

Missional Imagination: What is God calling us to be and to do in the 21st Century?

Presenter: Stephen Harrison

A changing and challenging world calls us to use imagination in our thinking and acting in mission. Stephen's sessions will provoke us to open ourselves to new ways of seeing, being, dreaming and doing in response to all God is calling us to do and be in the 21st Century.

Session 1: What is meta for? Freeing ideas from their containers

What stops us from thinking and acting creatively to fulfil the mission we are called to participate in? In this session we will set the scene and examine the metaphors, images and ideas we use that restrict our missional imagination.

Suggested Reading

Metaphors we live by – George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes - Alexandra Horowitz

Deep Survival: Who lives, who dies and why - Laurance Gonzales

Canoeing the Mountains – Ted Bolsinger

What is my song: Dennis Linn

Introduction

Story: Locked out of house.

I am the youngest child in my family. I have two older brothers and a sister and there is a five year gap between them and me. On the odd occasion when I was little my parents went out and left my siblings in charge of themselves, of the house and of me. And we all know what happens when the kids are left at home. One time my brothers and sisters locked me out of the house so that I wouldn't report the anarchy that they were creating inside. And what were they doing? Well they got several large bean bags from around the house and they unzipped them and they poured the contents out onto the floor in one of the rooms and pretended

that they were out in the snow. They even took photos of themselves dressed in beanies and gloves cavorting in their winter wonderland, throwing the beans into the air. Yes, I know. Outrageous. And my parents and I would never have known about this. If I hadn't years later found photographic evidence.

But this story isn't really about my siblings, as the youngest it naturally is about me. What do you think I might have been doing while I was locked out of the house? Well of course I was trying to get back inside. Now this mostly meant banging on the door for a few minutes, yelling and then sulking for what seemed like an eternity, but may have only been an hour...or maybe even less... It is hard to sulk when no one is watching. The thing that strikes my adult self though, is how my younger self only considered the option of being back inside the house. I paid little attention to all that was outside of it. A yard. A neighbourhood. A city. A whole universe, but my vision was constrained, partly by fear, partly by a sense of injustice, but largely by my own limited imagination of what was possible. Oh the things I could have done out in that yard, in that city, in that Universe, if I had only freed my imagination.

I could have done anything but my focus, my vision, was set.

We all know we are in challenging times for the church. It isn't the elephant in the room, it pretty much is the room we are in. The question is...how do we get to other rooms...or out of the house and beyond.

I wonder if our vision for mission in Australia, for the church is bit like that child sitting on the back steps. Locked out of the faux snow party inside. Wanting back in.

What is behind the closed door? Is it our memory of better times? Of people just coming to church. Of Christianity and Christian's being esteemed.

It is hard to avoid the feeling that we want what is inside the house.

But there is a big open world around us. With all kinds of possibilities.

How do we change our focus? How do we become conceptually unstuck?

How do we expand our imagination for mission?

This is what I hope we might do together over the next few days.

Introduce Self

But before we get to that - who am I?

Lay worker - 20+ years - Parish, Uni, School, Diocese.

Not a theologian. A practitioner. Missiologist.

I come not as an expert but someone journeying with you.

One internal pressure we often place upon ourselves as leaders is we think we have to have the answer to the problems we face... but the answer often lies in the interactions we have with others.

Watch this:

Video: Steven Johnson: Where good ideas come from?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU>

Two things to draw from that video...

Firstly. I wonder if we abandon our hunches and experiments too early. Not giving them time to mature.

Secondly. Over the next few days the important thing is for us to have conversations about our slow hunches or half ideas, to share them with one another – and to really listen – even if the idea sounds a bit crazy. And to consider using the structures you have to intentionally share ideas.

Activity:

Think

...about your ministry area.

What is a slow hunch or half idea.....you have about it right now? [5 min]

Where have we been?

In the 1950's there was a big shift in theological emphasis on what was thought and said about God, mission and the church. These changes didn't just happen in one church but at an ecumenical level. Result of post-colonial consideration of mission.

- Emphasis on God as Trinity.
- Missional God. Sending God.
- Church doesn't have own mission. Participates in God's mission.
- Mission is everywhere. Including outside our front door.
- Mission is not just evangelism...Five Marks of Mission

In addition to these changes at the theological/missional level. Two world wars and the 60's brought about massive social change in the 20th Century. Christendom was already on the way out this just accelerated it. And we have been wrestling with it ever since. One thing we can't do is go back.

