Editorial

'Sign of the times' is a phrase strongly associated with the Catholic Church in the era of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. It marked a significant shift in theological thinking and was taken to mean that the Church should listen to, and learn from, the world around it if it was to remain faithful to its calling. Unarguably, the migration streams around the world, the refugee crisis and millions of people on the move is a 'sign of the times' for the Church to listen to, today. In addition, globalisation, geographical fragmentation and spatial disruption may lead to a consequential longing for a coherence of place and community. The importance of place is emerging as a sign of the times and this is becoming reflected in narratives of lived and experienced theology, as reflected in the following papers.

The redefining of the importance of place is explored by Andrew Rogers in his paper, 'Lived Theologies of Place: Finding a Home in the City'. Andrew Rogers offers a fascinating insight into the diaspora churches, and especially those with an African majority, in central London, but which have grown in urban conurbations across Europe. Due to patterns of migration and settlement, the search for suitable premises has become a critical issue for African diaspora congregations in London where spaces for places of worship have become highly contested. Andrew Rogers engages with the work of the French urban anthropologist and Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, in a critical conversation with the narratives from across 36 'new black majority churches' (nBMCs) in the central London Borough of Southwark. In their struggle to find and make a congregational home the importance of place within a 'lived and experienced theology' emerges, that enfolds other forms of theology into itself.

Arguably the experience of the Israelites is a narrative of migrants resettling in an alien culture and rediscovering their heritage. Perhaps a 'sign of the times' is that a more informed biblical understanding would foster relationships. If so, David George Ford's paper makes for challenging reading as he sets out what has long been suspected, but largely ignored, by the church leadership. National surveys in Britain show that Catholics are some of the Christians least likely to engage with the Bible outside of a church setting. However, the

evidence suggests that this is an issue facing all mainline denominations. To address this, the Catholic Church produced a variety of resources in accessible formats that Ford evaluates using selected focus groups made up of ordinary Catholics in North East England. His qualitative research case study highlighted six helpful ways ordinary Catholics found useful for engaging with the Scriptures that also meet the aspirations of the Church. In particular, reading the Bible within community was identified as being helpful. Ford argues for further ethnographic research and broadening the study to address whether engaging with the Bible outside of Mass is transformative for ordinary Catholics, a question that has applicability far beyond the one denomination.

The importance of place as being something undefined is illustrated in Nigel Room's paper 'Understanding Local Churches as Porous Living Systems'. Many reasons are proffered for the undisputed decline in Church membership in the UK. Drawing on his experience in consultancy to local mainstream churches, Room finds insights from the Tavistock tradition that has its origins in the late nineteen forties at the edge of the 'modern' or rationalist period. It utilises 'socio-psychological' methodology based on an action research paradigm. Room argues that the core change required of churches in the contemporary era is to move from what are essentially closed systems to open systems that have genuinely porous boundaries between themselves and their context. Drawing on biblical precedents, the Tavistock's current programme, *'Partnership for Missional Church'* offers the opportunity for a fresh formal ecclesiology through a cultural change. A two-way 'porosity' of the church at its boundary with the community, can lead to the effective transformation of a local church by discovering God's dreams for the flourishing of the community and their realisation.

We make place, and place makes us, where identity is formed through storytelling and presence. In the context of churches and missional ecclesiologies, congregational studies that focus attention on the particularity of congregations and the relationship between congregation and context, offer the opportunities for building relational space between congregations and communities and thus the sharing of gifts and hopes. In his paper, '(Re)Placing the Congregation: Fieldwork and Congregational Place-Making', Scott Hagley argues for congregational leaders and groups to engage in ethnographic fieldwork as a means of facilitating an understanding of relational space, and to articulate the importance of place connecting congregational identity with the life of the neighbourhood. Such fieldwork, Hagley argues, should be undertaken collaboratively with a pneumatological-missional concern and demands the ongoing sensemaking implied by theological articulation. Engaging the tools of ethnographic fieldwork and connecting a congregation to place will, with reflective

practice, create new pathways of crossing cultural boundaries, a theologically necessary because the Christian faith is inherently translatable.

Perhaps no single issue has caused as much grief and pain in Western Church life than the so-called 'worship wars', Ian Hussey writes in his textual analysis of the most popular twenty-seven songs hymns of the 19th and 20th centuries and contemporary popular worship songs. Surprisingly, perhaps, the analysis dispels the popular criticism of contemporary songs over their lyrical quality and argues that both contemporary worship songs and traditional hymns should find a home in congregational song. It is, Hussey suggests, a classic case of both / and, and hopes that a maturing church will become at one accord with its musical preferences.

In his paper Andrew Groza addresses the marginalisation of the Church in Australia. Perceived as 'repositories of the old traditions' the Church lacks the status it once enjoyed and its role in society's life is openly questioned, challenging its long term survival. Many social and cultural drivers of change have contributed to the current state of affairs, over which the church has had virtually no control or influence. How individual churches respond however, is under their control, and their reactions to this challenging environment has varied. Groza records the experiences of eight church pastors in two States who, having recognised the changing landscape, are addressing this challenge by establishing new forms of church birthed out of missional theology. Referring to the works of Lesslie Newbigin and Wesley Michaelson amongst others, Groza presents a missional church as one that 'places its commitment to participate in God's mission in the world at the centre of its life and identity'. Innovating new ways of 'being and doing church' within the Australian context has brought its own challenges for those leaders seeking to bring together a missional theology with ecclesiological praxis, but Groza's work is illustrative of the richness gained in seeking to understand the immense effort of those implementing a missional paradigm in response to the changing environment facing the Church in Australia.

In his review of Helen Morris' book, 'Flexible Church: Being the Church in the Contemporary World' Andrew Dunlop finds an important contribution to debates surrounding the ecclesiology of new forms of church. Helen Morris offers her own ecclesiology which she calls 're-contextual churches', constructed out of a dialogue between seven relational directions between God, the church and the world, and the Pauline concept of the Church as the Body of Christ. Morris' aim is not to produce another blueprint ecclesiology, which she argues we must move beyond, but one that offers 'flexibility and stability'. A laudable objective, Dunlop finds, but one, he suggests, whose end could become another idealised blueprint.

Priscilla Sun-Kyung's book, 'Hospitable Witnessing' raises a challenge for Martin Walton in his review. Sun-Kyung movingly explores her life-changing experience through her friendship and caring for another woman with mental health concerns. 'It has been like entering and discovering an unknown world', she writes. Walton finds the book more an account of the author's own struggle to live faithfully in Christian discipleship, than a theological reflection on friendship challenged by mental health issues. That said, Sun-Kyung's story is, as she writes, 'an urgent call for the church community', and one that Walton acknowledges should not be ignored.

We conclude this Editorial by expressing condolences to all who grieve over the loss of ecclesialogist Gerard Mannion. He died September 21, 2019, aged 49 years. His untimely death comes as a shock to his family, friends and many colleagues around the world who had come to know and grown fond of him. Gerard Mannion was the Joseph and Winifred Amaturio Chair in Catholic Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University. He was an eminent ecclesialogist, the founding chair of the *Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network*, author of a large number of books in the fields of ecclesiology, ecumenism, public theology, and philosophy and organiser of many conferences. Gerard was member of the Editorial Board of *Ecclesial Practices*. The first time that we met him, at Gladstone Library, he impressed us, not only by his knowledge and wisdom, but also by his wonderful sense of humour, his graciousness and genuine kindness and seemingly boundless energy. Later we noticed how he often gave a platform to young scholars. May our remembering of Gerard be a continuing blessing for the Church and for the world.

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