

How we respond to the phenomena of post-christianity and 'emergent church' (or whatever terms we may prefer for those things), and how and where we express that in the curriculum:

Steve Taylor, 1 February 07

In my allotted time I aim to do 4 things:

- Firstly, to offer some definition in relation to the title: “the phenomena of post-christianity and 'emergent church' (or whatever terms we may prefer for those things)”;
- Secondly, to outline a practical theology model that has guided my curricula development;
- Thirdly, to apply this model to the subjects I teach – Emerging Church (Level 5, as part of Context for Ministry); Missional Church (Level 7); Gospel in post-Christian (Level 6 and 7).
- Fourthly, to be stimulating enough to keep myself awake.

1. Define

a) **Sociological definition:** Here is a somewhat ironically humorous sociological definition:



GENTLEMEN, I BELIEVE THERE IS
AN IMPOSTOR IN OUR CONVERSATION

male, hip, middle class, males, boys with expensive toys.

b) **Scriptural:** Luke 10:1-12



Artist: Simon Smith, Opawa Baptist Lenten 7-pack series

In terms of my teaching, I prefer to orientate the conversation with the Biblical narrative. Let me read to you from Luke 10:1-12. I find this a deeply subversive narrative.

Luke is written (drawing on the work of David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, 1991, 84ff) to a community in fragmentation and exile. The destruction of temple in Jerusalem, means they have lost their centre and are having to re-form their narrative. A second generation church has lost their leader, Jesus, and their founder, Paul.

- note the priority of *Missio dei* (where Jesus was about to go (v. 1))
- note the vulnerability of this mission (*Do not take a purse or bag or sandals* (v. 4))
- note the community nature of this mission (two by two (v. 1) table fellowship that is eating and drinking (v. 7))
- note the integration of mission (preaching, healing, engages the workers of the day)
- note the contextual nature of the worship; it emerges from the cultural forms of the day
- note the eschatological horizon; the dwelling around table in community in Kingdom conversation is always in anticipation of the preparation for the coming of Jesus.

It is a text that has haunted me over the last 18 months. I currently start many of my classes by reading it, forcing students to engage with the inherent missiology. By and large all of my students find it a deeply disturbing narrative.

So I offer Luke 10:1-12 as a definition of “whatever”: We listen with “post-Christians.” We eat and drink with “post-moderns.” At their tables we conduct a Kingdom conversation, offering peace as shalom. Could this be the emerging church?

Luke 10:1-12 has, of course, immense pedagogical implications: teaching as act in community, participation and listening as essential spiritual practices, learning as whole bodied, an application that occurs in the towns and villages. But I digress. This is a curricula conference not a teaching conference.

2. A practical theology method

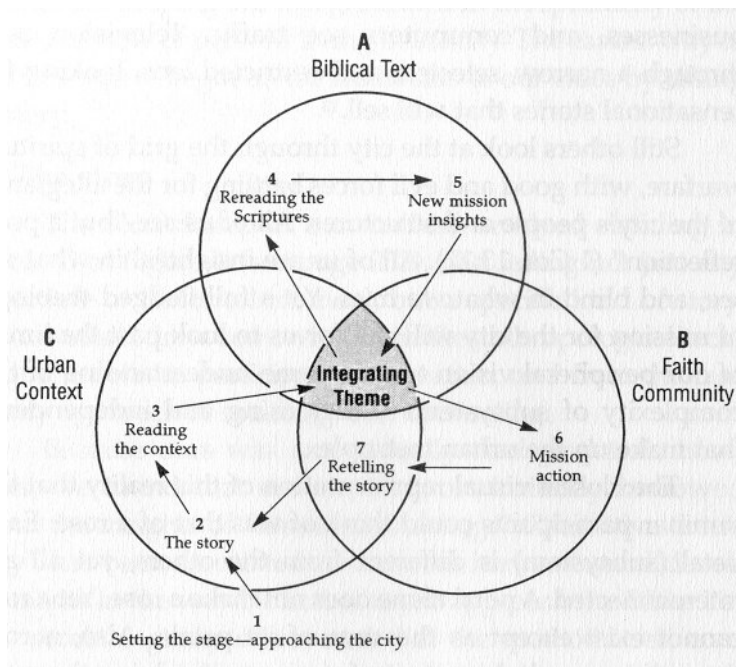
“Walking into One Conversation” by Dr Mark Strom. “Part 1 – The Centrality of Christ to Scripture and Life” concludes