But....institutions are slow to move....we might be more intentional about what we do now...but essentially we are doing things the same way we always have...what we need is radical imaginative change. Not because what we do now isn't good...it just isn't sustainable...

As I said earlier I don't have the answers...but I think we do...if we can be open, courageous and willing. So this is where I want us to go together over the next few days:

Where are we going?

Session 1: What is meta for? Freeing ideas from their containers

Does the way we think restrict our creativity? How might free ourselves from those restrictions.

Session 2: Stick your head out of the pond: Seeing ourselves more clearly

If we are going to be missionally imaginative we need a strong sense of who we are and who we want to be. This is an anchor of sorts. Boundaries are actually important to creativity.

Session 3: *What do the neighbours think? Understanding our community and context*

Being missional means being sent out. But what are we being sent into. It is easy for us to think we know our own culture....but do we?

Session 4: *My car has a couch: Imagining a different future*

We will begin to converge in this session and start thinking about how our future might be different.

Session 5: *Throw away the hammer: How to create new ideas for mission*

Finally we will look at how we might develop new and effective mission strategies.

Conceptually Stuck

In essence I am hoping we might do some initial work in becoming conceptually unstuck. What does this mean? We are in a time when tinkering with the old ways of doing things just doesn't work anymore. Replacing the organ with electric guitars, powerpoint instead of books, won't help.

Ed Friedman – A Congregational systems guru says:

“Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur that spirit of adventure which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first”

We have to see differently. We have to see ourselves clearly.

So...

If at any point through the next couple of days you are thinking of saying:

If only we...

Did more or better traditional prayer book worship or...

Returned to the centrality of the Gospel or...

Were more faithful to Jesus or...

Developed more progressive theology or...

Did more evangelism or...

Trusted the Holy Spirit more or...

Have I annoyed everyone yet....

Resist the urge! You are conceptually stuck. Let go.

Even though there might be something in all or any of these ideas they simply something quite complex that we need to wrestle with and unpack...

...and mostly they express a desire to be through that door in the house...

...where Christianity is strong, healthy and valued.

Church of England – Bp Humphrey Southern - Panickers and Deniers

Faithful and effective – Conversation in the middle.

The power of Imagination

So where to begin in order to become conceptually unstuck.

Well we will start with our imagination.

Our imagination – our image forming ability shapes the way we see the world and respond to it. And it is remarkably powerful.

Examples of the power of the imagination:

“In the 1950s, an English container ship that conveyed Portuguese Madeira wine anchored in a Scottish port to offload some cargo. One crew member went into a refrigerated container to check whether all the cargo had been unloaded. While he was inside, another crew member unknowingly closed and locked the door. The trapped crew member used all his strength to pound on the walls, but to no avail. No one heard his cries, and the ship left for Portugal. When it arrived in Lisbon a few days later, the man was discovered dead inside the refrigerated container. Its walls contained a detailed record of the pain the man had suffered, which he wrote using a piece of metal. He had recorded how his body was slowly paralysed and frozen by the frigid air and how the resultant injuries caused unbearable pain until he finally turned into a lump of ice. But that wasn't the real shocker. What was most surprising was that the temperature inside the container measured (19 degrees Celsius. The

refrigeration in that container had not been turned on at any point because it held no cargo. In addition, there was food in the container that the man could have eaten.”

“Why, then, did the crew member freeze to death? Apparently, he believed with absolute certainty that he would freeze to death because he was in a refrigerated container, and his body followed his belief. It had nothing at all to do with his actual situation, that is, with whether the temperature of the room where he was trapped was actually below freezing. His imagination of his own death caused the result. If he had cast off his belief that he would freeze to death and had sought a way to sustain himself, he would have survived.”

“Encyclopedia of Relative and Absolute Knowledge” Bernard Werber

We think...being more imaginative is good...but our imaginations also restrict us...so its not just about using imagination or more of it...it is about the nature of how we use it.

