



# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

## Faithfulness in the Heartland

*Gail Neal*  
Synod of Mid-America  
PC(USA)  
Overland Park, Kansas

In a recent conversation, a colleague remarked that “change comes hard to the heartland.” I responded, “maybe, but faithfulness comes naturally.”

Let me back up. I came to my current position on the staff of the Synod of Mid-America, Presbyterian Church (USA), following years as an interim minister within churches located primarily in small town rural America. Socio-economic realities are forcing these congregations to make decisions which seem like either-or choices: either they change or they die. As much as these congregations want to survive, they resist changes which seem to sell Jesus to their communities. It is as if they would rather die than market the Christian faith in a more attractive package. As an interim minister it was my job to facilitate that change, make it more palatable somehow, and show them that such change is vital to their survival. Only, by the grace of God, that wasn't the way it worked out.

What I discovered in the moun-

tains of Colorado, the farmlands of Nebraska and the agri-business outposts of Western Kansas is that these Christian folks were resisting change with good reason. Innately they seemed to know that superficial changes in music style, worship format, and organizational structure didn't really get at the heart of the matter. Like a deer pants for the stream, these folks yearned to be faithful to God, they earnestly desired to be the church. They just didn't know why it was becoming increasingly more difficult to do so. What I found was not so much resistance to change as it was confusion about what is really going on in the relationship between the church and the world today.

God hadn't changed. They were sure of that. The gospel message hadn't changed. It was as true today as it was yesterday. God was still the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life and the Lord of all. Their question wasn't so much why do we have to change as it was, “Can't the world see that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life?” And what they had trouble accepting was that the answer to that question was, “No, the world can't see any such thing. While they

may have seen that once, the world has moved on.”

For many congregations this realization is a radical paradigm shift. To accept this view of the world is to look at friends and neighbors, town councils and community organizations, businesses and schools in a radically new way. No longer are these other folks ‘like me.’ They are, instead, puzzles and problems. Puzzles because congregation members just can't comprehend how anyone could face

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life each morning without an active faith and trust in God. Problems because it means that Christians have to relate to them in ways that we have never acted before — ways which are new and different and strange.

But, this is the reality of the post-modern world. The world in which we now live is decidedly non-Christian. Christendom is irrevocably dead. The world no longer knows God and couldn't care less. Once congregations accepted this reality in all of its ramifications, they even began to look at the church in a new way. They stopped asking themselves, "What do we want the church to be and do for us?" They began to ask instead, "What can we do? What can the church do in the face of this disturbing reality which we are just beginning to see and understand, a reality which contradicts everything that we have always believed about America the beautiful and our place in it? How can we show the world that the only good and ultimate end of life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever?"

What they find, once they accept the reality of this world view, is that things begin to make sense to them, things like, why the church membership is dwindling, why church school classrooms are half empty, why it is so hard to recruit church officers and Sunday school teachers and mission volunteers. In a non-Christian world God simply is not a priority, stewardship is meaningless, faith in Christ is a matter of personal choice, church membership is irrelevant, corporate worship is optional.

As an interim pastor one of my tasks was to help churches accept the reality of this world in which we live. But, once that was done, my task had only begun. For surely the gospel message is one which offers hope for the future, and that is the message which needed to be communicated—that the demise of Christendom was not the end of either the Christian faith nor of the church; God had not and would not desert them in the midst of this new world. I found that there were three helpful means of communicating this message,

inspiring hope for the future and motivating the congregation to change with the times in order to remain faithful to the God they had loved and served all of their lives. This entailed three distinct but related shifts.

1. The first shift is a *shift of viewpoint* which entails forthrightly addressing the anxiety which comes from living in a strange new world. Give congregations permission to share their feelings of confusion, fear and disorientation. Foster an environment of honest discussion where alternative perceptions and experiences are expected and accepted. Encourage them to share these feelings not only with one another but also with God. Worship, preaching, teaching and participating in traditional spiritual disciplines such as prayer (both private and public), reading and studying Scripture, and celebrating the sacraments, these activities enable church members to remain grounded in the faith that they know while seeking God's help,

guidance and direction as they strive to find ways to witness to that faith in the contemporary situation.

2. The second is a *shift of trust* which is possible only when the Scriptures are accessible to the people. For too long the Bible has been the purview of the clergy. Laity have relied upon ordained ministers to interpret the Biblical faith for them and to them. Christians need to learn to end their dependence upon the clergy in order to trust the presence and power of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Priscilla. In this new world it is imperative that the people themselves possess the Biblical knowledge and interpretation skills which will enable them to live faithfully within a culture that has forsaken God.

