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# TRANSFORMATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

*Revolutions in human thinking are not created by new information but by new paradigms that allow more information to be fitted more fully and adequately. And revolutions in scientific paradigms can be awesome moments of cognitive dissonance.*
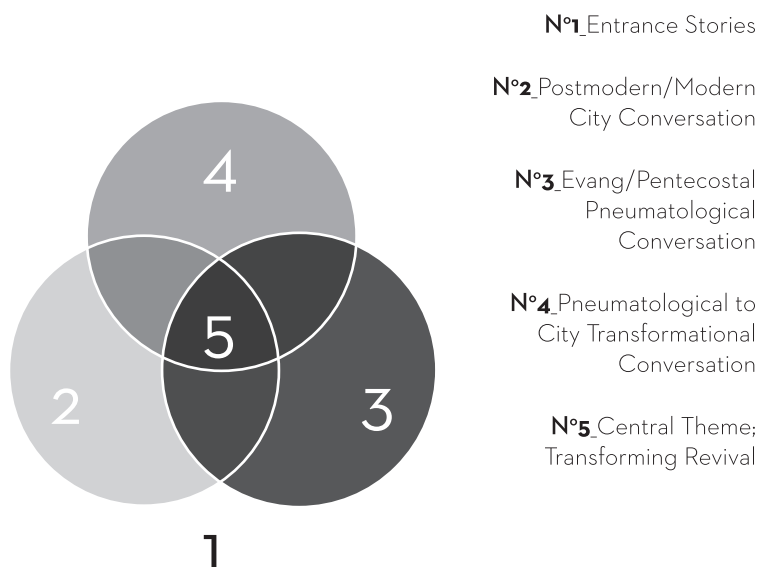
Harvey Conn[1]

Theology begins in the truth of story — God's story, my story, our story. Over the last fifteen years my involvement in leadership of the global AD2000 cities network mentoring city leadership teams and the Encarnação network of urban poor mission leaders has prompted the evolution of a new hermeneutic – new at least for Evangelicals. This study develops the concept of a "transformational conversation hermeneutic."[2]

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1    (1984:54) on Kuhn's (1962/1970) idea of paradigm and Festinger's (1959) cognitive dissonance.

2    Throughout this study, I utilise the word "frameworks" for meta-narratives that include multiple themes —the hermeneutic framework, the framework of the Kingdom of God, or postmodernism as a framework.

**FIG. 1: URBAN THEOLOGY AS TRANSFORMATIONAL CONVERSATION**



Nº**1** Entrance Stories

Nº**2** Postmodern/Modern City Conversation

Nº**3** Evang/Pentecostal Pneumatological Conversation

Nº**4** Pneumatological to City Transformational Conversation

Nº**5** Central Theme; Transforming Revival

*Fig. 1 shows a process for developing urban theology about Transforming Revival. It begins with an entrance story (Nº 1) and involves three components: the in-city conversation(Nº 2), internal Christian conversation on pneumatology (Nº 3), and interfacing of these in a transformational conversation (Nº 4). These contribute to central theme (Nº 5).*

I discovered urban Christian workers constantly struggling with the sense of "irrelevance" of their training in systematic theology and its dissonance from the nature of the God of action they followed. In contrast they loved *building* collective theologies from their stories. I build the theory from such tensions by defining my terms and relating these tensions to four polarities in our perception of the godhead: his structuring and creativity, his relationship to the present and to history, his existing and acting and his transcendence and immanence. I consider the relationship of this hermeneutic with Postmodernity in an excursus at the end of chapter 8, exploring to what extent evangelical theology can engage with or become postmodern in style.

## Transformational Conversations
The phrase "transformational conversations" was sparked by Brueggeman's comments about intertextuality as "an ongoing conversation that is as urgent and contemporary

as the present moment, but it is also a conversation that stretches over the generations" (1997:78-79). This study regards theology as both diachronic "conversations" (over the generations) and synchronic conversations (one time, across cultures). It defines urban theology as communal conversations with the potential for social transformation.

