formed to guide their production. With a view toward making resources accessible in a variety of media for congregations, church systems, and pastoral leaders seeking missional transformation, they will: a) work alongside the other teams in the project to monitor what resource materials are emerging; b) give appropriate educational shape to the materials to maximize their usefulness and effectiveness; c) design and coordinate the physical layout and presentation of the materials and oversee their production; and d) devise a plan for the most advantageous means of dissemination and accessibility for the materials.

The teams implicated in these various facets of the project are being formed this fall. Letters of interest regarding participation in some phase or aspect of the project will be welcomed. Such letters should include an indication of the previous experience and involvement out of which some contribution would be made toward achieving the goals of the project. They should be sent to GOCN Coordinator George Hunsberger at the GOCN office. ■

THE GOSPEL IN POSTMODERNITY

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way the church conducts its ministry for the foreseeable future. So what must we do to confront this new cultural challenge?

Unfortunately those looking for an easy explanation are sure to be frustrated, for postmodernity resists any facile summary. It is not a monolithic reality but a bewildering

profusion of responses to the contradictions and limitations raised by “modernity.” One of these is the problem of “foundations.” At least since the seventeenth century, the modern world has tended to construe meaning and truth according to a set of incorrigible foundations—certain cornerstones believed to be objectively, universally, and self-evidently true. Some found an unblemished foundation of knowledge in “experience,” while others found it in “reason.” The church too sought to base its beliefs on pristine foundations, whether an inerrant Scripture (Fundamentalism), an infallible teaching office (Roman Catholicism), or an indubitable existential encounter with Transcendence (Neo-orthodoxy).

Of course, all this anxious clamoring after guaranteed foundations was only a coverup for a deeper and more pervasive insecurity. Remove the foundation, and the person’s worldview comes crashing down. It seems the louder people insist that they command a stranglehold on truth, the more tenuous their grip actually is. Ironically the modern search for meaning has left people more uncertain about truth than they were to begin with.

In the wake of the modern experiment, postmodernity has come to recognize the futility of this desire for fixed foundations. Like the character in the biblical story who stored up for himself treasures on earth instead of in heaven, those who seek to secure their lives with a set of human foundations are sure to be disappointed. In contrast to the modern fixation on foundations, postmodernity has asserted the plural, contextual, and open-ended character of meaning. Rather than looking for a single “center” of meaning, postmodernity appreciates the “decentered” character of meaning and truth. The postmodern mindset decenters

“reason”; it decenters “experience”; and it suspects that claims to speak from the “center” all too often are but a subterfuge for wielding power over others.

Some Christians may well perceive in the open-endedness of postmodernity a radical threat to the gospel. If Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, then how can there be any Christian rapprochement with this adolescent worldview that casually brushes aside all claims to universal certainty? Indeed, many advocates of postmodernity have abandoned belief in God and drifted away from the church.

Still, the postmodern milieu also offers the church a tremendous opportunity. Times of momentous cultural change have often provided the pivotal occasion for the gospel to be heard afresh. This was clearly the case in the world of late antiquity; it was also the case during the reformations of the sixteenth century; and, by God’s grace, it may once again be so in the cyberworld of the rapidly approaching twenty-first century.

One thing is for sure: mission and evangelism among the postmodern, post-denominational, post-everything generation cannot be pursued according to old paradigms. Disillusioned with the traditional church, many in this new generation simply tune out assertions of objective “Truth” with a capital “T.” What they need is a church that will enter into their world of decentered meaning, an incarnational church that lives not according to humanly conceived foundations but that embodies the grace of the living God who in Jesus Christ is the true decentering mystery—the God who will not be possessed, who is not reducible to any ideology, whose very name (“I am that I am, I will be what I will be”) calls us into question, and whose gracious character is made manifest in the Word made flesh. This God decenters all human reality in order to recenter us in the reconciling reality of grace.