3. The third is a *shift of leadership*.

No longer will the clergy be the main link between the church and the un-churched. The focus of the ordained ministry will shift instead to

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## **The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter**

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with North American culture

Editor and Coordinator: George R. Hunsberger  
Administrative Assistant: Judy Bos

Information concerning this  
publication or the network  
can be obtained by contacting:

## **The Gospel and Our Culture Network**

at Western Theological Seminary

101 E. 13th Street

Holland, MI 49423-3622

Phone: 616-392-8555

Fax: 616-392-7717

e-mail: [judybos@hayburn.com](mailto:judybos@hayburn.com)

# Indicators of Missional Transformation in Churches on the Way

Dale Ziemer  
Center for Parish Development  
Chicago, Illinois

*[Ed. Note: Dale is a member of one of the teams in the GOCN Transforming Congregations Project, the team whose task it is to identify and research churches that exemplify something of the qualities of “missional church” described in the book by that title. To do that, the team first needed to be clear what it saw to be the tangible “indicators” of such churches. What follows from Dale are some observations growing out of his work with a group of churches seeking transformation in this direction. These illustrate some of the collective experience of the team from which they have developed the indicators they will be using to identify churches. Its free-flowing recognition of the dilemmas and joys of this journey toward new forms of the church seemed useful to share with a wider circle of people on similar journeys.]*

Over the last two years I have had the privilege to be a partner with seven congregations in the Reformed Church in America Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, New Jersey, who are seeking intentionally to become more faithful and effective missional churches. (See “Becoming Missional Churches” in *The Gospel and Our Culture* newsletter, Vol. 8, No. 3, September, 1996, which describes the project). This intentional process includes substantial leadership training for clergy and congregation teams. They are becoming equipped to lead processes of theological exploration, biblical study, contextual analysis, vision discernment, strategy formation, and implementation in their own churches. We are discovering together that the journey of transformation toward a missional church is profoundly rewarding and renewing, while also quite difficult and challenging.

The following statements of participating church leaders have been gleaned from a series of conversations and interviews. They indicate honest and candid reflection about what is occurring as they are cultivating their congregations to become missional churches. They are offered for encouragement to travelers on a similar path.

1. Efforts to become more faithful seem to start up and then fall, start up and then fall. Often, they are not consistent, met with resistance, hard to keep at center and as top

priority, often crowded out by operational concerns for maintenance of present program.

2. Conversations are being held where people are beginning to realize that “Christendom is over and it isn’t coming back.”

3. There is ambivalence: People are sharing their interest in as well as their fear of change.

4. The conversation is beginning to move away from “bucks and butts” to “how can we become more faithful?”

5. There is movement among people from “giving answers” to “asking questions.”

6. Existing groups are beginning to use their time together differently. Sometimes they’re even choosing to meet longer or more frequently for study.

7. People are beginning to embrace the idea that we need to spend more time on issues that are of more importance than issues like “what doors need to be locked.”

8. People are beginning to beg to talk about vision not in terms of programs, but of what God is doing in the world. Others are doing their best to try to understand that.

9. People are beginning to work through a lot of local church history and experience that seems not to have much to do with what we’re facing now.

10. People are beginning to imagine about their church, “What if we were really chosen by God?”

11. It feels like we’re putting some of the first few spades into the earth, turning the earth over just a little, little bit at a time.

12. People are meeting in small groups and find them to be very meaningful and important.

13. There are little bits here, little bits there.

14. People are sitting around the table talking about things they otherwise wouldn’t talk about in church, they are in conversation and relationship with those they wouldn’t be otherwise.

15. We’re no longer talking about the “black hole of money” or the “black hole of the steeple.”

16. New ideas are being entered into discussions and not swatted down immediately.

17. There are a number of people who are able to picture their church in their mind as a sent body of people rather than a place where certain things happen.

18. People are finding it difficult to pull away from the table because of the meaningful conversation and relationships that are taking place.

19. Church leaders admit that there is less resistance than they thought there would be to spending so much time

20. It is being observed sometimes that those who have “always been there,” and are dependable givers, are the biggest resistors to change.

21. Some people are willing to give time and thought to the question, “what’s happening to the church today?”

22. Pastors are questioning all of their working assumptions, they are trying to distinguish between what is Christendom thinking and what is not.