Negative Imagination

Story: Flat Tyre

One night driving along a back country road a man got a flat tyre. As he hopped out of his car it began to rain. When he looked in his boot there was no car jack. As he looked around he noticed a light from a farmhouse and decided to go and see if he could borrow a jack. As he walked along in the rain he began to imagine what the farmer would say to him. He would probably be angry and say: What are you doing waking me up in the middle of the night. Just thinking this he began to get angry. How dare he say that to me...here it is raining and in the middle of nowhere...by the time he got to the farmhouse he was furious...he knocked on the door and a voice called out “who is it” – and the man so enraged yelled back... you know damn well who it is...and I wouldn’t borrow your jack if it was the last one on the planet....

I wonder if you have used your imagination in this way before. You have imagined a conversation that you are yet to have with some. You imagine what you will say and what they will say. The conversation in your head isn’t going well and you start to get angry or annoyed at the person. Or maybe you have neighbours moving in next door and you see they

are young. And you start to imagine the parties they will have, the noise they will make and how you will respond.

Imprisoned by metaphors

Imagination is our image making ability – but it is much richer than that.

There are images we carry with us all the time...that shape the way we see reality.

Humans often think in images or metaphors. These pictures in our head shape how we think about all kinds of things. Even our language uses metaphors that we not aware of...for instance we have:

Oriental Metaphors:

- Happy is up, sad is down
- Virtue, goodness, health, all are up; depravity, evil and sickness are down.

There are myriads of others:

- Knowledge as light
- Friendship as warm, loneliness as cold.
- Life as journey.
- Time as commodity.
- Scandal as fallout
- Peace as a pathway. Somewhere there is a 'roadmap' to peace and the need to 'stay the course'.

Activity: Work metaphors [10 minutes]

Name as many metaphors as you can that are used in the business or political world.

[Eg. Career ladder, drill down]

Cog in the machine / Off to the mill / Career ladder / Organisations are machines

Strategy is chess / Processes are journeys / Low hanging fruit / Drill down / Lots of moving parts / Drinking the Kool-Aid / Reach out / Take offline / Best practice.

Metaphors for where we are right now

Activity: Name the metaphors we use in our current concern about the church? [5 min]

Decline – Going down.

Elderly

Stuck

Lost

Are these metaphors helpful?

One I think is helpful: Lost or Off the Map

I picked up a book: Deep Survival by Laurance Gonzales. The subtitle to this book is: Who lives, who dies and why. One of the things Gonzales says is that the people who survive are those that accept they are lost and realise that they must *live* in the environment they *find* themselves in...not the one they *wish* they were in. Those who survive pay great attention to all that is around them. They are filled with wonder by their environment and they engage with it, they learn about it, they embrace it. But the key is that they must live in the new reality so much so that their rescue is often felt to be an interference to their activity.

I think this is a good metaphor for us in the Anglican Church.

Maybe the church has been lost in the woods of culture and society for a while. Not from any fault of our own. Like many people who get lost we thought we knew the terrain we were entering but at some point the familiar landmarks were gone. I realise this is probably not new to you and in many ways we have already begun the exercise of accepting our reality and remapping our world. The question is have we done it deeply enough?

Are we eating insects like Bear Grylls and enjoying them or are we are still hoping that someone will rescue us and pop a Big Mac in our hands? We have to accept the new and changing world we find ourselves in, see it clearly, adapt to it and live in it.

In the wilderness it takes some time to learn the survival map well enough to live in it for a long period. It takes years and years. Even something as simple as starting a fire with sticks can take months to be proficient at. We need to not only remap but learn new skills, of not just survival, but living.

Playing with our metaphors

Can using old and new metaphors help us to open up new ways of thinking about the church?

The metaphors we use are important they shape the way we think and act.

Anglican school as church or mission field.

Activity:

Pick a metaphor card.

How might the metaphor change how you do church?

Adventurers (not Settlers)

Lose life (not Protect life)

Construction site office (not Cathedral)

Sailboat (not Rowboat)

Lizard (not Frog) *Frogs wait for food / Lizards go and find food*

Airport terminal (not Holiday destination)

School (not Prison)

Jeans (not Suit)

Tools: Glasses and Hats

We are always looking through a particular lens?

Whose eyes are we looking with? Ours of course?

But does it have to be this way? We can wear different lenses.

On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes - Alexandra Horowitz

Look at the church as a scientist, artist, entrepreneur etc.

Ask these people what they think.

Story: What is my song? Dennis Linn