The three circles in Fig. 1 link three conversations in a total process which I am calling a "transformational conversation": firstly, the conversation within the faith communities, secondly, the community conversation within the city and thirdly, the transformational conversation between these two.

The transformational conversation hermeneutic is fed by the metaphors and symbols, imagery and grammar, dialect and cadence of both the city and the faith community. The hermeneutic results in defining public space for open conversations about complex issues (I will use the term "conversation spaces"), in contrast to some approaches that reduce the scriptures to singular meanings or to absolutist slogans.

## Personality of God in Theological Style

Theology may be considered as human reflections on the nature of God. In grappling with story-telling theological processes in urban poor pastors' and city leaders' consultations we stumbled onto an understanding of doing theology as conversation. Doing theology this way consistently resolved four polarities about our perception of God better than the systematic rationalist approaches common among Evangelicals:

- Is God a rationalist philosopher or creative storyteller?
- Is God or was God? Do we know God primarily in his present actions around the globe or through his involvement in history?
- Is God incarnate or cosmic? Immanent or transcendent? Local or global?
- Is God or does God? Is God the God of being or the God of action?

## God of Story or Rationalist Philosopher?

From many of the last 30 years in and out of slum areas in cities around the world I have concluded that Jesus' storytelling style embodied the primary style of teaching used among the poor. We think story, communicate story to story.

- Storytelling Consultation Process -

In 1996, we held a typical storytelling consultation in Mumbai with 80 leaders of urban poor ministries. Each day we would introduce the day's theme. Each worker then had ten minutes to tell his or her story. At the end of each day, we would integrate the theology and strategies that had been shared. Many worked for Western funded missions to the poor. On the side, they did what they knew really worked. It was these Indian stories of how Indians were finding solutions in their context that were crucial. At the end of the week, the whole group knew we had developed a genuine Indian theology and praxis of working with the poor.

In integrating urban poor theologies[3] we extended this methodology of developing grassroots theology, simply labelled as "storytelling theologies."

This requires a theological facilitator trained in ethnotheological perspectives and able to work with leadership in designing insider-outsider reflection processes. The role of the trained theologian is thus not that of the expert coming with truth, but as:

> *The reflector and thematizer, the one who is able to provide the biblical and traditional background that will enable the people to develop their own theology*

(Bevans, 1996:51).

I would add that the theologian must come as revivalist, bringing the presence of God, for such theologies have been developed much on our knees. These gatherings are often filled with a sense of the presence of God, so that the theology evolved is not simply cognitive and communal but experiential, healing, creating unity and love.  At a leadership level, the process becomes more refined, systematic and rationalised.

- From Stories To Global Theology -

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From 1991-1997, as part of the AD2000 city network, a global team of city leaders from most continents extended the "storytelling" method to city leadership consultations in other regions and cities.[4] From these were developed urban theologies and urban strategies (Grigg, 1997b). At this level, the complexity increases. We drew from stories given in multiple city contexts. I remember sitting with the leadership team for five days in 1993, identifying strands that seemed to keep twisting with other strands, becoming braids that eventually linked to major themes. The themes became paramount in the final written theology. The outcome was a *globalised theology and strategy* reproduced now in a number of cities.

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The theologies are not developed in a vacuum. The synchronic are based on the diachronic. Participants come with previous formal or informal theological training that draws on systematic and biblical theologies, for these remain foundational. What they had never been able to express was the outworking of that theology into new indigenous theologies for their decade (thus answering the second query, "Is God or does God?" by a transition to the present and synchronic,). These new theologies are not grounded in a single denominational view imported from another continent, but from indigenous expressions within the workers' own people and land. They often contradict their own views developed from imported formal training. Thus *communal ownership occurs.*

Such theologies develop comprehensive themes of city leadership, holistic ministry among the poor, urban poor church life, etc. This *comprehensiveness* is not because the

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3    In, India ('93,'96,'03), Hong Kong ('96), Manila('99, '04), Sao Paulo ('02), Nairobi ('03), Addis ('03) Bangkok ('04) and other cities.

