

Downunder narratives: a Kiwi in conversation with the Allelon Mission in Western Culture Project

It is my understanding that I have been asked to present a concept paper, considering the Allelon Mission in Western Culture Project (MWCP), as it might relate to my context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Being a Kiwi, and wanting to foreground the priority of everyday narratives, let me start with a Kiwi story.¹ My hairdresser grew up in a rural New Zealand town. When I told her I was a Baptist pastor, she told me she loved Baptist churches. However, to my surprise, it was not the local youth group that had captured her heart. Instead, it was the second-hand clothing shop. As she calmly snipped, she told me how she frequented a Baptist second-hand clothing shop, searching for cheap clothes that she could stitch and tuck, creating something new and wanted out of something old and cast aside.

Now, pause for a moment to consider this story from the perspective of my hair dresser's rural Baptist church. They had most likely held a church meeting and initiated an exciting new missionary strategy to reach their community, by running a second-hand clothing shop as a community ministry.

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As we gather to consider Mission in Western Culture, my hairdresser both encourages me and warns me. I am encouraged because within Western culture, are people, and churches, like my hairdresser, already creative, resilient, and capable of surprising acts of re-formation. I am warned that we need to focus not on "strategy" - the ways institutions seek to organize the reality of others, but "tactics" - to partner with what people are already doing with these external strategies in everyday life.²

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Proposed methodologies

Everyday practices: Michel de Certeau

Certeau was a Jesuit priest who began as a historian studying how church mystics had responded to cultural change. Then, as a lecturer in France in 1968, he watched his nation crippled by the protests of his students. Many people date the start of postmodernity to the 1960s, and Certeau, observing his students, began to reflect on cultural change, no longer historical, but everyday and contemporary. In 1974, Certeau was employed by the Government to research changes in contemporary culture.

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How to listen to the culture? Certeau argued that you needed to listen to the stories of everyday life. This is seen most clearly in his *Practices of Everyday Life*. He researched culture by observing practices, how people walked, shopped, cooked and ate together. For Certeau, such everyday narratives of shopping and cooking could be used to "excavate" social meaning.

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His work has a number of applications for the MWCP.

1. We engage with "tactics," the practices and products of my hairdresser, rather than the "strategies" of how we can bring about change.
2. It resonates with the missiology of Luke 10, that we start by listening.

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¹ Drawn from Steve Taylor, *Out of Bounds Church? Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change*, Zondervan, 2005, Postcard 2.

² Using concepts of Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984.

3. It allows us to listen respectfully, in a way in which the Other can be encountered as the Other, without colonising or dominating.
4. It does not foreclose the potential for change: as Certeau argues that it allows the researcher “to go beyond the narrative of personal experience in order to extend the field of investigation to the social dimension of the present, by specifying the social differences that emerge.”³

Cultural change through imaginative religious practice: Graham Ward:

Not everyone would accept Certeau’s theological credentials. Thus I find it fascinating how Certeau’s methodologies are taken up theologically by Graham Ward’s *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*.⁴ What Certeau starts, Ward expands, providing an intellectually sophisticated and theologically credible foundation upon which the MWCP might build.⁵ Let me attempt a brief summary.

Ward argues that all knowing demands a *standpoint*, defined as a shared knowledge arising from a tradition of reflection and articulation.⁶ Having a *standpoint* demands an enculturated participation, for “cultural negotiation is always syncretistic. In fact, the very hope for cultural transformation lies within this syncretistic process.”⁷ With application to the MWCP, the only way to proceed is not by a mission **to**, but a mission **in**, a [Western] culture.

This then raises the question: if you have a *standpoint*, and enter into mission “in” a culture, how do cultures change? Or in Ward’s words, how might Christianity become “a transformative public practice with respect to the cultures that contextualise it?”⁸ (Surely we can hear Newbigin applauding such a public missiology?)

Ward employs hermeneutics, tracing the manner in which dwelling in a standpoint then relies upon engaging in embedded readings both from, and within.

