Conclusion: ‘Does the future have a Church?’

My earliest memories of attending church are as a three-year old. I was taken by my parents to a parish church, named for St. Francis, in the north-west of England. My memories of the church building are vague and impressionistic but they are nevertheless real.

Over the last twenty-five years I have been a member of four Baptist churches. Each of these has had a vision for their future futures and in each of them I was invited to become a part of imagining what that future might be. In each instance this has involved trying to discern the mind of God’s Spirit for the congregation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conclusions drawn have typically been somewhat vague and impressionistic, but the vision that has emerged in each instance has nevertheless been real.

It seems to me that memories and imagination are closely related. Each is a way of creating mental maps of reality; of the past and of the future, respectively. We pour our energies, time, resources, as well as prayer, into shaping a future that gives concrete expression to our shared hopes and aspirations concerning the coming of God’s Kingdom ‘on earth as in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10). Jesus taught his disciples about the coming Kingdom using parables and metaphor. In doing so, he was teaching them the centrality of imagination as a way of anticipating God’s future purposes. John’s apocalyptic vision in the book of Revelation is arguably an indication that Jesus was successful in imparting this practice to his disciples.

Imagination is central to Gerard Delanty’s account of the nature and formation of contemporary community. Delanty is a sociologist with several very helpful insights concerning the value, formation, vitality, and sustainability of community. He argues that the ‘vitality of community is above all due to its imagined capacity… in the search and desire for it. Community… has to be imagined and does not simply reproduce meaning but is productive of meaning…’ He concludes with the claim that ‘community is more likely to be expressed in an active search to achieve belonging than in preserving boundaries.’

For Delanty the vitality of any community, including a church community, reflects the degree to which is has developed the capacity for imagination. Secondly, vitality is dependent on the degree to which the discursive activity of its members can generate new possibilities and alternative futures. Discursive activity, for Delanty, is the activity through which members of a community talk, write, or otherwise publicly express their collective history, identity, and aspirations. We could say that the church cannot become what it cannot imagine. Of course, we might immediately want to add that theological imagination and theological vision does not have its sole origin in the collective activity of a community of God’s people. It should also properly reflect Christian theological tradition and history and, ultimately, the revealed will of God through the Scriptures.

It should come as no surprise then that Darren Cronshaw, in his co-editor’s foreword to this volume, highlights the need for imagination and advocacy when considering the topicality and urgency of congregational transformation and change. His concern is clearly shared by the many practitioners, researchers, and theologians who gathered in March 2014 as part of the New Wineskins Symposium at Whitley College, Melbourne. That we did so in an atmosphere of prayerful devotion and attentive listening to the Word of God is an indication that to engage in the theological task in the absence of spiritual Christian practices is to run the risk of secularising our practices of mission and ministry.

On re-reading their papers, one is struck by their frequent use of metaphor and image as a way of trying to express the realities of congregational life and transformation that they are so eagerly pressing towards. Indeed, and most obviously, the use of the imagery of ‘new wineskins’ is itself an attempt to hint at imaginative practices that are located in the teaching
ministry of Jesus and which retain their capacity for capturing key insights about the contemporary social and cultural realities of our churches. The chapters of this book prove that the new wineskins imagery has stimulated and provoked thinking and reflection in a way that is timely, topical, and urgent. The Baptist community that identifies closely with *Crossover Australia* is faced yet again with fresh questions about its preparedness to receive the new wine of God’s future. The March 2014 *Symposium* was a step along the way in engaging researchers and missional strategists to imagine God’s future for the Baptist churches of Australia and the neighbourhoods and people that they are called to serve in the name of Jesus.

Of course, as with any metaphor, there is always the danger of it being over-used. Familiarity can, and does, breed contempt. Avoiding this danger requires us to ponder what Jesus meant when he first used the metaphor of old and new wineskins (Matthew 9:17). We also have to consider the extent to which it is valid to equate ‘new wineskin’ with ‘Baptist church life’. Finally, we may also be left wondering what we are to understand as the ‘new wine’ of our contemporary situation.

Careful exegesis of Matthew chapter nine (and its synoptic parallels) will provide some answers to the questions posed here, but it will only take us so far. Even though Jesus may have been referring to his own teaching as the new wine, is it then automatically invalid to use the metaphor to say something about the significance of other phenomenon in our own time and place? The authors in our volume seem to think it is highly relevant to apply the words of Jesus in this way. The constant question on many of their lips has been, “What does the ‘new wine’ of new members, new ideas, and new missional patterns, for example, have to say about the current state of the wineskins of the Baptist community in Australia?” They have learned to talk respectfully yet honestly about the wineskins that they have inherited. They have discovered inadequacies in them but have learnt to appreciate the past as providing wineskins that were wholly appropriate for an earlier time. The questions addressed here reflect the need to investigate whether these have now lost their relevancy or potency. In reviewing their wonderfully diverse and rich contributions I have been struck by the wide variety of ways in which the metaphors of new wine as well as of new wineskins have been given life and expression.