23. When it comes to helping people move out of Christendom thinking it is like a redundant process—it tends to move two steps forward and three back.

24. People entrenched in Christendom ways of thinking about the church are leaving the church. And it’s often a surprise about who those persons are. Not everyone is being converted.

25. Participants in the church are struggling with many other complex life issues and demands, and often make only sporadic time commitments.

26. Churches trying to become missional churches are looking for, finding, and discovering great collegiality with other churches looking for and struggling with some of the same things. They form a strong bond together, bonds that are not formed with other congregations.

27. An increased number of persons are willing to participate in Bible study, sometimes as much as 75% of the worshipping congregation.

28. There is ferment, the foundations are being shaken.

29. Old ghosts are being buried.

30. People are experiencing the benefits of praying together and meeting together over struggling alone.

31. Pastors are meeting together and are “peeling the layers off the onion,” they are getting deeper into identifying their working assumptions and working theology, discovering what they really believe and how they practice that. They are beginning to share openly in a trusting group.

32. New behaviors are being tried in the congregation, such as dialoguing about core issues.

33. We are growing more comfortable with “kingdom” or “reign of God” language, that is, “bible” or “faith” language.

34. Older long-time members are becoming open to new experiences, but also report that they are scared. There is a lot of anxiety expressed about where this is going.

35. Pastors are preaching differently. They’re asking for sample sermons on “missional church.”

36. There are intentional efforts to expand the conversation and exploration, not just keep it within the confines of a few people.

37. Leadership teams seldom take votes and are becoming more comfortable with deciding most things by consensus; they’re discovering “you can’t find Robert’s Rules of Order in the scriptures.”

38. Church leaders are discovering at some point that they can’t go back anymore to where they were.

39. Sometimes clergy are labeled by other clergy as having a certain way of thinking that is not acceptable.

40. It involves a lot of frustration at first, an unbelievable amount of frustration.

41. Church leaders are starting to have frank discussions about the church’s past—what it was and what it wasn’t.

42. Church leaders and members are moving beyond the blaming stage. (They are moving through stages of grief, a la Kubler-Ross when a death has occurred.)

43. Significant times are blocked out for conversation. They are structured, planned, and held consistently over a long period of time so that a pattern of expectation is slowly built up that we will talk together. After a while they reflect, “a year ago we weren’t talking like this.” They are able to talk about the changes that have occurred.

44. The church is identifying and prioritizing the strategic (most urgent, important, and significant) issues they are facing as a church.

45. Energy starts to snowball.

46. Persons are coming forward to contribute more money so that the process can continue.

47. A sense of great urgency occurred that preceded any change or even any movement or interest in change.

48. Bible study is going on everywhere. People are praying like they never prayed before—using what’s familiar to their religious tradition (e.g. liturgy, free prayer, etc.)

49. Conversation, consistent conversation. The church is learning “you have to talk,” “it takes talking and it takes time.”

50. Great impatience and frustration precedes the change—people are “sick and tired” of those who are blocking and holding the church hostage.

51. Every meeting is started with at least a half hour of bible study and prayer. Nothing is done without it anymore.

52. A church does a 180 degree turnaround on willingness to be in meetings and acceptance of how much time it takes to be together.

53. People discover with thanks the difference they experience by engaging around the Bible as compared to engaging around the boiler.

54. “Not rushing to solutions”—people have a new appreciation of knowing the difference between operational band-aid applications and thinking strategically, with transformation in mind.

55. Sometimes there is six months to a year of work before an “aha” occurs. And there is indication that when the light turns on, it never goes off again.

56. There is now opportunity for conversations where deepest yearnings of the heart for the church can be expressed.

57. Churches that are or are becoming missional have leadership (the pastor) who gets it and is on board. Where the pastor doesn’t get it, any efforts seem to get sabbatoged.

58. On our Mission Church Team we often do 90% study even while doing our business, wrestling with



what we are to be about.

59. My preaching has been difficult. What I used to do, I can't do now. So much had been aimed at individualism, individual piety.

60. We're involved in lots of theological reading and study—it's now an ongoing thing in this congregation.

61. Some of the main obstacles have been time, lack of focus, and not being real organized about structuring time for conversation.

62. A major learning for us has been how much time actually is involved in discerning God's call as a congregation.

63. My mantra is this, "We're still learning the ropes." We're learning how to discern God's call. My other mantra is this: "We're learning how to sail this thing. And we're going to get to practice for the rest of our lives."

64. Definitely our church has more of a servant attitude. There's a change in perception about what we're after as a church.