Cultural change proceeds via cultural hermeneutics. Critique operates within these micro-modifications. Critique is constituted in the interpretative act ... any critique is an internal reflection within an ongoing process of transformation that issues from/in reading, citing, reciting and interpreting various cultural activities.⁹

This has strong echoes of Certeau’s work, and his belief in the potential of tactics and everyday “making do” to subvert the strategies of dominant readings.

Having explored how cultures change, Ward then seeks to outline the relationship between religious practices and cultural transformation. He argues that while hermeneutics is the doorway through which cultural change happens, the door handle is the *poiesis* that is everyday practices. Ward outlines culture as a shared “social imaginary.”¹⁰ People are persuaded into the social imaginary

³ Certeau and Giard, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, viii-ix.

⁴ Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

⁵ Classical theological themes including Trinity, Incarnation, pneumatology are evident in Ward’s work, undergirding his call for embodied and imaginative participation in Christ and through the Spirit in the ordinary, everyday narratives of people’s lives.

⁶ He is drawing on the work of Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991 and Nancy Hartstock, *Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

While using their notions of shared knowledge, Ward probes further around the relationships between individual reflected experiences and patterns of belief, and issues including who legitimates and how to conduct negotiations with other standpoints.

⁷ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 16.

⁸ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 61.

⁹ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 63.

¹⁰ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 119.

through imagination. At this point Ward draws upon (yet expands) Paul Ricoeur.¹¹ In essence (crudely summarising pages of dense theological argument), given an embedded standpoint, all people are faced with the possibility that, when made aware of their particularity and limitations, they might undergo a sort of “rupture.” As the rupture is embraced and experienced, new meanings and ways of grasping reality can be generated. A space develops between what is, and what might be. For Ward

What imagination does is glimpse the new possibilities for meaning that metaphor provokes ... to glimpse alternative and perhaps better possibilities ... to fashion different social imaginaries...[to] open up new possibilities, new relationships ... new ways to perceive, desire, interpret and rethink the world.¹²

Thus the imagination is the key to cultural transformation.

Ward points to the way that such acts of imagination are located in practices: what he defines as “any embedded act of meaning and communication operates within, and is invoked by, certain sets of social and cultural forces.”¹³ Thus practices are the door handle which open up change.

Ward uses the example of seeing a homeless person, whether in person or through the media. This act of seeing has the potential to destabilise one’s existing shared “social imaginary,” and lead to acts of resistance against the dominant social imaginary.

I propose some direct application for the Allelon MWCP.

1. Change can only happen by a mission **in** Western culture.
2. Existing congregational systems are standpoints.
3. It will be impossible to measure the extent to which a culture is transformed, for no one person or agency or standpoint can control the message. Instead assessment can occur only as “the transformations themselves bear witness to effective agency.”¹⁴ Our assessment criteria will be the mapping of changes in congregations, not whether a community or nation is “redeemed.”
4. We must beware the danger of an ecclesial centrism, for, in the words of Ward, “God became incarnate that the world might be saved, not that the Church might be founded.”¹⁵
5. The MCWP needs to focus not on *strategies* but on what Certeau defines as *tactics* and Ward as *practices that engage the imagination*. I am reminded again of the comment made by Ursula Green at our 2006 Consultation, noting that change had occurred in her congregational system through song and liturgy. Most of us are highly skilled at academic articles, yet somehow we need to background such work and instead foreground *practices that engage the imagination*. This should include engaging poets and songwriters and creative liturgists around our project.

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Let me return to my hairdresser.

National design

Looking for existing “hairdressers”

One implication of Ward and Certeau is that all over Western culture, are creative, resilient people, and churches, capable of surprising acts of re-formation. Thus we need to search for already

¹¹ Where Ward differs from Ricoeur is that Ricoeur locates motivation within the individual. In contrast, Ward locates it in the standpoint. Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 140-1.

