Editorial

In one of the early editions of *Ecclesial Practices* the Editorial reflected on how the interplay between theological reflection and ethnography could be likened to a *paso doble*. Each eyeing the other with respect and passion. Since those early days, the conversation between ethnography and theology continues to be lively, and from the papers published over the past eight years a tentative merging of the disciplines' respective methodology and theoretical framework is discernible. But, at the same time, it is becoming apparent that, what Kristy Nabhan-Warren and Natalie Wigg-Stevenson label a 'crisis of representation' in ethnological approaches to theology, is emerging.

This special edition records a conversation at a workshop hosted by *Ecclesial Practices* in 2019 that addressed this issue, which Kristy and Natalie outline in their Introduction. Referring to the seminal works published in 1986 that set the methodological and theoretical framework for ethnological studies for anthropologists, Kristy and Natalie point to the treasure trove of wisdom for theologians to be found in the decades of ethnographic studies since their publication. At the heart of this 'crisis in representation' is the uncertainty about the adequate means of describing social realities. Kristy and Natalie urge practitioners engaged in ecclesial studies to reflect deeply on their methodologies and harness the energy that has developed since the late eighties. For, in so doing, they argue, theologians will be empowered to engage more fully and creatively in their conversations in the field. Critically is the shift away from verbal language towards images, from descriptive texts to creative art, and to participative action research that changes both the author and the participant.

The following four papers within this special edition are excellently reviewed by Kristy and Natalie and need no further introduction in this Editorial. However, together the papers make the strongest argument that ecclesial studies is emerging into a discipline that is distinctive and informative for theologians in refreshing ways. Highlighting this 'crisis in representation' is a timely reminder that 'Ecclesial Theology' should be critically reviewed

and the insights offered in the papers published over the past years in *Ecclesial Practices* are a powerful starting point.

Two further papers are published in this edition. The first, by Ken Chitwood follows a similar theme to the papers above. Chitwood poses the question as to whether ethnography as comparative theological practice invites us to take a more intentional move away from theologies enshrined in texts and toward theologies embodied in practice. In his paper Chitwood presents three ethnographic studies comparing traditions across Hindu and Christian cultures within a South Asian context as a means of doing comparative theology. He powerfully argues that ethnography offers theologians the opportunity to listen and learn from, wrestle with, and discern alongside 'local theological knowledge, traditional theological knowledge, and cultural critique of both to produce fresh theological insights and possibilities for Christian living'.

The final paper in this edition of *Ecclesial Practices* is on a completely different subject. Or is it? There is a rich tradition of theological and ecclesiological writing on the place of sacred places in the Christian tradition, not least in relation to English churches. In March 2020 all faith buildings were closed for several months across the United Kingdom to combat the rising cases of COVID-19. This unprecedented move provided an unusual opportunity to conduct a survey amongst church goers in England as to their attitude toward church buildings, the findings of which Andrew Village and Leslie Francis present in their paper. The survey addressed the relevance of church buildings generally, their importance for Christian identity, their place in faith expression and their importance as a witness to faith, with some surprising results. As churches re-open, the question coming to the fore is whether the COVID-19 pandemic has irredeemably changed the onetime unchallenged assumptions as to the place and meaning of church buildings. Just how different will the emergent church post pandemic be and what will it look like? Surely, employing ethnography as comparative theological practice, an approach that gives cognisance to the 'crisis in representation', would provide a more fulsome answer.

Piet Meiring reviews the book 'Obedience and Servant Leadership' by Eugene Baron and Nico Adam Botha. The book looks at the unification of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa in 1994 and presents, twenty-five years on, an account of the unification process more recent developments against the backdrop of the church's struggle against apartheid based on the stories of four key church leaders who steered the church through this process.

One cannot but sense the change in approach and presentation embodied in the moving away from, as Chitwood writes, 'theologies enshrined in

texts and toward theologies embodied in practice'. A move that makes only too apparent the 'crisis in representation' that this special edition of *Ecclesial Practices* addresses. As a journal we are emboldened by this and will continue to encourage this exploration into faith today. Is it time for a new methodological and theoretical framework to be described for theologians to unlock the treasure trove awaiting to be discovered?

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