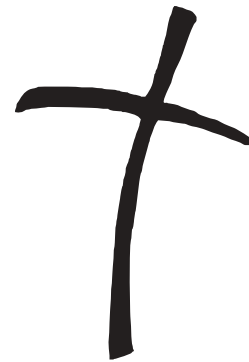
65. Another outcome has been our insistence on consensus, listening to alternative voices and minority voices, not using power plays. We are more patient, we look for further wisdom.

66. Now we are doing something about learning to swim in these new waters that the world has cast us into. ■

*FAITHFULNESS continued from page 2.*

equipping the saints to serve God on the home mission field of daily life, for it is they who will be the primary witnesses to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Change may come hard to the heartland, but faithfulness comes naturally. And it has been my experience that, like deer panting for a stream, heartland congregations yearn to be faithful to their God. They only await a way to understand the relationship that exists between the church and the world today and the tools to respond to it. ■



## The Gospel and Our Culture: Theological Reflection

*David Kettle*

*The Gospel and Our Culture, UK  
Cambridge, UK*

The Gospel and Our Culture locates our Christian calling today within a global drama. The dominance of Enlightenment presuppositions, increasingly severed from any Christian anchorage, has achieved new penetration in recent decades in the management of social and technological developments. This has generated strong currents and counter-currents within culture, raising the threat of social fragmentation. Within western society it shows itself in the progressive inroads made by the secondary, ideological culture of politics, business, education and the media into the primary culture of personal family and local community life. In the third world it shows itself as traditional cultures and national sovereignty are subverted by the West's structural readjustment programmes, the enlargement of property rights and by the impact of western mass media with global reach. Ours is a critical time in which to foster public debate focused on the basic assumptions or

'worldview' commitments of western culture as these are brought into the light of Christ for transformation, renewal and judgment. People of goodwill who do not profess the Christian faith must be challenged to recognise that much they value as good has been rooted in Christian faith and becomes precarious unless God is honoured as the highest good and the only source of good. Western Christians, meanwhile, must be challenged to hear anew the distinct call of Christ where they have previously allowed their culture to assimilate their faith to itself.

Such assimilation has brought the global threat of fragmentation into the church. In this regard The Gospel and Our Culture offers hope in its programme of relativising, within the context of lively engagement within the grand biblical metanarrative of God's action in Christ and its mission imperative, the absolute dogmas of secular ideology which foster within the church distortions of both a legalist-fundamentalist kind and a liberal-relativist kind which then polarise the church. The promise which the Gospel and Our

Culture holds in this regard is perhaps hinted by its success already in holding in sustained conversation Christians of diverse theological inclinations.

The Gospel and Our Culture also offers, potentially, a contribution to the renewal of modern western theology which, as an academic discipline, has derived its self-understanding largely from the Enlightenment. Today we are called to recover its primary character as the evangelisation of those ‘worldview’ commitments which inform the cultural context of theology. Such theology is irreducibly missiological, and requires that missiology be always theological. On the one hand this implies today a grand recapitulation of our theological heritage as a history of engagements between the Gospel and dominant worldviews, notably Greco-Roman and Enlightenment. On the other hand it implies a theology closer to Sunday’s worship and to weekday life, to popular spirituality and to practical wisdom, empowering Christians lay and ordained to take responsibility for the gospel in their personal lives and in the public life of their society.

Issues of the Gospel and human culture have received considerable attention in the late twentieth century from scholars of diverse Christian traditions, among them Roman Catholics (see for example John Paul Gallagher’s ‘Clashing Symbols’); neo-Calvinist scholars pursuing worldview analysis (e.g. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton of the Toronto Institute for Christian Studies); staff at the World Council of Churches (e.g. Wesley Ariarajah, Christopher Duraisingh), and American evangelicals critical of cultural accommodation in their own tradition (e.g. Os Guinness, Mark Noll, David Wells). Further theological encounter between these could bear valuable fruit.

