

INTRODUCING CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

Creative Conversations could be thought of as a research tool or practical method designed to help Christian communities or mission groups develop a deeper sense of understanding of, and relationship with, those who find themselves socially and geographically marginalised in some way; those we might think of as ‘the person of difference’ or the ‘excluded other’. The intention is that through a growing awareness of, and sensitivity to, the issues around marginalisation, the Christian community might be able to frame approaches to mission which engage with the deep-rooted arrangements that sustain such patterns of exclusion.

In terms of a method, a parallel might be drawn with reading scripture: just as we develop methods and provide tools to help Churches read scripture well, so we are also seeking to develop methods and tools to help Christian groups exegete their own contexts – especially to understand the ways in which their contexts are characterised by landscapes of marginalisation and exclusion.

In practice Creative Conversations works by setting up ‘conversational spaces’ where small groups of 2-3 people who have shared experiences of marginalisation or struggle are encouraged to talk to each other about their experience whilst being recorded so that there is an audio record of the conversation. Very careful preparation goes into setting up the conversational spaces so that they are safe, open, hospitable and attentive.

It might help you to imagine a Creative Conversation if you have heard the BBC Radio 4 ‘Listening Project’. Here you have two people talking together about an aspect of life they share. This is somewhat different to Creative Conversations in that it is designed as an audio archive and they are obviously conversations that have been carefully edited. But an interesting feature of these conversations is that they quite often include a surprising or unplanned moment of shared insight, or of mutual discovery. For example, one of the people talking might say something like “I’ve never told you this before but ...” and then go on to share a precious held thought, emotion or experience that is a complete revelation, in some senses even to the person sharing it: what was previously hidden and unacknowledged is confessed and articulated.

There is a sense in these moments that something about the quality of the conversational space itself has enabled something that had been hidden to come to the fore. It is this sense of creativity, or co-creativity, which is at the heart of what we are exploring through Creative Conversations. It is the convening of intentional conversational spaces that make room for people to discover and articulate what is difficult to hear. It is in a sense trying to enable spaces of co-creation where people from significantly different social and cultural situations (us 'outsiders' and them 'insiders') come together so that a priority of voice is given to those who, in normal circumstances, are not heard.

Creative Conversations is an attempt to combine recent developments in qualitative research methods, especially ethnographic methods, with approaches to mission which are seeking to be particularly attentive to issues of difference or otherness, especially within marginalised urban communities. In particular we want to find ways of making well-founded and rigorous research methods available (and fun) for groups of Christians who want to discover more about their context and at the same time build bridges with their neighbours.

One element of this, which we think is critical in developing these kinds of conversational spaces, is that learning takes place in an inter-subjective sense; we wish to avoid approaches that tend to objectify others, or learn 'about them' and instead recognise that in the to-and-fro encounter we also develop a deeper understanding of our *own self* within a given place. Thus in Creative Conversations we want to encourage elements of both reflective and reflexive practice to bring a deeper understanding of how difference or otherness is configured in the context in which we seek to do mission, and how we also embody within ourselves those very same configurations of difference that we might observe 'out there'.

In practical terms the Creative Conversations project has been devised and convened by Mike Pears from Urban Life and Cathy Ross from CMS Pioneer Leadership Training (Cuddesdon). We have used a Seedcorn grant from Durham University (Common Awards) to support two people who are each convening and recording between 6 and 8 conversations from their own contexts. A larger group of 14 people from around the country gathered in March 2015 at an orientation day to launch the project and some of these also plan to participate in Creative Conversations in their own places. As part of

their research these groups will do some initial analytical work on the recordings and present their findings at a gathering on 27th November 2015.

Our intention is to continue to develop Creative Conversations as a practical tool for research which can be used in a wide variety of contexts. With this in mind we would like to invite those who are interested to find out more and perhaps join us in this journey of learning to attend the Creative Conversations day in November.

The aim of the Creative Conversations Follow-Up Day is:

- To hear presentations from those who have been involved in the first round and to learn from their experiences about how to develop this as a practical research method
- To learn more together about the theory and practice of convening conversational spaces which enable people of difference to engage more deeply with each other.
- To share more about the theological thinking behind Creative Conversations and how this approach might help us to explore ways of approaching mission in marginalised places
- To meet others who are exploring similar approaches.

We are using a dedicated page on the Urban Life website as a platform for doing further analytical work on the conversations and also to reflect on and refine the method. We aim in the future to encourage groups from around the country to participate in doing research in their own areas so that we might build up a kind of community of shared research where we can learn from each other about how to engage better in these kinds of marginal places.

If you would like to find out more about Creative Conversations please feel free to contact Mike Pears or Cathy Ross and log on to the Urban Life website www.urbanlife.org

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