In short, the church in the postmodern age must *let* God rather than *having* God be the source of its strength. Such a church can then rightly see the cultural changes of our time not as threat but as opportunity and task. ■

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GOSPEL AND CULTURE: a dangerous conjunction

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The relationship of ‘Gospel and Culture’ is becoming an urgent practical concern for every Christian community across the world. How do we understand the two terms?

Culture is defined by Lesslie Newbigin as ‘the way in which human societies order their corporate life.’ Gospel may be defined as ‘the good news of God’s act of salvation, which is complete for all creation in Jesus Christ.’ A dangerous conjunction is created when ‘gospel’ and ‘culture’ are put together, for two reasons:

1) Whenever the gospel (God’s Word) is spoken dangerous things happen to people and to culture. The power of God’s Word is a recurring Old Testament theme. ‘God lifts up his voice, and the earth melts’ (Ps. 46). In the prophetic tradition to utter God’s Word is to destroy and give new life, to judge and forgive, imprison and liberate, both individuals and nations.

The New Testament describes Jesus as the Word of God. When he speaks, captives are liberated, the poor receive good news, the lame leap for joy, demons are exorcized, powers are dethroned, and the dead are brought to life. A dangerous conjunction occurs when the gospel is spoken in the midst of a people’s culture. Because of this no-one should preach the Word of God who does not realize that, in doing so, she or he is on dangerous ground. No-one should begin to preach without believing that in the next fifteen minutes the culture of the hearers will be transformed. No-one should

preach who cannot end by saying ‘This is the Word of the Lord.’

2) Gospel and Culture form a dangerous conjunction in a more subtle way. We use the term ‘gospel *and* culture’ by presupposing that the two exist independently of each other. This leads to three problems:

a) We assume that the gospel is pure and culture-free, independent of any cultural categories. It is wrong to speak in this way. There is no gospel which is not already inculturated. By using words and thought-forms to speak the gospel we already use the categories of one culture rather than another.

To assume that the gospel can exist as gospel apart from any culture leads to the desire ‘to make the gospel relevant’ in a particular cultural context. This wrongly assumes that the gospel exists *per se*, and that we must do something to it in order to enculturate it. But what makes it gospel in the first place is that its relevance is already plain; it is by definition ‘worldly’ and engaging. Otherwise, it is not gospel.

The same assumptions appear when a preacher explores a particular biblical text and then asks: ‘What does this have to say to us today?’ The gospel spoken through a particular text already encounters us; it needs no artificial bridge-builder who *appears* to be taking the world or culture seriously but in fact takes neither seriously. Both an agenda which wants to start with this world and then make the gospel relevant to it, and an agenda which wants to start with the text and uncritically cross the 2000-year gap into the present, fall short at this same point.

b) We assume that we can speak of culture that is ‘gospel-free.’ Again this is not valid. All cultures, having been created by God, testify to the presence of God.

Any culture is truly understood and truly constituted in and before God. That is to say, if a culture is not understood in the light of the personhood of God, then it is not truly understood at all. If the chief end and purpose of humanity is to glorify and enjoy God, then culture is only truly described in relation to its purpose in God.

c) It is a Western tendency to speak of ‘gospel and culture’ in this separated way because it suits the familiar dualisms of modernism: on the one hand gospel and on the other hand culture. Thus gospel is concerned with values, private life, the individual, spirituality, religion; culture is about facts, public life, community, the scientific, the natural world.

The ‘*and*’ in ‘gospel *and* culture’ is important because it suggests they are related rather than separate entities. Let us explore this relationship under three headings: *conjunction*, *disjunction* and *controversy* (transformation).

The Conjunction of Gospel and Culture

My primary grade English teacher described the word ‘and’ as a ‘conjunction.’ This is a helpful word; it means ‘join together with’ and refers to two or more things coinciding. Near our house at the end of the Wattle Park tram route is a ‘conjunction’ of five roads, referred to by the locals as ‘five ways.’ The word ‘and’ in ‘gospel and culture’ should be understood in this sense.

