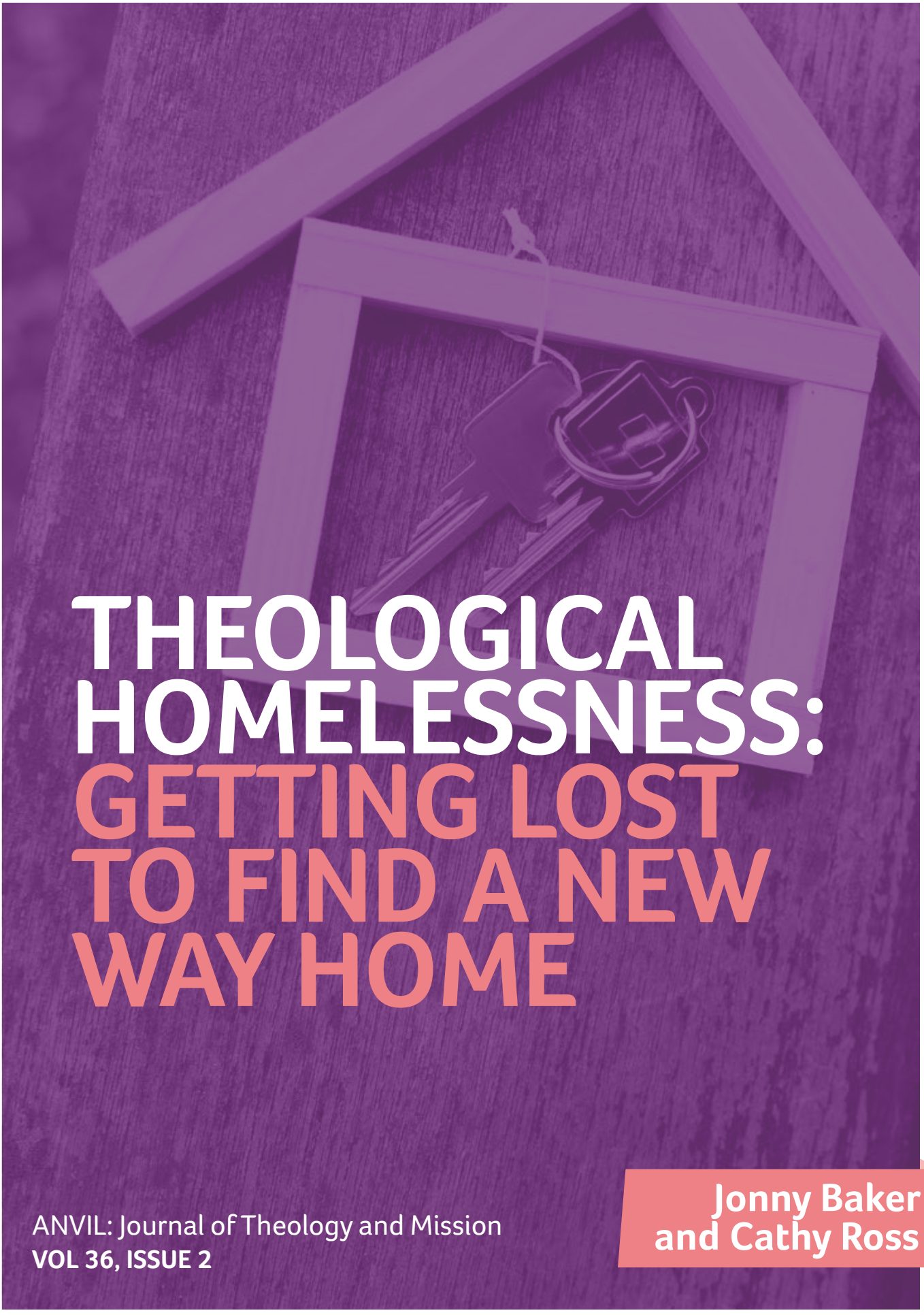

THEOLOGICAL HOMELESSNESS: GETTING LOST TO FIND A NEW WAY HOME

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010 the Church Mission Society (CMS) began Pioneer Mission Leadership Training, aimed at those who are engaged in doing something new or different with a motivation rooted in mission. Since then, our experience with training pioneer leaders, who are developing mission projects and communities in new contexts, is that the paradigms within which they have learned and understood theology have not equipped them well. One striking metaphor that is quite commonly expressed is that they feel like the rug is pulled from under their feet, sometimes leaving them destabilised, unsteady and wondering what happens next. Then the students begin to move from a world where theology is a content to be downloaded, learned and imparted – and perhaps defended – to a world where theology is more like a process with which the community engages together. This shift is challenging but opens up new horizons for the way we all conceive of theology in practice. We have come to think of this process as a kind of theological homelessness that needs to be experienced in order to find a new way home.

It is based on observations from overseeing training pathways, teaching and learning theology together with the students over the last 10 years, as well as on interviews with students. We will intersperse the body of the paper with direct quotations from them to allow the students' voices to be heard. All quotations are anonymised and used with permission.

THEOLOGY IS...

One of the very first exercises we do with students is to invite them to complete two statements in as many ways as they like and to stick them on the wall. The statements are "Theology is..." and "Theology is not..." Invariably a whole set of negative associations with theology comes up for discussion – it seems to have a bad reputation! Broadly speaking these associations cluster around themes of academic irrelevance, lack of connection with real life, insistence on right belief systems and doctrines and that it is about control and oppressing others. Theology, as many of the students have experienced it, does not seem to be life-enhancing.

> L: I guess it's been fairly clear to me that "seminary" training often leaves Christian workers with some kind of theoretical framework, a basic understanding of how to preach three-point sermons, and if you're lucky some basic counselling skills. Most people I've known in ministry felt totally under-equipped for work in a real-life context.
>
> And this is just in the context of church work. In the context of mission outside of a typical church context there seemed to be even less of practical value.
>