The Gospel and Our Culture includes within its scope reflection upon the Gospel and human cultures in general. This approach recognises that such is the pervasiveness of western cultural presuppositions that concern precisely for the contextualisation of Christianity in non-western indigenous cultures today may be shaped, ironically, by these presuppositions rather than by indigenous engagement with Christ. It also recognises the practical dominance of western culture over other cultures and their future. Christian reflection on and evangelisation of our own western culture today is the greatest act of service in Christ to other cultures. ■

WEBSITE

<http://www.gocn.org>

EMAIL

[judybos@hayburn.com](mailto:judybos@hayburn.com)

CHATLINE

[majordomo@calvin.edu](mailto:majordomo@calvin.edu)  
“subscribe gocn”

# LEADERS IN THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

*George R. Hunsberger*  
*Gospel and Our Culture Network*  
*Western Theological Seminary*  
*Holland, Michigan*

Recently I had occasion to spell out what kind of leaders I thought the church needed right now. The occasion was a process of curriculum revision at the seminary where I teach. The Dean’s request—that each of us on the faculty prepare a statement about what kind of graduates our program ought to produce—pushed me beyond the immediate aims of the curriculum review. I began to realize that the perspectives that pushed their way forward in my response were those that had been nourished by many companions in the GOCN movement who see the “missionary encounter of the gospel with our culture” as the clue to the life and witness of the church. What began as an attempt to grasp the aim of theological education, I quickly recognized, has wider implications. To state the aim of seminary training is to state what you think leaders of the church—both clergy and lay—ought to be like. What I sent to the Dean was really an emerging sketch of a deep curriculum for the continued cultivation of leadership within a congregation as much as it was a description of the formation of pastoral character and action.

For me, the description which follows below represents an emerging vision of those in the church who lead well because they lead missionally. It is not a fixed recipe for any particular kind of success. It attempts a portrait of leaders living in faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That attempt sets a certain trajectory that cuts a different path from what has too easily been accepted as conventional wisdom. The leader is *not* an entrepreneur. Leadership is *not* about personal charisma. It does *not* have to do with surgical, technological precision. Rather, it has to do with being on the leading edge of the missional church’s response to the calling and sending of God.

This list is still “on the way.” Perhaps that is best shown by adding to it the comments of a trusted and insightful friend, Laurie Baron. What she adds deepens the vision and invites others to do the same.

In that spirit, I offer these statements about the leaders we need.

1. *Leaders who know what time it is.* They will be people who possess a discerning historical memory and an expectant future perspective, people who discern the signs of the times. They will recognize what is true of the current era and moment in the history of both the human circum-

stance and the presence of the church, and they will be able to interpret what makes this time significant within the mission of God.

2. *Leaders who own shared responsibility for the church's calling.* A personal sense of call to ministry by itself will not be adequate. We will require pastoral leaders who know the church's calling, its missionary identity, and know that the calling includes them. The personal dimensions of their own calling will be oriented within that larger picture, and their calling will be pointed toward helping the church fulfill its own calling.

3. *Leaders who read well.* They will be people who can and do read what is around them, interpreting what is generally true for many people, and what is particularly true for the people of the most immediate concrete context in which they find themselves. Along with hermeneutical skills for reading texts (especially the biblical texts), and for reading traditions (their own particular Christian tradition as well as other traditions), they will be readers of culture (and cultures), of social systems, and of the human person.

4. *Leaders with vision.* They will size up where things are and where they are heading if left unattended. They will possess dreams for the future that will be infectious. They will be able to see paths from the present to the approximations of dreams that are possible under the Holy Spirit. They will be always working on the edges of transformation and change for persons, for the Christian community, and for the broader society. They will possess capacities to help churches to welcome, navigate, negotiate and redeem necessary change.

5. *Leaders who en-vision.* Whether in worship, where a world is cast and the Bible re-shapes our corporate way of envisioning what "reality" is, or in evangelism, where the gospel is said again in the tones and hues by which it comes to vivid expression in the life-worlds of varieties of people in contemporary circumstances, they will be people ever seeing new opportunities to forge pictures of the alternate which the gospel poses in our cultural settings.

6. *Leaders full of spirit.* Grace, wisdom, knowledge and power. They will have a wide and generous spirit, with a far-ranging ecumenical urge for the unity of the church across confessional, structural, and cultural lines that work to divide. They will be deeply passionate for the peace, justice and joy of the reign of God. They will care without bounds for persons as made in God's image and for all the created world as made for God's joy.

7. *Leaders with a deeply-rooted curriculum.* Their vision for the essential ingredients of Christian growth and maturity will be pervasive influences on the personal "care of souls," the nurture of discipleship, the preaching and teaching of the scriptures, the style of administrative work, and the fashioning of the faithful community. Grand curricula such as Paul's "faith, love, and hope" or the covenantal structure of "dependence on God's care and loyalty to God's rule" will guide them.

