Encountering our own whiteness: An autoethnographic conversation on the experience of putting together a journal issue around mission, race and colonialism

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ABSTRACT
This article emerged out of a debrief as a result of putting together a journal issue on race, mission, and colonialism. We found this to be a challenging, confronting, and learning experience where we encountered our whiteness, sometimes in unexpected ways. We were able to uncover this by a series of conversations during which we discovered new and troubling insights about the process which had made us deeply uncomfortable. The autoethnographic conversations really did provide a place for moments of disclosure or epiphanic moments as we began to unpick and analyse our own reactions, responses, and unease. These began to provide insights around systemic racism, structures of whiteness, tools of whiteness, our own white fragility and complicity. Drawing on scholars such as Willie James Jennings, bell hooks, John Hull, and Anthony Reddie helped us to deepen our reflection and begin to understand how we are enmeshed in a system of whiteness for which we have to take responsibility. Jennings’ metaphor of mastery was particularly helpful and revealing as we found ourselves so often pushed in this direction. This personal story of putting together a journal became a larger canvas for us to reflect more widely on systemic injustice of which we are all a part and how we can become stuck in it. We learned that we need to own this and to be more intentional in our efforts to dismantle whiteness.

Introduction
It all began with a telephone conversation in June 2020. Earlier that day there had been an email from a potential student stating that our website was not inclusive and showed no awareness of issues of race. We looked at our website and agreed. In fact, the Church Mission Society (CMS) had been trying to address issues of race, especially in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. After an email exchange with other colleagues in CMS, it was suggested that we produce a special edition of our online journal Anvil focused around the theme of race (2020). During our conversation about producing
this edition, we immediately became aware of at least two challenges. The first was time frame – the Communications team wanted the articles delivered in three months. Normally, an edition of *Anvil* takes a year from the conception of the theme to publication. Second and more importantly, we realised that we, as two white people, should not have sole responsibility for co-editing an issue on race. We began to wonder just who could do this within our CMS staff and this is where our conversation started.

We are not intending to put CMS in a bad light with this conversation and reflection. We are part of CMS and are reflecting on this as insiders. We know that all organisations are facing issues of race, diversity and inclusion, and we are encouraged that CMS is wrestling with these questions of what it means to be human and to live and work together. We have gone back and forth over whether to name CMS or not. In the end, we opted for transparency but we do not want the naming of CMS to be a distraction from a wider critique of whiteness within our institutions and organisations.

It was in our conversations during the production of this particular edition of *Anvil* that we became aware of the injustices, complexities, fraught historical legacies, and fragilities that were playing out in front of us as well as in ourselves. We began to wonder why they had caused us such discomfort at the time. When we finally delivered the content to our Communications team, we said to each other that we needed to take stock and debrief on this experience. Why did we feel so uncomfortable and awkward? What did we learn from this? And how do we make this not all about us?

**Methodology**

This paper came out of a series of conversations we had about this experience of editing Anvil. We came to identify this as autoethnographic conversation. Walton describes how autoethnography is an analysis of personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Walton 2014, 3). She describes how autoethnography is a narration of ‘epiphanic moments’ and designed to provoke an empathetic response. Some forms are more focused on evocative stories, and others on more traditional analytical approaches of sociology but in all these accounts, Walton explains, ‘the practice of telling stories that shed light on wider issues or move the reader to empathetic understanding of social questions is one that closely resembles very familiar ways of finding theological meaning in everyday events’ (Walton 2014, 9). Anderson et al. describe their approach as autoethnographic conversation, made up of a pattern of conversation and writing. They note the ways that it ‘can challenge or trouble established ways of thinking’ about identity, ‘inevitably connecting with the lives of others in the cultural landscape in which we find ourselves’ (Anderson, Goodall, and Trahar 2020, 395). This focus on the everyday, theological meaning and epiphanic moments has much to relate it to the approach of theological action research. One of the key commitments of theological action research is that theology is disclosed in real conversations where different theological voices are present (Cameron et al. 2010, 53–56). As Clare Watkins recounts, the concern ‘is not the content of the different voices but rather the insight that is gained through sitting with them all, in open, listening conversation’ (Watkins 2020, 46). This paper draws on autoethnographic practices to reflect on experience, and on the practice of conversation to recognise the interconnected nature of these voices and to identify these epiphanic moments, or in the language of theological action research, moments
of disclosure. We chose to write this as a conversation because it enabled us to hold the ambiguities and complexities of the experience without being tempted to neaten the edges. We wanted to invite others into the conversation rather than give the impression that we had clear answers to share. Through the conversation, we recognise these moments of disclosure and reflect on them together.