4    I led a number of global and regional consultations yearly, among them: Calcutta ('92), Chicago ('91), Los Angeles ('92), Seoul ('95), Hong Kong ('96), Mumbai ('93), Delhi ('93) with these coordinators . They extended these at national and city levels. A New Zealand leadership team developed a city leaders' consultation in Wanganui in 1996 (Grigg, 1997d).

theologies are developed with systematic logic, from a foundational web of belief, but because the stories cover the essential range of current issues, related to a given theme, identifying a new web of belief. Stories also gave a warm human sense of truth, honed from both Scripture and involvement. "Systematic theology engages the intellect; story-telling engages the heart and indeed the whole person" (Bausch, 1984:6).

Struggles with "storytelling theology" led me to "transformational conversations" as a more encompassing description. Stories are part of wider urban conversations.

### Stories, Chaos and the Multivariate Urban Context

This illustrated a major shift in urban theology from the stability and continuity of rural theologies (emphasis on God is, the God of being and stability) that have been the context of the historic church, to the ongoing discontinuities and chaos of the mega-city (emphasis on God does, the God of action and change). Ariovaldo Ramos, Brazilian Evangelical leader, commented once to me, "since the city is always somewhat chaotic, an urban theological response should also be somewhat chaotic."

My father, a scientist, left a book around on chaos theory in mathematics. Chaos theory developed because of the nature of multivariate analysis — small perturbations in starting conditions lead to extensive divergences in ending conditions, apparently random, but actually following clear mathematical rules, such as in predicting weather conditions across the earth (Gleick, 1987). Cities are multivariate. Indeed, urban planning contains a whole science of fractal geometry based on multivariate analysis, that when applied to the apparently chaotic emergence of city forms enables planning predictions (Batty & Longley, 1994). The parallel concept is multivariate theologies.

In Brazil during this study, I discovered that some Latin theological methodology has also progressed from the intrusion of Marxist analysis into Catholic theology through liberation theology. Fr. João Batista Libanio in a Brazilian Catholic theology of the city, *As Lógicas da Cidade* (The Philosophic Structures of the City (2001)), affirms the approach of beginning from stories. He expands on Foucault's idea (1972:10) about seeking discontinuities beneath grand themes and relating them back to the continuity of historic theologies:

> *We opt for a reading (of theology, of the city) that creates discontinuity before we create order. This is in contrast to two very different ideological options of our time… One traditional reading prefers order, continuity… The other posture, with a modern tinge, specializes in the unity of thought of neo-liberalism. This also announces changes but at their heart, these changes only maintain continuity. It fixes on a unified structural model of the city...* (2001: 23 tr. from Portuguese mine).

This concept of multiple discontinuities, multiple variables, causing us to stop in our tracks because they are different or perplexing, distinguishes urban theology.