¹² Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 132, 154-5.

¹³ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 8.

¹⁴ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 112.

¹⁵ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 58.

existing examples of local congregations working toward naming their narratives. I am encouraged by the following:¹⁶

1. Mark Lau Branson explaining how the processes of appreciative enquiry, as **the intentional asking of questions**¹⁷, can be applied in existing congregational context, and, in so doing, had generated new imaginations.¹⁸
2. Steve Taylor reading the **every[Sun]day worshipping practices** of a congregation as a way of unlocking everyday narratives, and, in so doing, laying open the narratives of a community.¹⁹
3. Fyfe Blair **visually** mapping his geographic locale and bringing this into his church annual meeting, as a way of accessing the geographic narratives that are shaping his community.²⁰
4. John Davies **walking** his community, using a range of randomized methods,²¹ and gaining a focus on the everyday narratives of his community.²² This includes a delightful piece of what might be called “rubbish bin” theology, in which the everyday practice of putting out rubbish becomes a theological narration.²³

Returning to Ward, he argues that there “is then a twofold work for those projects involved in developing transformative practices of hope: the work of generating new imaginary significations and the work of forming institutions that mark such significations.”²⁴

Each of the above are already (like my hairdresser, and in Ward’s words) “generating new imaginary significations.” Perhaps part of the role of MWCP will be to firstly capture such stories and secondly offer workbooks which outline how such everyday narratives can be generated. Equally, while each of the above is “generating new imaginary significations” they have not automatically led to the “forming [of] institutions that mark such significations.” Perhaps the MWCP can also offer leadership coaching around moving from generating to forming. These might include the following:

1. participation, engaging the congregation in such generating and forming
2. mirroring, helping a congregation see themselves clearly as their everyday narratives are articulated
3. engaging, the everyday narratives with Biblical text
4. managing, the inevitable conflicts as “rupture” occurs
5. change processes, by which new imaginations are named, tested, evaluated and so formed

A next step?

What I am suggesting is that we might need to take seriously existing tactics of reading everyday narratives. So rather than propose some grand strategy for New Zealand, let me articulate an emerging narrative.

¹⁶ Drawn from Steve Taylor, “Lecture gathering 4: Eating and drinking. Dwelling and discerning local narratives: mapping your landscape,” Missional Church Leadership course, Bible College of New Zealand, 2007.

¹⁷ For example: When were you most alive, most motivated and excited about your involvement? What do you value most about this church? Make three wishes for the future of the church.

¹⁸ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversation. Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, Alban Institute, 2004.

¹⁹ Steve Taylor, *A New Way of Being Church*, University of Otago, PhD Thesis, 2004.

²⁰ <http://fyfeblair.blogspot.com/2006/09/this-familiar-place.html>

²¹ For example allowing a dog to take you for a walk, first left, first right, first left etc, going to extremes (lowest to highest, ugliest to most beautiful, saddest to happiest), cut up the map into grids, put in a box, shake and chose 2 pieces to start and end.

²² http://www.johndavies.org/articles/article_05_02_15_towards1.html

²³ <http://www.johndavies.org/sermons/talk-gb-iona-06-1.html>

²⁴ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 146.

The Baptist denomination is one of the largest numerically in terms of church attendance in New Zealand. While in recent years it has adopted a fairly modernist approach to consultancy and change, in March I was invited, along with a number of other leaders, to consider the need for fresh innovation around missional questions.

I sat and listened in surprise to a group of senior leaders describe their desire for a conference that would shape itself as an ongoing conversation, that would listen to mission stories from the edge, in the hope of seeing mission change within Baptist Churches and New Zealand.²⁵ Titled **Sharpening the edge**, it began to form around seven recently formed mission stories from the edge. Seeking diversity, they brainstormed around categories of mission as entrepreneurial, ethnic, new forms, re-missionalisation, multi-congregational, school based, suburban.