In John’s Gospel the conjunction’ is described by the word ‘incarnate’ (John 1:14). The gospel is ‘incarnate’; it is not an idea, a theory, nor an ideal without concrete existence. In my local Uniting parish at Wantirna, when the Anglicans decided to dissolve a partnership of three years standing, I protested (along with the Moderator) to the Bishop and Archbishop on the grounds that our partnership was a concrete expression of the gospel which transcends all divisions and differences.

They responded that the gospel sets forth an ideal, a theory, and that in the real world it doesn’t work like that. We retorted that the gospel is either concretely expressed in the real world, or it is not gospel. The nature of the gospel is that it is always expressed in language or action and can exist only within a cultural context.

‘The word became flesh’ (John 1:14) announces that the good news became truly human in the historical person of Jesus. This well-known text

is a way of saying that the gospel is enfolded in a particular historical time and place. It is also a powerful example of that fact, because in using these words to explain the content of the gospel for his own historical time and place, John goes to the heart of the Hebrew and Greek culture in his day. He uses the Hebrew words 'dabar' (the creative, life-giving speech of God) and 'nepes' (humanity in its alienation from the Creator), and the Greek words 'logos' (the divine principle and wisdom of the universe) and 'sarx' (as human form).

The incarnation is reflected in Jesus' birth, life and most powerfully in his dying and death. The Apostles' Creed confesses that in Jesus Christ God became truly human, 'conceived and born of Mary,' who as a man 'suffered,' 'died,' 'was buried' and 'descended into hell.' In other words he underwent the most extreme form of our human condition, so that we may believe there is nothing of our human nature which has not been assumed by God in Christ.

The Disjunction of Gospel and Culture

Jesus was a disturbing presence who caused such a disjunction between himself and those around him that it became necessary that he be put to death. (John 1:10f). The crucifixion bears witness that the incarnate One was rejected by the culture in which he was enfleshed.

The gospel offends because it calls for the faithful worship of God by a world turned in upon itself which wants to worship itself. This is taken up powerfully in the letter to the Romans (1:18ff) and 1 Cor. 1:18-25. The 'disjunction' between gospel and culture is mirrored in the disjunction between Christians and the world. ('If the world has hated me, it will hate you also,' John 16:18ff). St. Paul's incarnate mission to be all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:19ff) is so 'that they might come to know the gospel.' Which means 'that they might become something different from what they already are.'

Points of disjunction will differ from culture to culture. In Vanuatu I saw such disjunctions in the practices of a closed community, submission to evil and good spirits, gender roles (which carried value judgments of worth). In the modern West the disjunctions occur in our concepts of community/individual, truth, consumerism, dualisms and activism.

The Conversion (Transformation) of Culture by the Gospel

The idea of the conversion of a culture through the interaction of gospel with it is familiar to the 19th century missionary tradition. Protestant missionaries in general believed the culture of those to whom they preached was 'heathen' and in need of conversion at every level. They set out to seek the conversion of individuals and culture alike. Many missionaries tried to eradicate customs, ceremonies, morals, styles of dress and even of food. They did not realise that the conversion they sought was not simply from a 'heathen' to a Christian culture, but from an indigenous culture to a 'Christian culture' as understood and expressed by a foreign missionary. The consequences were: a) significant cultural conversion was achieved at some levels (e.g. cannibalism, widow-strangling, warfare); b) conversion led to a dichotomous life of 'two heads and two hearts' and failure to integrate the gospel message with the life of the people; c) the issue of conversion to Christianity within their own culture was never adequately addressed.

Some missionaries took a different approach. They sought conversions 'within' the culture. As early as 1927 Christian Keysser, a German Lutheran in Papua New Guinea, realized that his understanding of the gospel was inappropriate for the tribal people. He found that they did not understand themselves as individuals. He could not achieve the conversion of individuals because they acted in kinship communities, where no important decisions were made without refer-

ence to other significant community members. They would make decisions together. So Keysser worked with the community and sought the conversion of the whole. The book recording his work is appropriately titled *A People Reborn*.

