Editorial

At a recent conference in the United States a group of scientists and thinkers, of various faiths and none, gathered to debate science and religion. An unenticing discussion loomed for the delegates who thought that they would have nothing new to say or hear. But the discussions centred not on participants' knowledge and beliefs but what remains largely unknown. And a consensus emerged around a feeling of awe and wonder in the unimaginable scale of the Universe and the delicate intricacy of evolution. A delegate at the conference summed it up thus, 'not everyone agrees that the heavens tell of the glory of God, but few would doubt that the heavens tell of glory'. Through the power of conversation, sterile arguments were laid aside allowing the mystery of the unknown to come to the fore. An objective of Ecclesial Practices lies in nourishing the desire to probe mystery, as both ethnography and ecclesiology do in their respective ways, by kindling a sense of engagement and gratitude with the unknown. The papers in this edition speak of the potential for the enriching power of conversation in seeking understanding and in exploring controversy, where conversation is otherwise muted.

'We live in a visual age, one characterized by the availability of cameras conveniently integrated in mobile devices', Roman Williams begins before introducing us to Photovoice as a framework for such a conversation. Grounded on the principle that people are experts on their own lives, Photovoice uses a combination of photography and critical group discussions as a way to engage participants in identifying their own views on the research topic and as a tool for social change. Although a social scientist himself, Williams argues that Photovoice has tremendous potential as a research tool within theological action research for engaging and researching congregations as it helps give voice to populations (and issues) that otherwise may not be heard. The detailed approach offered by Williams encourages its wider use in congregational studies and other practical theological sub-disciplines too.

Jan Grimell is an ordained minister in the Church of Sweden as well as a continuing reserve officer in the Swedish Armed Forces. Although Christian communities and military service would suggest polar opposites, Grimell engages the two in conversation using Bonhoeffer's description of Christian discipleship. The author finds common ground between Bonhoeffer's theological understanding of Christian discipleship and communal life with military culture(s) and communal life. Grimell illustrates how, through conversation, ordinary 'God-talk' offers the potential for broadening understanding and encouraging acceptance of lived religion within more secularized contexts and how Christian communities can serve as cultural platform. Although not always successful, such conversions are worth pursuing, in spite of rejection and suffering, because ultimately discipleship transcends all comprehension.

In September 2016, a national British newspaper published an online article entitled 'Bishop of Grantham first Church of England bishop to declare he is in a gay relationship.' In response, many letters and e-mails were sent to the Bishop and the Diocesan Office, the vast majority expressing support, others otherwise. Referred to as the 'Lincoln Papers', the correspondence was empirically studied by Grace Davie and Caroline Starkey and considered within the context of the continuing change in both society and the Church of England. A key concept underpinning the authors' analysis is the notion of 'vicarious religion', namely the relationship between the small group of actively faithful and a wider body of more loosely attached adherents. The Lincoln Papers are both evidence of, and a contribution to, a continuing process of social change, and in particular, evidence that the church's teaching on sexuality is seen as out of step with society as a whole. Although the Lincoln Papers do not provide an answer to this, the authors remain optimistic in that, with exceptions, their tone are gracious and respond positively in what is an all too often intemperate debate.

Daniel Dangendorf's paper examines the process whereby worship songs are chosen in German Protestant Churches and Free Churches, a matter that has received little attention in (especially German) practical-theological reflection. Practical-theological guidance appears to focus mainly on rational theological and musical assessment of songs but fails to give cognisance to the practical limitations, perspectives and insights of practitioners who are at risk of being marginalised. The choice of songs will reflect the manifold social, theological and musical criteria when those involved in the liturgy are given voice through a continuous *personal interaction* (conversation).

Armand Leon van Ommen confronts the elephant in church intercessions, namely the avoidance of 'taboo' subjects and, in particular in the context of this paper, the stigma that is attached to mental health. Over a period of three

years van Ommen, together with thirteen pastors, gathered and analysed prayers, conducted interviews and arranged focus groups with prayer leaders in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium. The findings though resonate beyond these churches. On the positive side, many topics do get prayed for at a general level. But when the prayer topic is sensitive, such as mental illness or relational problems, people are not prayed for by name. Acknowledging that church leaders would not call this a matter of taboo, but one of pastoral and ethical sensitivity, nevertheless van Ommen finds the social norms of what is acceptable trump the theological values of the church that is called to be welcoming and embracing of all and look beyond stigmatising labels and become a different community.

In his article, 'I could be wrong', Rein Brouwer reviews the writings of Kester Brewin, a foremost contemporary exponent of radical theological thought and practice, and a principle instigator of the Vaux Community. Brouwer traces Brewin's theological journey, beginning with his book, *The Complex Christ* and then through his later writings. This is a journey that led Brewin 'outside of what would be taken as orthodox belief' and possibly because of this, although honoured by some sociologists, his more recent writings have been largely ignored by theologians. Brouwer 'regrets' this and suggests that Brewin's writings provide a powerful critique for ecclesiology and church renewal movements. Brewin longs for the church to be rescued from its sterility and as uncomfortable as they may be, Brouwer commendably outlines Brewin's arguments and looks for a conversation with others thinking through the future of the Church.

There is nothing new in the place of conversation opening us to a sense of wonder in the divine. 'Come let us reason together, says the Lord' (Isaiah 1.8), but these papers are inspiring and encouraging of practitioners in ecclesial practices to engage in conversation to the mutual enrichment of both ethnographers and theologians seeking understanding by shifting away from argument and indwelling the comprehensibility of mystery. This 'spiritual sensibility' is manifested in the fostering of justice, love and peace for one another and in the world. Something for which surely, we all yearn.

Simon Hill and Henk de Roest