Editorial

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“Missional theology” has produced a flowering of work at the interface of mission studies with biblical and doctrinal studies in recent years, especially in North America. The key vehicle of its development has been the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), founded in 1987.¹ The theological link between mission and theology that it expresses goes back to the theology of “the missionary nature of the church”, as described at the Willingen (Germany) meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1952 and developed as a theology of *missio Dei*. Although North Americans were involved in the Willingen meeting, contemporary missional theology is the result of a more recent encounter with the work of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin was involved in drafting the theological statement from Willingen on “the missionary calling of the church” (IMC 1953) and oversaw the integration of mission into the World Council of Churches in 1961 with the aim of fulfilling this insight. But GOCN is a result of his later challenge to the churches of the West to “a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and [European and North American] culture” (Newbigin 1986: 1). As Newbigin’s challenge was taken up in North America, the use of the word “missional” can be traced to the seminal work *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell Guder (1998).

However, the current penchant for missional theology faces some challenges. I will mention two issues here: the word “missional” and the Euro-centric nature of missional theology discourse. First, the word “missional” was adopted to avoid the problems of the adjective “missionary,” which evoked the Christendom paradigm (Guder 1998: 3–7). Although Guder and his colleagues were using missional mainly in the sense of oriented toward mission, missional can also carry an activist meaning somewhat different from the rather passive “missionary nature of the church.” Rather than focusing on how the church is being sent, missional draws attention to the purpose for which mission is done. This latter usage is evident, for example, in Christopher J.H. Wright’s

¹ See <https://gocn.org/>.

monumental work *The Mission of God*, which follows earlier eschatological exegesis in aiming to show how the Bible has a metanarrative of mission. In this context, Wright defines mission not by its root meaning of “send” as in John 20:21 (“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” NRSV), but by its common English meaning of “a long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieved through proximate objectives and planned actions” (Wright 2006: 23). So when Wright refers to the mission of God, he means that “The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal-oriented” (2006: 63) rather than that God sends. Of course, God does not send without purpose, but focusing on the ultimate purposes may neglect the sending of Christ and the witness of the New Testament to the way Jesus lived. Although this is far from the intention of Wright, who is an ethicist, this use of “missional” confuses Christian mission with contemporary business practices (as recognized by Van Gelder and Zscheile 2011: 43–44). When applied to the church, it stresses the agency of the church and is concerned about its purposefulness and effectiveness. So it often appears that, rather than serving the *missio Dei*, missional church is about producing or engineering successful local churches through leadership, planning and structures (cf. Gelder and Zscheile 2011: 44, 89–90). The corporate use of the word “mission” is as important to resist as the colonial one. Neither has much to do with mission as demonstrated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and enjoined on his first disciples.

A second problem for missional theology is the Euro-centric nature of current missional theology discourse and the expectation of European agency in re-expressing the gospel for the West. Given that, historically, Europeans had little hesitation in evangelizing other continents, African, Asians, Latin Americans, and other people of color might reasonably expect to be involved in the re-evangelization of the West. The Indian professor of mission, Jayakiran Sebastian spoke for those who have “been *impacted* by this concept” but had not been given the “opportunity to *inform* it” when he expressed his concern that the use of *missio Dei* “seems to have achieved a paradigmatic status on par with *homoousios* in contemporary theological and missiological discourse” (2007: 33–34). He worried about this, first, because the postulation of a divine origin for mission might “cover up for the harsh realities of how mission was organized, and how mission was experienced” (2007: 29) which, he wrote “hardly meets the criterion spelt out in the theological understanding of the *missio Dei*” (2007: 39). Second, he warned against attributing mission to God because many acts of terror – past and present – are motivated by such a belief that the perpetrators are on a divine mission (2007: 41). In other words, paradoxically, despite its efficacy in helping churches in the West to think of themselves as in mission in their own backyard and to recognize their dependence on God’s

initiative, *missio Dei*, or missional theology, can also be used to cloak Western power and white interests. Sebastian's comments suggest that missional theology is susceptible to political manipulation. God's mission should not be identified with any particular episode in world history, such as European missionary expansion, but only with witness to the life and work of Christ given in the gospels. Sebastian proposed that it is only through such being in mission to our neighbor that we begin to understand who God really is (2007: 44). Rather than starting with a missional theology or a metanarrative of history, mission begins as obedient practice.

This issue of *Mission Studies* contains six articles. The first two deal with African themes and the second two with China. Of the remainder, one arises from a novel set in Papua New Guinea and the other raises a key theological question relevant to mission.

On African Christianity, David Ngong examines the political theology of Emmanuel Katongole, which he contends is about "contesting conversions." Ngong goes on to suggest that Katongole's criticism of both Pentecostal Christianity and theology of inculturation as apolitical may be misguided and that these indigenized and indigenizing approaches may in fact offer the kind of personal conversion that support the political change which Katongole wishes to see. Francis Benyah offers further insight into African Pentecostalism, and at the same time continues the discussion begun in the first issue of this year about mission and development, when he shows how Pentecostal churches in Ghana have made what could be regarded as development goals an integral part of their faith and practice.

Focusing on China, Martin Ward appraises the work of the Church Missionary Society missionary John Richard Wolfe in Fujian from 1862–1878, finding that his popular title "Moses of Fujian" was undeserved. After examining the CMS archives, Ward shows how Wolfe abandoned many of his religious ideals and resorted instead to using the unequal terms of the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) between Britain and China to protect and further missionary work. Alexander Chow's article is about contemporary China and particularly Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tian'en 趙天恩), a diaspora Chinese who traveled in and out of China between 1978 and 2004 and led the revival of Calvinism there. Chow coins the term "return mission" to describe the work of Chao to distinguish it from "reverse mission," in which diaspora Christians of other continents evangelize Europe and North America.

Steve Taylor's article focuses on conversion in Papua New Guinea from a theological perspective. It does so in an innovative way by examining a secular novel, *The Mountain*, which describes an indigenous Christology of Jesus as "good man true," "who die for PNG." Taylor describes this theology as *hapkas*

(half-caste), which also describes the hybridity experienced by the people of PNG, and arguably of Jesus, who was fully human and fully divine. The final article by David Muthukumar addresses the contentious issue of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) by drawing on Irenaeus' image of the "two hands of the Father" to suggest that in God's economy of salvation there is a "twin mission" of *Logos* and *Ruach*. Contrary to common attributions, Muthukumar argues that *Logos* and *Ruach* each combine both subjectivity and objectivity, as well as universality and particularity, in election and resurrection.

This is the last issue of 2019 and with it we look forward to the quadrennial assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) in Sydney, Australia in July 2020. For details, see the IAMS website.² The next issue is a special one to set the context of the conference, which has been prepared by Darren Cronshaw and colleagues from Oceania. I hope many readers are planning to be there in Sydney!

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² International Association for Mission Studies, <https://missionstudies.org/>.