At stake here is the question: 'What happens to the culture of a people in the encounter with the gospel? I make two assertions which seem to be contradictory but are not.

a) On one hand the people remain true to their culture. They are not, and cannot be, for example, converted from African to Western, or from Western to African.

b) On the other hand nothing about the missionized culture is the same again. Conversion is renewal of minds and perspectives, the changing of spectacles. Nothing is the same in the way the culture is understood.

Some have posed as the question: 'In the light of the Christian gospel, which aspects of traditional culture i) should be eradicated, ii) should be left untouched, iii) should be modified.' Put in this way the question does not seem to me to be valid, if the gospel is about a new creation, a new earth as well as a new heaven. In the light of the gospel, nothing is the same again in the way we see a culture, whether in our 'private' or 'corporate' life. We are citizens of heaven on the earth. (Philippians). We live in the world 'as if not' (1 Cor. 7). We are in the world but not of the world (John). We have no abiding city (Hebrews).

Although we remain in the culture, we are no longer *of the culture*. Even things which appear to remain the same are not the same any more.

The Christian community is called to give expression, in their life together, to this new citizenship, in their cultural context. ■

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RE-IMAGINING CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

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Albany Regional Synod
Reformed Church in America

What shape will congregational ministry become in the future? How can the Regional Synod of Albany help congregations live into a missional approach to ministry? These questions shaped the agenda for twenty church leaders in Albany Synod called together by the Congregational Service Commission at the Fowler Camp and Conference Center's Chi Rho House in February 1997. Joining the retreat was George Hunsberger, professor of missiology at Western Theological Seminary and coordinator of The Gospel and Our Culture Network. He shared the Network's focus on strategies necessary for the recovery of the church's missional identity.

Recovering missional identity is a familiar theme in Albany Synod. In 1995, the synod reorganized for mission by creating the Synod Mission Council. Prior to the creation of the Mission Council, Synod had focused on providing programs to strengthen the life of congregations. Now, the emphasis is on mission and how Synod helps congregations serving as missionary outposts proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God in an increasingly unsympathetic and apathetic culture. This retreat was the first step in developing an approach to work with congregations to build the church. Several insights gained on retreat will help shape future ministry with congregations.

The church now lives in a post-Christian era. Congregations and clergy no longer enjoy the social position which formerly gave them prominence in North America. For example, churches no longer have influence regarding the scheduling of events by community organizations. Our congregations now live in a vast mission field where many are apathetic regarding the gospel.

Congregations will recover a missional character. They will become what David Bosch describes as "a body of people sent on a mission." Hunsberger noted two foci. First, congregations will recover their missional *identity* in a culture which draws people away from, rather than pushing them toward, churches. Second, congregations will become missionally *engaged* in their context with members involved in mission and ministry they perceive is faithful and having value and worth.

Congregations will come to terms with a pluralist society. The church will come to realize it must learn how to minister as a minority in a society composed of many colors, of Asian, African, and Hispanic heritage (as well as European), and of many ethical values. In addition to atheists, Christians will live next door to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, who affirm different ultimate principles.

While living in a consumer culture, a missional congregation will move beyond consumerism. Church growth advocates have urged congregations to attract people by offering better and larger programs, thereby strengthening the perception of churches as vendors of religious goods and services and occasionally pitting church against church. In moving beyond consumerism, currently dominant images will shift—in worship from a passive/entertained audience to worship participation (including roles in developing worship content), and in administration from policy committees to an emphasis on ministry teams.

A missional congregation will cultivate the future. It will transform congregational life by emphasizing ministry which corresponds to a vision for the future shaped by exile not exodus. An exodus paradigm conjures a crusader conquering the land (North America). An exile paradigm conjures life in the midst of an alien culture but still singing the Lord's song.