**Fig. 2: Processes in a Conversation about Transforming Revival**
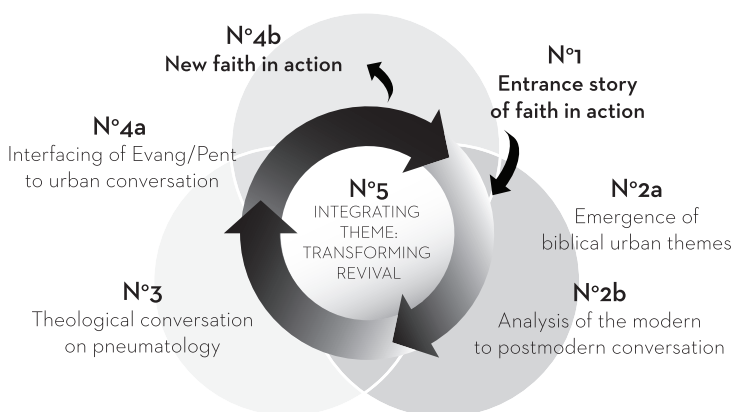


*Fig. 2 expands the steps for developing a transformational conversation on the relationship of Holy Spirit and city. It begins in an action story (1). From reflection on the action, biblical urban themes develop (2a). This leads to an interface between the urban conversation (2b), the communal context and Scripture. A faith community conversation on pneumatology (3) develops from that entrance story. In turn, this leads to an interface between these two conversations on the Spirit and the city — the transformational conversation (4a). This creates a new praxis (4b).*

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**Multiple Story Conversations**

However, if multivariate analysis in chaos theory produces beautiful art out of apparent discontinuities, can an overarching pattern be seen in the Scriptures? This highlights a historic hermeneutic problem of the search for a unifying centre. Osborne states,

> *As the interlocking principles between strata of the biblical period become visible, the patterns coalesce around certain ideas that bridge the gaps between the individual witnesses. However, it is very uncertain whether any single theme or concept stands at the apex of biblical theology. Many believe that the complete lack of consensus demonstrates that a cluster of ideas, rather than a single theme, unites all others* (1991: 282).

If there is no single theme, can multivariate theologies be patterned? William Temple utilised a concept of drama:

> *What we must completely get away from is the notion that the world as it now exists is a rational whole: we must think of its unity not by the analogy of a picture, of which all the parts exist at once, but by the analogy of a drama where, if it is good enough the full*

*meaning of the first scene only becomes apparent with the final curtain: and we are in the middle of this.*[5]

Another perspective was to examine stories within multiple contextual theologies in both Scriptures and everyday contexts. This theological *storytelling* or conversational approach led us to a more fruitful practical approach, since most Evangelical/Pentecostal preaching is populist, from contextual story to biblical story, rather than systematic.

The pattern of transformational theology thus becomes a dancing, multifaceted conversations, rising from the lowest classes into multiple sectors of society. It is like a series of candles that flame into life in ten thousand corners of the city. The mapping of this urban conversation cannot simply be a search for a grand theme but for multiple simultaneous interwoven themes and within them tens of thousands of vignettes.

But what should the dance, the drama, the conversation, be called? Brueggeman's concept of the unifying substance of the Old Testament as a *plurality of voices* led to an expanded hermeneutic for *transformational conversation* as the interface of that biblical plurality of story with the plurality of urban conversations.

In this study, themes of revival, the Kingdom and city of God will be viewed as frameworks for such conversation spaces. However, no one theme can be elevated to a single integrating theme subsuming all others.

### Similarities to Narrative Theology

Narrative theologies give us some exegetical tools for step 2 in Fig. 2. Narrative theology in the second half of the twentieth century developed as a crossover of ideas from literary theory to become popular as an interpretative approach to the biblical stories.[6]

> *In the plot, coherence, movement and climax that characterize a story, narrative theology sees a way to overcome the problems theology creates for itself through its subservience to discursive reasoning* (Fackre, 1983:340).

Evangelical theologians have recently been more receptive to a liberal exegetical concept of "narrative" (Van Engen, 1996:44-70). However, problems exist. Only parts (admittedly large) of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts are narrative in style. Pauline and Johannine theology are both conceptual. The Wisdom literature is of a very different genre. Thus a purely narrative focus reduces the range of the God-side of a transformational conversation purely to story. The Proverbs and poetry (of David), the rhetorical questions (of Job), the pathos (of Jeremiah) and rationality (of Paul) must all be aspects of the conversation.

Thus, in seeking a better phrase than "storytelling" I have chosen not to use "narrative theology." It is too emotionally loaded for Evangelicals and too limited in its biblical compass.

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5    In a letter towards the end of his life (Iremonger, 1948).