I have noticed a common and underlying conviction that the search for congregational transformation is always directed to the end of spotlighting God’s reign and the accompanying shalom thereby promised to the wider community. In the contribution from the Baptist Union of Victoria, for example, the team of writers demonstrates that the transformational, spiritual and inclusive nature of local mission is directed towards seeking the increase of God’s *shalom* in the neighbourhood and surrounding community. In other chapters I can see that the need to change church culture is anticipated as a necessary prior step towards becoming a more intentionally missional and incarnational presence in the community.

Of course, changing church culture is likely to occur at the junction where our collective memories of the past intersect with our congregational imagining of the future. Several of our authors have discussed church consultancy in a way that shows that memories and aspirations can become entwined with congregational identity and vision. Understanding the impact and orientation of both memories and aspirations is central to the practices of intentional interim ministries, for example, in its focus on history (especially of conflict) and identity, as well as upon the need to commit collectively to imagining and working towards a shared future.

In some of the discussion underway within this volume, the new wine is readily associated with the presence of new arrivals within a Baptist congregation. Their presence raises
questions about the extent to which a congregation is resourcing them to relate their newly-found faith to family members and friends. Research presented here shows that new arrivals in a congregation are far more likely to have existing friendships with people outside the church than are longer-standing members of the church. Of equal significance for congregations located in culturally diverse suburbs across metropolitan Australia, is the reality that numerical growth has often been due to new ethnic minority groups joining existing Baptist congregations of forming their own ethnically distinct congregations.

Some sociologists (and some practical theologians) appear dismissive of church growth due to the influx of newer church members from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The impression is sometimes conveyed that this kind of growth is, at best, like winning the consolation prize in a church growth competition. For more critical commentators, it is manifestly a sign of the failure of the church in the West. It seems to me that such claims are highly problematic. Firstly, they devalue the emphasis that Baptist congregations have always placed on locality and neighbourhood, an emphasis that is illustrated superbly throughout this volume. In a suburb with a significant ethnic Chinese population, one might hope to see that reflected in the life of a local Baptist congregation. Secondly, they fail to comprehend the rapidly changing nature of global Christianity on the move. The move towards becoming more authentically integrated and ethnically inclusive requires imagination and advocacy in moving towards a greater fulfilment and anticipation of the biblical vision of ‘every tongue and tribe’ worshipping together in the kingdom of God.

This typical Baptist commitment to locality and local mission is also evident in understanding the need for new wineskins and new patterns of congregational presence at the urban margins, particularly among the vulnerable and exploited. Some authors press this further, arguing that authentic communities of the kingdom will live out a commitment to advocacy that at times brings them into conflict with political and other forms of authority that appear to be hindering the purposes of God’s kingdom reign. This commitment to advocacy serves as a test of the extent to which congregational vision is authentically an imagining of the coming kingdom of God.

In sum, what has been presented here in this volume should not be taken as merely a series of case studies which provide principles for activists who are desperate to repeat the alleged success of others. Instead, what this volume has set out to do is to build on the biblical insight that it is the Saviour himself who has taken the responsibility of establishing his church (Matthew 16:18). To this extent, the congregational activity, transformation, and missional activity that we have been describing here is actually an extension of Jesus’s mission. Of course, his mission should also be seen as an expression of the missio Dei (or mission of God). Only after these primary missional movements is it the case that we are then sent into this mission. In taking up their (metaphorical) pens, each of these authors shows that they are wrestling with the same issue of how best to respond to the realities of changing social and cultural contexts in a way that reflects faithfulness to the teaching of Jesus and to the missional nature of the church that he is establishing.

The diversity of views and practices outlined here reflects the extent to which reading the biblical texts of Matthew chapter nine is always under negotiation. Our practices both shape, and are shaped by, our understanding of the teachings of Jesus, particular where these are expressed in parable and imaginative metaphor. The value of the current volume rests in the degree to which it will foster your own imagination, and that of the congregations of which you are a part, and lend wings to the ideas nested here. If these things happen, they will stand as a fitting testimony to the originators and sponsors of the New Wineskins Symposium and
the ongoing research, practice, experimentation, and missional imagination that they will continue to encourage.

[2,039 words]

Darrell Jackson, 6th April 2015

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