8. *Leaders who believe.* They will believe God with, and

sometimes for, the people of God. They will demonstrate and nurture the ability to believe within a secularized environment and nourish fresh ways of holding and commending belief in a pluralist social context. They will nourish faith into the warp and woof of daily life and vocation.

## A POSTSCRIPT

Laurie Baron  
Freelance Writer  
Holland, Michigan

I find one particular point to celebrate, and also find one ingredient missing.

#2: Leaders who "own shared responsibility for the church's calling" will bring a powerful witness against the clergy/lay distinction that pervades the church. Currently we speak confidently of being "called" to ministry as really the sole and necessary legitimation of that choice. We talk some, but not much, about the church's calling, and never as the primary call into which all of our personal callings fit. The minister's, yes, but also my calling and everyone else's, for no one who is called into the kingdom is left without work to do. But to speak of being called to other work is often suspect. Instead of legitimizing a deep sense of vocation, it's often perceived as aggrandizing personal preference. It has no "hold." The sense in this paragraph that all our callings are part of the one mission and calling of Christ to the church on behalf of the world is moving—it clarifies a troublesome image and gives me hope.

I'd add #9. *Leaders with humility.* In the push for leadership, I think we risk a kind of arrogance in our clergy that may take the form of over-control and love of power or, maybe just as harmful in the long run, the conviction that they are the ones who know what God is doing. So I would like to see leaders who understand that God's intention is bigger than their vision—bigger than the church. Who know that the heart of the gospel is a mystery in which we are invited to participate, and that the church's role—and indeed their own role—in that mystery is a holy calling only partly available to our understanding and who are well-enough acquainted with sorrow and failure to have developed patience, and wise enough to listen to critics, skeptics, the tired, and the slow, even while pursuing the passion that grips their own ministry. ■



## NETWORKINGS

□ The next **GOCN Annual Consultation** will be held October 22-24, 1998, at Techny Towers Conference Center in the Chicago area. The issue to be explored is the question: **“What is the gospel for and in the society we know and experience now?”** The team currently working on this question in the Transforming Congregations Project will lead the process and open the question along three lines: 1) What is the *content* of Christian proclamation? 2) What is the nature and character of the salvation revealed in the gospel? and 3) How does the church hear, live and announce the gospel so that its life is sign, herald and instrument of the reign of God? Presentations by Jim Brownson, Inagrace Dietterich and Barry Harvey, bible studies, worship, and small engagement groups will provide ways to sense with freshness how the gospel addresses North America at this crucial time.

The consultation begins with dinner on Thursday (October 22) and concludes with lunch on Saturday (October 24). The cost, including lodging, meals and materials, is \$180 (\$165 each for a group of three or more). A full announcement of the consultation and registration materials will be sent soon, but those wishing to register early may send their name, address, institution, phone, fax and e-mail with payment to Judy Bos, GOCN, 101 E. 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Holland, MI 49423, Fax 616-392-7717, e-mail: judybos@hayburn.com.

□ David Kettle has announced the **renewal of the U.K.’s Gospel and Our Culture Network**. When the decision was

reluctantly made in November 1996 to close down the program as it had existed before that time, its assets and future possibilities were entrusted to the British and Foreign Bible Society which had been its partner for some years before that. Now with the appointment of David Kettle as the Coordinator for a renewed network, new initiatives are under way. Kettle sees as the fundamental challenge for the network that it continue the kind of work Lesslie Newbigin had begun: “keeping before Christians the mission tasks he has helped us to identify, enabling these tasks to be recognised and addressed in ever wider circles, and planting these things more firmly in the life of the church and its institutions.” There are also other important tasks the network will undertake: “on the one hand to foster further interaction between Gospel & Culture reflection and academic theology, and on the other hand to help such reflection further nourish popular spirituality.” In the coming months it is expected that renewal of the Gospel and Our Culture network will include:

(1) *the formation of an Advisory Council, chaired by Rev’d Dr Colin Greene of Bible Society, previously on the Management Council of Gospel & Culture.*

(2) *the revival of a newsletter with a planned supplement which will provide an annotated list of articles from journals and books which can be ordered from the network.*

(3) *the creation of a British Gospel and Our Culture ‘page’ on Bible Society’s Internet website.*

Further information is available from Rev’d David Kettle, 11 Red Gate Road, Girton, Cambridge CB3 0PP, U.K., e-mail <GospelC@bfbs.org.uk>. (See Kettle’s article on page 5 in this issue.)



Western Theological Seminary  
101 E. 13th Street  
Holland, MI 49423-3622

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