6    Brevard Childs (1970) traces it from the early 1940's to its decline in the 1960's. Because the crossover from literary analysis occurred at multiple points globally, the emergence of narrative theology occurred through multiple sources. Van Engen comments, "One realise(s) it is practically a misnomer to speak of a narrative theology "movement." The presuppositions, methodologies, agendas and styles of the players in narrative theology are too diverse to be lumped into a single cohesive movement" (1996). Yet it infuses theological thinking.

## Is God or was God?

In answering the second question, "Is God or was God?" I recognise that philosophic and systematic theologies tend to be *diachronic*, testing for validity against historical patterns of theology back to the Scriptures. All theology must pass this test to some extent. In theology within a context of historic roots in traditional Western Europe, diachronic approaches are appropriate.

In contrast, *practical, pastoral, contextual and mission theologies* prefer to start with contemporary stories of the day (real stories = truth) and then find biblical truths and stories responding to these. As the global village of the 20th century shifts into the urban millennium, the verification of theology has moved from the above diachronic perspective to a synchronic perspective where we contrast theology across cultures in a single timeframe. When operating globally, those of us doing theology largely share e-mail networks enjoying collective paradigms. This process often moves too rapidly for formal publishing.

Recently, Biblical theologians have responded to social change by increasingly speaking about the active "God of redemption history" in contrast to categories of the "God of being" of classic theology. This raises the question about whether foundationalism (building rationally from some foundational truth) has failed[7] as the basis for theological study. In a postmodern world, history as a rational construct has been found wanting by some (see discussion in Hagner, 1998; Perdue, 1994), so ceases for many to be a valid basis for testing truth — but both rationalist liberal and evangelical theological study are deeply rooted in historical paradigms.[8] However, there are other routes to rationality than Cartesian foundationalism, which requires beliefs to rest on verifiable evidence and deductions from inarguable foundations (Vanhoozer, 1995:11).

### A Web or a Building?

A helpful model is that of "knowledge as a web or net"[9] with neither foundation nor starting point (Quine & Ullian, 1978). Quine argues that nonfoundational theology fits the way Christian faith and practice generally operates. This requires attention to patterns inherent in beliefs and practices rather than a general theory of rationality. Since knowledge is seen as a web, there is not the question of the building collapsing if one piece of knowledge is found wanting. The stories must mesh, but need not necessarily do so in a rationalistic linear manner from a foundational point.

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7   Both liberal and evangelical theologies are rationalist in style and foundational in approach. Where they differ is the basis of that foundationalism. Liberal theologians view the ability of the human intellect as able to discern the foundations. For evangelical theologians the foundation is the Scriptures as revealed truth (Marsden, 1997:98).

8   Brueggemann seeks to develop a post-liberal or nonfoundational approach to Old Testament studies, while recognising the collapse of trust in historical foundationalism (1997:84-87).

9   "Just as modern epistemology was dominated by an image, that of a building needing to be supported, so postmodern epistemology is dominated by a picture: W.V.O. Quines's image of knowledge as a web or net" (Murphy, 1997:27).
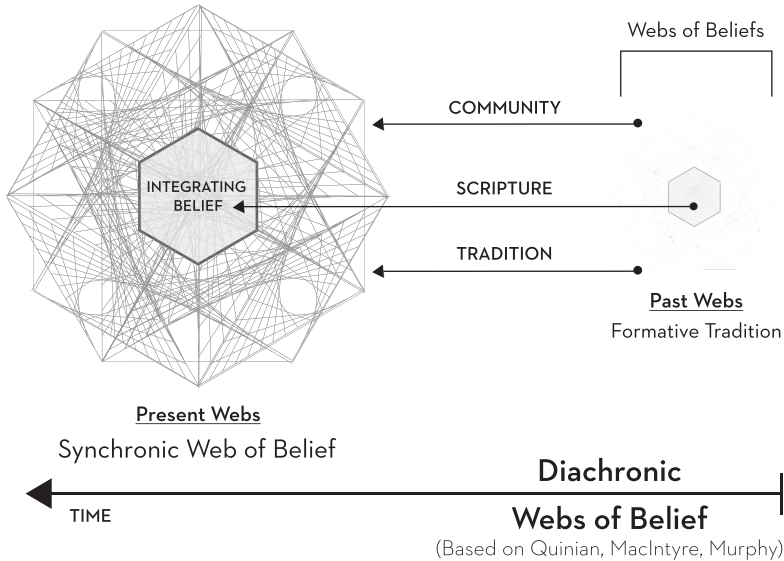
**Fig. 3: Elements of a Web of Belief Analysis**