These insights and others significantly influenced thinking at the retreat. A great deal of work lies ahead. The next task is to develop strategies to work with congregations in re-forming ministry. We have a tradition—*semper reformanda*, which will help us live into the future—always being reformed according to the word of God. ■

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Brown Kinnard
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Dear George:

You and I have not met, but I have been reading the GOCN newsletter for some time, and I want to share a friendly challenge. But first let me thank you for your project, and be assured I will continue to follow with interest.

Up to now I have thought that GOCN and other

mainliners (e.g. Loren Mead) only theorize about the coming church, while creative evangelicals go ahead and embody the theory in living experimental congregations, e.g. Willow Creek, Community Church of Joy, etc., etc. From the silence of GOCN I have wondered, Do you not know about these churches? Or is there some sort of prejudicial ignoring? What's going on?

So I turned to a recent edition (December 1996) with hope. Finally, I thought, GOCN is getting beyond theorizing. But I was doubly disappointed. First, it remained mostly general and abstract. (I wonder if European type intellectualizing is not one of the "powers" from which

your conversation needs to be freed?) Second, there were dismissive references to what creative evangelicals are doing, specifically in the article by Doug Ward.

I ask, what really is to be dismissed about, for example, George Hunter's description of "apostolic" congregations in *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon, 1996), especially his missiological reflections in chapter 3, "A Case for the Culturally Relevant Congregation"? Or what is to be dismissed about Ralph Neighbour's theology of the cell church in *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Touch Publications, 1990), part 2, "Theology Breeds Methodology"? Or Neighbour's understanding of the five to seven year process of leading congregations through transition (The Year of Transition seminars)?

For myself, I have left the mainline church, at least for the time being, and am happily a part of Vineyard Christian Fellowship which was conceived and has grown through a missiological understanding. I am 63 years old and can't wait for mainliners to reinvent a wheel on which (as it seems to me) creative evangelicals already have a two decades jump.

Or is it that you have thoroughly explored, understood, and assimilated what some creative evangelicals are doing, and found it wanting for good theological reasons, and decided the models are not worth dialoging with? If so, please enlighten folk like me who have become deeply engaged in scriptural and theological reflection on what some creative evangelicals are doing.

A READER'S RESPONSE

Doug Ward
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I would like to respond briefly to Brown Kinnard's letter concerning the seeming disjunction of the GOCN's mandate and the creative search for new forms of church found in various evangelical and mainline churches.

I have understood the central role of GOCN, to this point anyway, as being a front line critique of our cultural heritage and an effective tool in deciphering the language and philosophical movements in our day. This has already served to awaken a rather sleepy and culturally unaware body of people who once believed they owned the culture or at least still possessed a voice. Let us keep pounding away at this task until the church wakes up to embrace its role as an agency of Christ to bring a new voice to the ways of the world.

As much as I believe it is our primary purpose as church people to translate this into new and fresh forms of church life, I am not convinced that it is the role of GOCN to take the step of publishing or dialoguing heavily in church applications until it has substantially completed its task of deciphering and providing ongoing tools and forums to monitor movements that profoundly affect our culture. At a minimum GOCN must do this well and hold the powers of our world to account both intellectually and communally for their beliefs.

I am committed to reading the latest and best books on church growth and identifying what would be best for my congregation and community. I am committed to experience the life and worship of other movements to learn what the Spirit of God is teaching through his people. But I must first rediscover the gospel and what it means in God's economy. It calls me to engage my culture but not to sell out to it.

Once we have a fresh understanding of the ways of the world, and I thank GOCN for teaching me much in this way, it is our responsibility to live in community and share what God is doing to challenge us in our own setting. We are too quick to look for techniques that will translate the GOCN conversation into practical principles for our situation. I am very much aware that it is the quality of our community life and the commitment to living the Christian pilgrimage in real time that makes the difference in my congregation and yours. We hear

very few stories of God's hand in the life of individual churches and live very lonely lives as Christians when it comes to announcing what God has done in our own experience.