“As I turn my mind to what this means for theological education, two questions come to the fore:

1. What does it mean to teach each discipline and design each program believing that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge?
2. What does it mean to be human?” (page 25)

I interpret Mark’s words as calling firstly for the centrality of **text**, and I quote; “The first question anchors us hermeneutically [it] returns us again and again to our primary documents.” (Strom, p. 25), and secondly, for the centrality of **context**. Again I quote; “The second question positions us within the world.” (Strom, p. 25).

This methodology has many similarities with emerging trends in the field of practical theology.¹ Let me show you a diagram from van Engen and Tiersma from their book, *God so Loves the City*.



In this model, which guides them at Fuller Theological Seminary, the process of theological thinking and education starts with C – **Context**. It engages with A – Biblical **text**. It leads to B – the actions of the faith community.

This diagram summarises a quantum shift in study of practical theology in last 15 years. Historically, practical theology was the application of theology; it was text, which led to action. Hence practical theology becomes the dumping ground for all sorts of papers - on preaching, worship, ethics, pastoral care. Or to quote from Mark again “The historical circumstances [of BTI/BCNZ] meant that practical theology became orientated to religious education.” (Strom, p. 33).

The practical theology diagram alerts us to a shift. We welcome concrete action. Practical theology becomes the exploration and critique of the concrete actions of the church in light of the Biblical texts. It is not text to action, but action to text to action. The theological task includes “a discernment of the contemporary work of Christ in the context of any activity undertaken.” (Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*). The belief in the Spirit of Christ as active in our world, demands we take B- the actions of the faith community and C - context seriously.

This is, to use a term from Mark Strom, “world-class” practical theology.

3. Application to curricula

This practical theology diagram has shaped the way I teach. I teach a range of papers, including a Masters paper Critical Mission Issues: Emerging Church, Reel Spirituality, Being Kiwi, being Christian, Pastoral leadership, Contemporary Preaching.

¹ Charles Edward van Engen and Jude Tiersma, *God So Loves the City. Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission* (Monrovia, CA: Marc, 1994), 241-69. Figure 6. Methodological Components of a biblical theology of mission for the city.

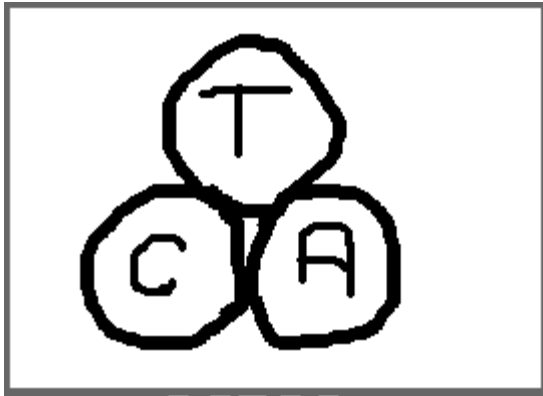
However, given my brief “whatever”; I want to focus on three papers.

3. a) Emerging church, M440.505

The Learning Outcomes are as follows:

At the end of the course students should be able to:

- (a) Identify the way key socio-cultural themes/issues are shaping the New Zealand Christian lifestyles and ways of being the people of God.
- (b) Point to Biblical and Christian resources that might both sustain and challenge such contemporary expressions
- (c) Begin to address the implications of such responses for the student’s personal involvement.



I offer this paper as part of “Context for Ministry.” This paper makes not attempt to parade the emerging church as “the answer.” Instead, it starts with the **actions of the faith community**. It ask “Why? Why is the emerging church evolving? Such a question inevitably leads to **context**, and the implications for ministry.