> M: The structure was set up so that the lecturer had the power of knowledge and the student was expected to be a sponge...

But as we press into this exercise, another picture begins to emerge that is more aspirational and certainly more hopeful of theology that connects with real life. It can be an adventure or a quest; theology is communal and conversational, and can explore friendship with God and the world. This signals the start of a journey for students, an adventure or a quest to find ways of speaking about God and the world that make sense.

> A: Theology is no longer something fixed to be learned but an adventure to be embraced and explored in community – both the learning community of pioneers at CMS and in my own missional community in London.

This journey usually seems to move through several phases. The starting point can be received as a relief – like throwing open the curtains and letting the light in. However, for some the invitation to go on a journey can initially be met with defensiveness and denial as it threatens all that they have known.

> L: I came into the course thinking I had the "theology" bit pretty well sorted, and wanted to get lots of "tools for my toolbox"... I thought there was only one way to "do" theology...

Some students experience this reframing as a leave-taking from the familiar and known and the beginnings of a journey of exploration towards the unknown.

THEOLOGICAL HOMELESSNESS: PARADOX AND AMBIGUITY

This journey to the new, the unknown, involves risks and uncertainties. For some this is liberating, for others more challenging, but for everyone we have found that travelling this journey together as learners within the pioneer community at CMS has been ultimately life-giving.

Leaving home is risky. Sometimes you even have to leave without knowing where you are going. Consider Abraham, who, by faith, obeyed when God called him to leave home: "He went without knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8, NLT). Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the practice of getting lost is a valuable spiritual

practice.[1] She cites Abraham and Sarah as good examples and claims that "the Bible gives no reason for God's choice of Abraham and Sarah except their willingness to get lost". We resonate with this idea of getting lost as it forces us to experience discomfort, be open to new possibilities, and it heightens perceptions and encourages us to see things in new ways.

> L: I began to realise that in order to do theology in a context, especially a missional context, I was going to have to let go of some stuff and be ready to have some unanswered questions. I realised that as Leonardo Boff once said, I could "number the hairs on the beast's back, but not realise when I was staring it in the face".