I trust that the GOCN movement will plan some forums around the implications for the local church but not at the expense of its primary calling, bringing the world and its powers to our doorstep and calling them to account.

God is already out there in the world making a difference. May our new "forms" and wineskins be large enough.

Committed to further dialogue.

EDITOR'S RESPONSE

The issues Brown Kinnard raises are important ones, and I'm grateful he has raised them in a direct and challenging way. His kind spirit as he does so is appreciated as well.

A few comments may be useful. The contrast between mainliners who only theorize about the coming church and creative evangelicals who go ahead and embody the theory in living experimental congregations is a hard one to use to interpret the people I know who have identified with the agenda of the GOCN. In the movement there are mainliners who embody the theory creatively and, I suspect, some creative evangelical thinkers who are spinning helpful theory but are not the pastors in congregational settings working to give the theory tangible expression. Many mainliner theorists in the movement are academicians whose own congregational locations are for them the place of a great deal of creative effort. It does not appear from our constituency as a network that it is a truism that mainliners only theorize and creative evangelicals embody the theory.

What this begins to precipitate is the question "Which theory?" It is not as though there is only one emerging theory out there depicting the coming form of the church. In fact, there are many of them and they compete for the soul of the church. Increasingly in the GOCN we have sensed ourselves

drawn by a sense of the missionary identity of the church that is especially shaped by an understanding of what is involved whenever the gospel encounters a human culture, ours included. Perhaps the forthcoming book *Missional Church* is the place where that has been most clearly articulated to date. The coming conversations about that manuscript and the project getting under way on “Transforming Churches Towards Mission” will be places where Brown and others can test whether in the network there is a naive ignoring or prejudicial dismissing of living experiments like Willow Creek and Community Church of Joy and creative evangelical theorists (!) like Hunter and Neighbour. I do think the other option he entertains is closer to what many of us think is happening: experiments and perspectives such as those he mentions have been explored and much has been learned from them, but we find ourselves reaching beyond the so-called “Next Church” for a self-understanding on the part of the church that is more rooted in the sending of the whole church, more suited to the church’s post-Christendom setting, and less shaped by the dynamics of vendor and consumer. ■

NETWORKINGS

□ Rodney Clapp runs an online column called “Porch Enlightenment” on the IVPpress site. These reflections on the culture from the vantage point of the gospel can be found at URL <<http://www.gospelcom.net/ivpress/feature/culturenow.html>>. An excerpt from the January 1997 posting shares highlights of books Rodney found most stimulating in 1996:

“Fair Warning: I read mostly in the areas of theology, biblical studies, sociology, cultural studies and history. I like suggestive books, books that open up new angles on old (or new) problems. I used to have a novel going all the time; but for the last few years, for whatever reason, I only seem to get to about a half-dozen a year.

1. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, by Richard B. Hays. Just like that, the book on the relation between the New Testament and contemporary ethics.

2. *The Lost City*, by Alan Ehrenhalt. A “thick” comparison of three Chicago neighborhoods, in the 1950s and the 1990s, that captures the issues surrounding building true community like no other book I’ve read.

3. *Raising Abel*, by James Alison. Creative eschatology built on the literary theory of Rene Girard.

4. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, by N. T. Wright. Nearly 700 pages of brilliance bent on limning the looks and substance of the historical Jesus, and itself an education in thinking historically.

5. *All God’s Children*, by Fox Butterfield. A New York Times reporter traces the life and genealogy of the man declared New York state’s most dangerous convict, and in the course discovers surprising roots of America’s terrible legacy of violence.

6. *The Frequency of Souls*, by Mary Kay Zuravleff. An offbeat novel of likeable, if muddled, characters who struggle with midlife crises, childhood issues—and hearing a dead parent speak over an old radio.

7. *Santa Evita*, by Tomas Eloy Martinez. Madonna’s movie has Eva Peron on everybody’s mind again, but for an artful summary of that woman’s strange life—and even stranger ‘life’ after death—this historical novel can’t be bettered.”



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