It seemed to me that this was a similar conversation to that being sought by MWCP, so I suggested the following processes be implemented:

1. Before the conference, an independent researcher provides some background for each story. This is the start of “core drilling” into a local context.²⁶
2. The story of the community would be told at the conference. It is accompanied by a written presentation of the “core drilling” research from (1) and so, while a local congregation narrative is told, it is already located within a context.
3. Following each story, a listening panel be invited to reflect on a prepared set of questions.²⁷ A set of shared questions would serve to focus our conference conversation. It could also have a wider benefit, for if the conference happens again, or a similar conference were to happen in other countries, then the same questions could be asked, and an international body of data would be built. At the conclusion of the conference, the panel be drawn together and a facilitator seek to draw together what would be heard theologically and missiologically, in regard to leadership in mission; and what would be the mission questions that have arisen and need to be addressed.
4. That an international Allelon presence be requested (in this case Alan Roxburgh) to serve as a listener and reflector. They would be offered space to give feedback on what they are hearing about mission in New Zealand and to make suggestions that might enhance future conversations.

The danger is that this merely gets at the everyday narrative of the storytelling leader of the church. Yet it does open up a number of outcomes.

1. It starts the process of “core drilling” into local narratives, potentially helping us identify not just existing leaders, but congregations interested in the ongoing MWCP project.
2. It frees stories of new significations, particularly if each story is podcasted.
3. It places these stories in critical mutual dialogue with theology and missiology, allowing us to get to the narratives behind the narratives.
4. It seeks to generate new mission research out of existing significations.
5. If seen as only the beginning of a process, it could open up the potential for leadership development to occur around the “ruptures” that will emerge from these processes, thus allowing a process of journey with a congregation over time.

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²⁵ It will be Baptist in energy, but open to all, and indeed, deliberately seek stories from other denominational systems.

²⁶ Questions include both qualitative questions that establish a baseline of information, along with quantitative questions that start to access the everyday narratives. For example; “Tell me about a Bible passage that has been important to your church, and how it has formed you,” “Describe an act of worship, a song, a way of being together as a group of God’s people that is significant to your church,” “List ways in which your church connects with others “outside” the church,” “Describe a time when you did this really well.”

²⁷ These are still to be developed, but might include: What are the theological themes that you are hearing through this mission story? What are the leadership images at work? What are the mission lessons being learnt?

6. It potentially allows, through Allelon representation and through the development of shared initial research and shared panel questions, a form of handshaking and standardisation across countries, opening up an international conversation.

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This is a delicate exercise, negotiating between an emerging local narrative and the MWCP. Both might be diluted, or one might overpower the other. But it does seem to me that there are significant synergies and that it does provide a way to follow the methodologies offered to us by Ward and Certeau, and start the MWCP not as a “strategy,” but as a partnership with existing “tactics.”

Conclusion

In summary, it is my understanding that the MWCP gathers around Newbiggin’s call to the church to the task of Western re-missionalisation.

In this paper I have used the story of my hairdresser as a local narrative to remind us of the need in this re-missionalisation task to resist becoming part of another “strategy”, and instead to seek ways to partner with existing tactics of “making do.” I have outlined two methodologies that I think might be helpful. The work of Ward and Certeau offer us a constructive research methodology, by inviting us to pursue mission in Western culture by listening, to *lex orandi, lex credendi*, to the practices of local communities, for “what transformative practices of hope and desire produce is embodiment; they fashion the body of Christ.”²⁸

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I have cited a number of existing examples, which perhaps suggest that there is a need to focus on the skills of being a missional leader that can allow [interplay](#) between narrating new significations and the forming of institutions. I have outlined one process emerging in New Zealand, and wondered if this might provide a way of practicing our methodologies and allow the MWCP to partner, resource and enhance existing national initiatives.

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Or it might be that this paper merely demonstrates that I, as a Kiwi bird, should simply remain flightless, and back in New Zealand, enjoying regular hair cuts.

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²⁸ Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 170