Getting lost and letting go can be followed or accompanied by a sense of loss and grief and feelings of being unsettled or unsure. We express this using the metaphor of theological homelessness. This can be painful. It may leave us stranded between two or more worlds. It forces us to look at our theological upbringing with new eyes. However, perhaps a certain amount of theological discomfort is a good thing. Certainly the themes of exile, pilgrimage and even homelessness are biblical themes. Our ancestor, Abraham, was uprooted from his home by Yahweh to discover new things about God, the people of Israel were forced to adapt to new cultures and strange ways while in exile and Jesus knew pilgrimage and homelessness while in his mother's womb. An African proverb expresses it well: "The person who has not travelled widely thinks their mother is the best cook in the world."[2] While leaving home can be painful, it also sharpens our senses, forces us to ask questions and confronts us with dissonance. We believe that it is in the dissonance and discomfort that authentic learning begins to take place. As students begin to wrestle with new and different ideas that may challenge formerly cherished beliefs, this is when the questions emerge, vistas are opened, horizons expanded.

Learning within the context of CMS also alerts students to the importance of place. Place matters. This means that the metaphor of theological homelessness is a kind of paradox because while theological homelessness may be a valuable experience, it is also important to know where home is; where we have come from. Theological reflection looks very different when done from a slum in Manila or a multifaith context in Birmingham. Our context also determines our intellectual heritage. While we rejoice in our western intellectual heritage, we work hard at exposing students to theologies from other parts of the world with which they are less familiar. Historically violent events such as the conquest of Latin America, aspects of European colonisation, slavery, apartheid and oppressive dictatorships as well as a range of rich indigenous and aboriginal theologies inform much of Majority World theological reflection. Scholars such as Lamin Sanneh have reminded us that we live in a world of polycentric Christianity and that "world Christianity is not one thing but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European enlightenment frame".[3] Andrew Walls was alerting us more than twenty years ago to the reality that Christianity is primarily a non-western religion, that our twenty-first century faith will require robust scholarship from the soil of Africa, Asia and Latin America and that the "most urgent reason for the study of the religious traditions of Africa and Asia, of the Amerindian and the Pacific peoples, is their significance for Christian theology; they are the substratum of the Christian faith and life for the greater number of Christians in the world".[4]

So we work hard at exposing students to theologies and people from other parts of the world. We encourage them to engage in theology as a global conversation and to appropriate a theology without borders.[5] In our own UK context, many of our students are living and working with people on the edges and outside the church. Their journey involves border crossing and home looks very different when you look back from across a border. The world starts to look a lot bigger than they had seen when they were at home and the horizons more expansive. Of course, our faith is a border-crossing faith and is most alive, creative and renewed in the process of border-crossing encounters. If we do not cross borders and remain only in Christian environments, then our faith stagnates, wanes and becomes domesticated and inward-looking.

> L: Relating this to theology, I am learning to make "home" in the good that I find in others whom I

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2009), 73.

[2] Ganda (Uganda) Proverb, https://afriprov.org/august-1998/.

[3] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22.

[4] Andrew F. Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, no. 4 (1997): 153.

[5] William A. Dyrness and Oscar García-Johnson, *Theology Without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

might have disagreed with before. I am learning to be a guest, as well as a host. I am learning to do theology in a way that holds less important stuff with open hands, but keeps some really key stuff with closed hands. Most of this is stuff all the main church traditions agree on. And I am learning to do theology more collaboratively in my working context, learning to learn, learning to listen.

Hospitality, guest and host are key themes that we explore together. The intermingling and fluidity of guest and host demonstrated in the life of Jesus is vital for us to understand and appropriate. Jesus modelled powerlessness and vulnerability by being a guest in our world, by letting go and being among us in our place and space. This radically changes the power dynamics. So often in mission, the receiving person or culture is seen as needy, vulnerable, in need of help. We try to turn this on its head. We need to be in relationship with them and learn to see the resources and spirituality inherent in that community and context.