So, for example, starting with **action** – why does the emerging church use visual images? Why does it make use of sofas or the internet? Ask “why” and the discussion quickly moves to **context** – learning outcome (a) identify the way key socio-cultural themes are shaping.

Having asked why, students want to turn to **text**. What is the place of image and imagination in our understanding of being human? What does it mean to shape ecclesiology as a participation in life of the Triune community?

And so the practical theology model and the use of **action of the faith community**, becomes a way of helping students read **context** and to engage with **text/s**, both Biblical and theological.

3. b) Missional Church M606.715

This is a new paper I am trialling this paper this year. It has emerged because of requests from Denominations and pastors for help in our churches. So, for instance, this year the Christchurch Diocese are handpicking 10 vicars to work with me as part of their intentional commitment to mission.

This paper works from the definition offered by Roxburgh and Romanuk in *The Missional Leader*.

The missional church is defined as a “a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.” (Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, Allelon Publishing, 2006).

Take that definition seriously and one is faced with a radically different location for learning.

The course will invite students to find a context. It might their work place, a local café, a sports club or a church. They will develop skills in reading the actions of this community in order to discern “the contemporary work of Christ in the context of any activity undertaken.” (Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*).

To quote from the relevant learning Outcomes:

At the end of the course students should be able to:

- a) discern the narratives of a selected context
- b) employ a range of Christian practices appropriate to missional leadership
- c) articulate a missional imagination with particular reference to a selected context

Again the practical theology diagram has shaped this course. We start by reading the narratives of people in **context**. We consider those narratives in light of **text/s**; Biblical and theological. And we ask students to complete an assignment in relation to **faith action**, by imagining a missional project that could occur within that context. Assessment is based on their ability to engage **text** and **context**.

3. c) Gospel in post-Christian Society, M205

I have taught this paper both at Carey Baptist College and at BCNZ Christchurch. The course starts with **context** (post-Christian society) and moves to **text** (gospel).

It is not an easy paper to teach. The paper as I inherited it defined context as the intellectual history of Christian thought. In so doing, there is the danger of the gospel in post-Christian society being reduced to a disembodied history of ideas rather than an embodied participation in the Triune God.

Further, faced with modern theory and post-modern deconstruction, students seem keen to race to **mission action**. They want answers. But have they first listened closely enough to context?

I have introduced two innovations. Firstly, I have defined context not as a history of ideas but as our pop socio-cultural milieu. We still engage with Derrida and Polanyi, but only after we have watched *Romeo and Juliet* and walked among our local malls and watched advertising.

Secondly, I start each class with Luke 10:1-12. Thus the Biblical narrative constantly challenges us and subverts our questions. Where is church if we take seriously the need to dwell at the tables of our postmodern culture? What does it mean for workers to “deserve their wages” (Luke 10:7) in light of sweat shops and Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*.

Both these innovations seem to have helped the ability of students to move between context and text.

In the future, I wonder if this paper could actually function like a missional church B paper. In other words, faced with the narratives of a local context, let us consider not just a mission project. Rather, let us do an even deeper theological work. For example, what does it mean to speak “peace” and the Kingdom of God is near in our post-modern context, or to search Scripture and shape ecclesiology in light of the table talk in our smoko rooms today.

Summary:

In summary, firstly, I have offered Luke 10:1-12 as a Biblical narrative to define the “whatever” of emerging church.

Secondly, I have outlined a practical theology methodology that is integrated with Mark's twin themes of text and context. At the same time I have added a dimension of "mission action" in light of contemporary trends in the field of practical theology. If we want to be "world-class" we have no choice but to take seriously the theological skills required for discerning living concrete theologies and for understanding the concrete actions of our faith community's today.

Thirdly, I have applied this to three papers I teach: Emerging church, Missional Church Leadership, Gospel in post-Christian society.

I am sure the response will be vigorous. Tim.