Webs of Beliefs

COMMUNITY

INTEGRATING
BELIEF

SCRIPTURE

TRADITION

Past Webs
Formative Tradition

Present Webs
Synchronic Web of Belief

Diachronic
Webs of Belief
(Based on Quinian, MacIntyre, Murphy)

TIME

*Fig. 3: The elements of a web of belief analysis. In synchronic (present time, global) analysis, the integrating truth is validated by comparison of theologies across cultures. Multiple historic Christian communities and traditions feed these. In contrast, validation in traditional diachronic analysis is against past traditions derived from a formative tradition. The particular community of faith, reflecting on both Scriptures and traditions informs and validates each web of belief.*

This web approach better describes global thought processes. Filipino or Maori cultures like most band, tribal or peasant societies are story-based, holistic in discerning truth. The aberration has been the Western nations' loss of story as primary vehicle for truth.[10] As Newbigin says about Western imposition of principles on biblical interpretation:

*Our European culture (with its large non-biblical component) predisposes us to think of the biblical stories primarily as illustrative of principles which can be grasped conceptually and which enable us to remain in orbit after the supporting illustrations have been*

10   Berger,  Berger and Kellner's, *The Homeless Mind* (1973) demonstrates the development of linear rationalism as a primary cultural mode of thought within modernism. This contrasts with holistic categories of lowland Filipino thought, (Lynch, c1979), representative of many peasant cultures. See an expansion of these ideas in the psychology of slum-dwellers in *Cry of the Urban Poor* (Grigg, 1992/2004 ch. 15,16).

*jettisoned. To live with the Bible, however, means to recognize that it is the story which is primary and irreplaceable, a story of which we and our contemporaries are a part and that the "principles" are not the enduring realities behind the story but rather the time conditioned attempts of a people at particular moments in the story to grasp its meaning* (1981:357).

This is not a rejection of rationality. However, it is an understanding that rationality need not be linear and foundational, but can be holistic.

Nancey Murphy (1997:120) develops MacIntyre's (1988) description of tradition, to give a three dimensional, (what I call a "helical") model linking the diachronic and synchronic components. In transformational conversations, we mesh synchronic Quinian web analysis with diachronic analysis, interfacing the historic conversations with the present web (see my summary diagram in Fig. 3). The storytelling consultations involve people trained in diachronic theologies, yet immersed in urban contexts, providing a multi-traditional background to the synchronic processes.

## Incarnate or Cosmic?

This helps answer the third question, the dialectic of cosmic Christ and incarnate Son. Urban missiologists generally insist that transcendence is rooted in incarnational living. We share a strongly held value that following Jesus demands this.

But some of us while living in the story-telling environment of the poor, also gravitate to linking the stories to global systematic theologies based on principles and philosophy. This reflects not just Western rationalism accentuated by rationalist modernisation but the mind of Christ who structures and organizes the universe. In his image, we intuitively search beyond the stories for supra-theological truths to connect our contextual theologies to one another.

> *The final stage of development of a biblical theology is the identification of an archetypal concept(s) or unifying themes behind the diverse documents.… Many believe that the complete lack of consensus demonstrates that a cluster of ideas, rather than a single theme, unites all the others* (Osborne, 1991:282).

Thus in answer to the third question, "Is God cosmic or local God? Transcendent or immanent?" we recognize the necessity of both poles, but among urban workers keep the emphasis on story for we find the storytelling carries living theology better than global rationalism.