We also acknowledge that home can be an ambiguous metaphor. We know that home is not a safe space for everyone. Indeed, it is the least safe space for women in our world so we realise that it can be a difficult metaphor for some. Christine Lienemann-Perrin writes, "We know that in all of our world's societies violence increases behind the excuse that what takes place in the home is of no public concern."[6]

Moreover, a further challenge and ambiguity has been that while the student may be starting to find themselves more at home in a new and more expansive landscape, ironically they can now be seen unwittingly as a threat to their sending communities. This may be the most problematic and tricky part of the journey. But like children who have left home and then return as adults, they have to forge a renewed identity and find new ways of relating to their parents as equals, as friends, rather than as a dependent parent/child relationship. And if the world of the student's parents (or sending community) is more defended, then we suggest that they treat them with love, grace and kindness because they have given much.

S: You grow up in a culture of church that has some assumptions and shared story. As you encounter more of the diversity of the world and the church in other places, you hold more lightly to the truth claims. It might not be the theological themes but even just the assumed implications of that for us and our culture. You realise that none of that stuff is important. It's just context that has shaped that over generations. So there is this leaving the comfort zone and leaving of sense of home that must be part of a maturing process that I can relate to. I am actually far more uncertain now...

UNDEFENDED THEOLOGIES THAT INNOVATE

Living with those outside of church in a new culture or space involves searching for a new language and a way of speaking and being that makes sense both in that context and in the pioneer's own life. The old language sometimes makes no sense. Part of maturing is not to repeat the posture of theology's certainty and certitude but to develop an openness and generosity of spirit to others, a humility that holds the emerging local theologies lightly and with respect. Bevans and Schroeder remind us of this posture:

Outsiders need to let go of their certainties regarding the content of the gospel. They need to let go of cherished ideas and practices that have nourished and sustained them in their own journeys toward Christian maturity. They need to let go of the symbols that anchor them in their human and Christian identity and let go of the order that makes them comfortable.[7]

We do not have to look far into mission history to see the damage outsiders have done to the local cultures, customs and context. Outsiders have to practise letting go. This also means practising attentiveness – really seeing and really listening. This takes real self-discipline and means genuinely practising kenosis. We need to let go of our particular ideas and beliefs, our ways of doing things and of seeing reality, our habits and postures for the sake of the gospel. In a sense we have to let go of the gospel for the sake of the gospel. Unless we risk losing the gospel we may never see the gospel become an integral part of the culture nor understood in a way that is meaningful for that community and context. In *Mission on The Road To Emmaus* we put it like this:

The spirituality of the pioneer requires a constant practice of letting go, of shutting up, of resisting taking up power, of really seeing and really listening. It also can practically mean giving up many of the practices that have hitherto fuelled their own faith, especially if they are embedded in resources from another culture (songs, texts, liturgies). And it can

[6] Christine Lienemann-Perrin, "The Biblical Foundations for a Feminist and Participatory Theology of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 (2004): 31.
[7] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 92.

> mean letting go of certainties regarding the content of the gospel itself. The gospel always comes culturally robed so, without this letting go, the gospel will not be free to find new indigenous robes and language.[8]

Simon Walker's work on leadership as "undefended" has proved extremely helpful and insightful for us and we wonder if what we are hoping to nurture in our learning together might be conceived of as "undefended theologies".[9] These are theologies that are open, questioning, exciting, innovative – free to create rather than to defend.

> A: Through the course my head and my heart have become more integrated. One is not opposed to the other any longer but the theology enhances and makes sense of the practice. It actually gives me permission to be free to innovate...

We also encourage creativity and innovation. We believe in a Creator God and that we can be co-creators with God. We urge our students to ask questions, to follow their passions, to be seriously and endlessly curious, to steal ideas, to see disruption as potential rather than disaster, to be imaginative, to be bold, to take risks, to reframe failure as experiment, to be undefended about their own ideas and projects.[10] While this may sound like a dream list, it takes courage and some persistence to live like this. We find this easier to do within the context of our CMS pioneer community that is encouraging, supportive, affirming and open to future possibilities and imagining.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Here are a few things that we have learned about learning over the last ten years:

A safe and companionable space

The learning environment we create is vital – a space that is hospitable, safe, trusting, open and where contributions and indeed people are valued. We could even call it home although we appreciate the ambiguities of this metaphor. The learning quest is one that is welcomed and encouraged. Indeed, those teaching are similarly on a quest themselves. We hope that is done in an undefended manner. Friendship is the way we like to conceive of the relationship between staff and students, as we are all learners together – companions or "alongsiders".

