

Why 'Creative'?

It is not the intention of *Creative Conversations* to find out 'about' people or to learn 'facts' about communities. Rather *Creative Conversations* are about personal encounters with others and the learning that takes place through them.

Creative Conversations draws on the understanding that when we meet with people who are quite different from us, and when we learn to come to those meetings in open-hearted ways, something 'creative' happens through the encounter that has the potential to open our eyes to new ways of seeing and even to cause a change or transformation in the lives of everyone involved.

Creative Conversations draws attention to this relational sense of 'knowing' and emphasises that knowledge about other people cannot be learned through seminars or reading books. This relational kind of knowledge emerges as we learn to be attentive to 'the ordinary' or the 'everyday-ness' of our own lives and the lives of those around us. In their book *Prophetic Dialogue*, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder suggest that this could be thought of in terms of 'entering some else's garden':

One enters another's garden not to compare its beauty and variety with one's own, but to appreciate another way of gardening ... A garden is a person's special place, and so one has to be respectful of the gardener's particular tastes and talents ... When one develops a relationship with the gardener, one can learn a lot and perhaps teach a bit as well.

A key part of this kind of leaning is about the way we 'see'. It is described well in the saying of the log and the speck (Matthew 7 vv.1-5): "first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye."

This passage suggests that our 'seeing' of others is most often skewed and that our 'judgements' of them tend to keep them at a safe distance. However, encounters that lead to clearer sight and involve closer proximity to each other are also discomfiting and risky; we do not know what might happen or how they might change us or where they might lead. It is this clear-sighted understanding that *Creative Conversations* hopes to open up.

At the heart of these encounters is the presence of the Spirit. In our own experience of incarnational community we have found John Taylor's book, *The Go-Between God*, so helpful in this respect. Taylor says about encounters:

*I am not thinking of what is narrowly described as 'encounter with God', but of quite unreligious commonplace experiences. And if we try to remember them more carefully, I think we shall notice that what happens is this. The mountain or the tree I am looking at ceases to be merely an object I am observing and becomes a subject, existing in its own life, and saying something to me – one could almost say nodding to me in a private conspiracy. That in fact is the precise meaning of the word 'numinous', which comes from the Latin *nuo*, to nod or beckon. The truly numinous experience is not marked only by primitive awe in the face of the unknown or overwhelming, but occurs also when something as ordinary as a sleeping child, as simple and objective as a flower, suddenly commands attention.*

It is important to understand that this approach involves not only an attentiveness to the other person (the neighbour) but also to the Spirit and it is, if you like, the Spirit that convenes the space between ourselves and our neighbours. I like Terry Veling's phrase here that "between

the two there is a third” (Veling, *Practical Theology*, p.54).

In the light of all of this, ‘research’ seems a bit of a blunt word because it usually conveys the sense of finding out ‘about’ things or people rather than being neighbours to them; it often seems not to account for the presence of the Spirit in the research process. However, the idea of research can be helpful because it suggests that we need some kind of rigour and method around our approach in order for us to be more careful, thoughtful and accountable for what we are doing. Creative Conversations tries to do precisely this—an approach to research that is both relational, attentive to the presence of the Spirit and has some rigorous methods behind it.

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