Community-minded scholars bring gospel to life

Launch of a book to help others find meaning in Scripture

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A book about John's gospel initiated by an Avondale lecturer invites readers to find meaning in the text through their own understanding and that of others.

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Signs to life: Reading and responding to John's gospel launched in Ladies Chapel, August 17, at the end of a symposium presented by the college of higher education, the Institute of Worship and Signs Publishing Company. The keynote speaker: Dr Kendra Haloviak Valentine, the book's author.

Kendra began the symposium by explaining three reading theories: the world behind, in and before the text. Reading Scripture with a knowledge of history, literature and culture helps us find meaning by providing a "check-and-balance," she says. "The more we are aware of what we bring to the reading experience, the more we will be aware of the wonder of what we find there that is beyond us."

Illustrating Kendra's point about each reader of a text making possible a new reading, four contributing authors—all scholars at Avondale—reflect on their reading of and response to the gospel.

Dr Carolyn Rickett, a senior lecturer in communication and English who studied testimonial and therapeutic writing for her Doctor of Arts, validates Mary and Martha's grief as their mourn their brother's death. Associate Professor Daniel Reynaud, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Theology who has published a book about the Bible as literature, notes John's repeated use of irony. Professor Jane Fernandez, vice-president (learning and teaching) who has published a book about the psychology of violence, reflects on Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. And Nathan Brown, a Master of Arts (research) student who is an advocate for social justice, brings a new perspective to the foot washing scene.

Signs to life editor Nathan Brown with author Kendra Haloviak Valentine and contributing authors Carolyn Rickett and Daniel Reynaud

[Photograph: Brenton Stacey]

"The gospel invites us to celebrate unity in diversity, and reading in community is an invitation to appreciate and to empathically engage with perspectives other than our own," says Carolyn.

Daniel expressed this differently during the question and answer forum at the launch. "We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable," he said. "It's about knowing Somebody, not something."

"So, is the interpretation of John, and of Scripture, now merely a subjective exercise?" asked Avondale president Professor Ray Roennfeldt is his remarks. "I'd suggest not. We're all reading the same text, we're listening to each other's readings and we're all led by the same Spirit who leads us into all truth. Reading in community may be somewhat more variegated but is certainly richer."

Inspired by a sermon of Kendra's about the wedding at the well, Carolyn and then colleague Dr Robyn Priestley wrote a research grant proposal to publish in print and on CD a series of sermons Kendra preached about the seven signs found in the first 11 chapters of John. "Anyone who has heard Kendra's presentations will know the profound readings she brings to biblical narratives," says Carolyn. "This project means more people, particularly those in regional areas, will now have access to her scholarship and to her pastoral insights."

"It's the mission of both entities to provide resources for the church—and we've always imagined the book and the CD as being read and used in churches and by families," says Nathan, who also edited the book in his role as book editor at Signs Publishing Company. "While we enjoyed a weekend hearing from Kendra and interacting with each other, the book now shares something of this experience in a wider way." TEACH