True north

We have come to use true north as a metaphor for our orientation towards mission. So our quest is not simply a matter of leaving home and doing what you like. This journey is held in a mission community whose orientation is towards joining in with creation's healing, transforming lives and communities, participating in the mission of God. In many ways the leaving is exactly for the sake of joining in with this mission and may happen precisely because the church refuses to cross boundaries and therefore becomes stultified and deadly.

Artisanal theologies

We resonate with Clemens Sedmak's idea that theology is done by artisans and with the metaphor of theologian as village cook – experimenting with locally available ingredients and always receptive to new cooks who arrive in the village.[11] The focus is around helping people to find some tools with which they can do theology themselves and with their communities. Theology is not taught by individual experts but rather by a team of enthusiasts and is certainly not learned as any kind of system(atic). Rather we seek to relate to people's questing and questioning and we endeavour to point them to the treasures lurking in the tradition(s) that they can explore and discover. Theology is a cultural activity of making and doing creatively. Kathryn Tanner's work helpfully highlights how many theologians working in the area of theology and culture have used very modern and fixed notions of culture that seem to close down possibilities rather than open them up. In contrast, postmodern insights open up a much more dynamic and creative understanding of the constructed and contested nature of culture (and therefore of theology and tradition). She describes theological creativity as the work of

> a postmodern "bricoleur" – the creativity, that is, of someone who works with an always potentially disordered heap of already existing materials, pulling them apart and putting them back together again, tinkering with their shapes, twisting them this way and that. It is a creativity expressed through the modification and extension of materials already on the ground... The effects of such tinkering can be... revolutionary.[12]

We also encourage alumni to join us in teaching when appropriate and some of our tutors are in classes

[8] Jonny Baker, "Prophetic Dialogue and Contemporary Culture," in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans (London: SCM, 2015), 204.

[9] Simon P. Walker, *The Undefended Leader* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions, 2010).

[10] Will Gompertz, *Think Like an Artist... and Lead a More Creative, Productive Life* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2015).

[11] Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 20.

[12] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 166.

as students so we really are a learning community together. A visiting student from New Zealand was really impressed by this. In his review of his time training, he wrote

> J: CMS approaches theological reflection not as an academic exercise, but as a group activity where real issues and experiences are discussed. Then there are follow-up sessions to see how action has been taken in light of the prior reflection. Also the majority of the teachers at CMS were practitioners themselves, engaged in the work of ministry and mission while being teachers. This meant that they were not divorced from the everyday realities of priestly life. Another interesting quirk of CMS was that much of the time people who were teaching in one class would then be a student in another. The learning environment encouraged everyone to learn from one another, rather than a top-down approach. This was refreshing as everybody's opinions and contributions were respected. This in itself helped train people in the realities of ministry where every member of the congregation has an opinion. Perhaps this way of learning teaches people in an "elder" style of leadership, and listening to the whole body of Christ, not just those in power.

We try to offer a range of lenses and perspectives from history and the world church so that there is a depth and range of textures to our theologising. There are so many gifts to uncover!

> AM: It's exciting discovering the new – I got into feminist theology and that opened a whole new vista.

> L: The thing I came to realise that I was lacking most was a spirituality to sustain me in the everyday of my life and work as a twenty-first century Jesus follower, and a husband and father. I realised I need tools for robustly theologising around the everyday tensions of dwelling among the poor, marginalised and excluded. I never even dared to believe that there was any thinking or writing about this that I could connect with. Thankfully I was very wrong... Another powerful thing has been getting an appreciation for a wider scope of church history, seeing some of the gold in other traditions that I had written off, and discovering some of the uncomfortable truths about my own.