### Bottom-up Contextual Theologies

This leads to the next concept. Transformational conversations exist within a genre of contextual theology. Urban missions theology is by its very label contextual theology. In reality, all theologies are in essence contextual:

*The Bible is a library of books and consequently of theologies. The Hebrew Scriptures are made up of Yahwist theology, Elohist theology, Priestly theology, Deuteronomic theology and Wisdom theologies, prophetic theology, exilic theology… the New Testament includes Pauline theology, Johannine theology — to name but a few* (Bevans, 1996: 3).

Systematic theology itself is a contextual theological genre, with its Western, Aristotelian roots, philosophic context, establishment environment and so on.

## Is God or Does God? Conversations as Action Theologies

The fourth question in establishing this hermeneutic theory is, "Is God or does God?" This is at the heart of praxis theologies. City transformational conversations begin in missional action where we seek to respond in godly manner to a need or an issue in the city. That is biblical. Theology, the knowledge of God, flows from obedience. This is part of the unspoken hermeneutic of Pentecostal theology, part of the "but does it work?" syndrome.

Like the incarnate Word, we live out conversations. Moreover, the incarnation is communal, hence structural. Structures are indicators of the realities of our theology, an anchoring into earthiness, demonstrating the God-humanity-creation linkages of a full-orbed theology.

- Lawyers In Christ -

> As an example of discerning or creating a charismatic/ Pentecostal transformational theology, we could take the legal sector of New Zealand. I first asked several Christian lawyers for stories of how the Holy Spirit has led them into the public arena as Christians in an anti-Christian environment. Doing this collectively helped identify the first themes of a transformational conversation in the legal sector — themes that in their professional isolation they have been unable to identify. For lawyers work alone much of the time.
>
> However, from the entrance stories we must press on through the conversational process to new action stories, for God is a God of action. That means enabling the lawyers to engage fully in conversation between the Scriptures and the legal sector of the city. Part of that conversation is conversation as structure. Two evangelical Christian law firms have become the core of that structure and worked with Australian counterparts to put together consultations of Christian lawyers every second year, though mainly focused on the details of Christians in the legal environment.[11]

This study explores the idea that major urban conversations are conversations of ideas embodied in structures. Sustaining and expanding the structural base numerically and in quality is essential for ongoing social influence. The perception of entrepreneurial success, momentum and structural expansion is part of gaining credibility in the postmodern cultural milieux. Those who lead larger structures often gain necessary credibility to speak to higher levels of city leadership. More than image, the reality of numbers of people on the ground, with capacity to speak, expands the potential of meaningful conversation at critical social junctures.

This study proposes that should that be the case, conversation may ensue — if the theological hermeneutics enable the conversationalists to impart significant meaning in their conversation. A discussion with a battered mother about the dignity of personhood from Genesis 1 and Psalm 139 while watching our kids score goals at Saturday

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11   Details from discussion with Les Allen, partner in Gaze Burt, May 2005.

soccer is only possible if I understand the theology of the meaning of personhood. The same principle is true at a structural level in the city.

## Conclusion and Implications for this Study

"Transformational Conversation Hermeneutics", a paradigm for creating new postmodern theologies, is rooted in the nature of God. Bringing together the stories, then identifying and reflecting on themes enables conversations within the community of faith, within the postmodern urban context and between the two. (If the reader wishes to evaluate this hermeneutic as a postmodern approach, they may turn to the excursus after Chapter 8 on postmodernism).

I have introduced the study with action stories (#1 in Fig 2) in chapter 1. In this chapter I have developed a hermeneutic theory supporting the investigative process. Chapter 3 reviews literature that reflects transformational conversations of the modern period. Part 2 develops the *urban conversation spaces* about transformational vision. This lays the basis for Part 3 where I trace the *pneumatological conversation*. *Transformational conversations* are developed contextually within both part 2 and 3.