The familiar areas of contextual, local, ordinary and practical theologies along with theological reflection are invaluable.

Conversations days

We believe in research – there is always more to learn and discover. Every year we hold a day when we invite academics, practitioners and students to reflect together on a theme. So far we have hosted days on "The Pioneer Gift", "Pioneering Spirituality", "Missional Entrepreneurship", "Mission is... Mission is Not", "FuturePresent", "Mission and the Arts", "Church Inside Out". We have published books and a zine as a result of some of these days and hope that this research is a gift to the wider community. We also host an e-journal (*Anvil*) on theology and mission to foster and promote a global conversation around mission and pioneering.[13]

Dreaming spaces

One of the challenges in a lot of areas of work is that it is so pressurised that there is not enough space to think, imagine and dream. In their book *The Radical Imagination*, social researchers Haiven and Khasnabish comment that the feedback they received from those joining groups to reflect on their work found it hugely valuable. However, they only did it because they were invited into a research group rather than embedding it as part of their regular practice.[14] Theological education suffers from this busyness. So we ring-fence a dreaming space two or three times a year for 24 hours when we go away and explore a theme related to our work. For example, we have explored communities of practice, missional entrepreneurship, engaging with African diaspora community, blended learning. These have produced deeper relationships in the team but also a whole host of creative ideas that we have subsequently incorporated into our wider work. We also invite some students into these spaces to dream together. Similarly, we have a day each year when we invite some external input into our team to stimulate our practice.

Assessment

We use portfolios and other forms of assessment that enable students to be creative and make connections between their practice and theology. One assessment that elicits wonderfully creative responses is where students are asked to cross a culture and reflect on that community. They then select a piece of Scripture that might resonate with that community and rework it so that the language might connect. For example, we have had a student who visited a pagan community rework Col. 1 with Christ as the Green Man, and a student visiting a Sikh community rework John 1 as follows:

[13] See churchmissionsociety.org/anvil.
[14] Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

John 1:1–14

Always! Forever! The Word was.
The Word was with the Guru.
The Word was the Guru.
He sang the divine Music with the Formless One,
before the universes, worlds and continents were made.

World and Form were created by him,
All species and colours, iron and fire.
No speck of dust exists except for him.

Where should we look for True Light?
In him who is True Life that is light for all.
Darkness and evil tries to extinguish the True Light,
Millions of times a day;
But the light beams out unfettered.

The Guru sent John. A holy saint.
He testifies about the True Light, ignoring caste.
He knew and saw and touched the True Light.
John was pure and devoted to God,
As a guru he brought light to humanity.
But he was not the True Light,
He pointed to the True One.

The True Light that enlightens all men and all women,
Ignoring all caste and race,
Was entering into our existence.
He lived as the True Humble one.
The Maker of universes was universally unseen,
By the very eyes he had gifted sight to.
How could his own world never welcome him in?

Some holy people saw him.
Some put faith in his True Name.
They were reborn in God.
Born, not of gentle mother, strong father or family honour.
But reborn of, and for, God.

The True Word became clay like us.
Spotless in moral character.
Weak as we are.
Lived not in a palace, but worked alongside us.

What did he look like?
All the saints saw him,
Made manifest to us by the Father of all.
Radiant with Grace,
Resplendent with Holy Truth.[15]

CONCLUSION

The journey that students are going on is nothing new in one sense. All good education creates an environment in which deconstruction, unlearning and then finding new articulations and understandings take place. So perhaps we are simply observing and naming an age-old process. But it is exciting nonetheless to see pioneer students so energised by this process of leaving home and finding home in a new way in mission theology. Sometimes it is easy to forget in the church – especially in relation to theology – that Christ has come to set us free and that freedom is at the heart of discipleship. The poet and writer John O'Donohue writes on the themes of home and longing. He concludes the poem "For a New Beginning" with these words, which we hope may be some kind of blessing to those setting off afresh or for the umpteenth time in this quest.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.[16]

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[15] Kevin Colyer (used with permission).
[16] John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book Of Blessings* (London: Bantam Press, 2007), 32.