To see how the methodology works, it is helpful to say a little about the process. The conversation was originally enacted at the ‘Dismantling Whiteness’ conference. We called it a semi-structured conversation. To prepare for it, we had a number of conversations about our experience and began to notice the connections we were making, the moments of disclosure, and flow of the conversation. We became aware of our own reactions and emotions in the process. We used the word ‘enacted’ because this was not an entirely spontaneous conversation, it was built on a series of conversations which had gone before, and yet it was not controlled, but allowed for finding a new route through the landscape. New insights and connections arose each time we had the conversation. This paper is not the conversation we had at the conference, but one which continues to draw on that conversation and follow its insights. It was an iterative process. To have this particular conversation, we wrote our sections in turn over 2 days. We have done some editing and tidying, but the broad flow of the conversation remains. We have also tried to maintain the conversational feel, leaving comments, and exclamations and retaining contractions.

The conversation

JB: In some ways, the easiest part was identifying three people to join the editorial team to help us pull the issue together. They were friends, who teach with us and with whom we have worked at other times, Harvey Kwiyan i, Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy, and Shemil Mathew. They were enthusiastic, and after a fruitful zoom meeting we had a plan, a title for the issue and a list of people to approach to write articles. But the complications started to arise as articles began to come in. While Harvey, Lusa, and Shemil were all enthusiastic about the project and happy to write their own articles, there was no money to pay them for their contributions or editorial work. While this was not peculiar to this particular issue as we do not normally pay people for contributions to Anvil, it did feel awkward. It felt like we, as employees of CMS, were asking others to contribute and to do the work for us. Was this exploitation? Already this was a clear indication of the kinds of power imbalance which would plague the process. As the editorial work began, we realised that it was unreasonable to expect Harvey, Lusa, and Shemil to do the editing work, and so it fell to us. Now we discovered further awkwardness due to being white people editing articles about black and majority ethnic people’s experience. Even more acutely it was the way in which it felt like white editors were hiding behind majority world faces. We were open about this with Harvey, Lusa, and Shemil, and we talked it through, but for me, it drove home just how crucial organisational representation is. Inviting our friends to help us to edit was a good thing to do, and I think it was moving in the right direction, but the result was to shine a spotlight on the fact that our structures are monochrome white, and inadequate.

CR: Yes, this revealed and unmasked the reality not only of our lack of diversity and representation but also the inadequacy of our structures. I think we began to
see and experience, in small ways, the reality of structural racism. Our structures were such that they hampered any fair and real representation because they just were not there.

This reminded me of Willie James Jennings, the African-American theologian and of his critique of whiteness. His work, particularly After Whiteness, has been very influential on me, and his ideas have frequently come up in our conversations (Jennings 2020). Especially the idea of white patriarchy which results in both hegemony and homogeneity. He explains that white self-sufficient masculinity does not refer to a particular person but rather it is a way of organising life that distorts our identity and the possibility of a richer life together. Moreover, whiteness does not necessarily refer to skin colour but rather to a way of being in and operating in the world, a way of seeing the world and inhabiting the world. It felt like we were suffering from this and were unable, within our current frame, to move beyond this.

In a way, we felt this in our bodies through our feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and that somehow this was just not right. Of course, my feelings are minimal compared to what black people have to put up with every day of their lives but this was an epiphanic moment for me and I hope, began to give me some empathy. Although I am questioning whether this is the just re-centering the white person yet again and a manifestation of my own white fragility?

And then our awkwardness and anxiety were heightened and intensified when we began the editing process.

JB: I agree Cathy, there was definitely something uncomfortable about the whole process – one in which we felt slightly trapped. While I’ve been convinced of the concept of structural injustice since reading liberation theology while studying for my Masters degree, I have to say this was the first time I was aware of being in the middle of it. For all our desire, and indeed the desire of individuals within CMS as a whole to raise and address issues and to be open about the difficult themes of the past and present, it felt like the internal structures we had were always pushing us in the opposite direction.

CR: Yes, I think you are onto something there – isn’t this really what Jennings calls mastery? Mastery is a slave metaphor, straight from the slave plantation. Jennings believes that this metaphor has influenced Western education. Education is about mastery and control. It is literally about slave owners training their sons to sustain any colonial holdings with power and control. This then relates to how we organise our world, how we inhabit our world – a world of efficiency and control for the sake of the master and the master’s sons. This, he claims, is replicated in places far removed from the history of the slaveholding USA because we have all been formed in this way: ‘an ecclesial reality inside a white patriarchal domesticity, shaped by an overwhelming white presence that always aims to build a national and global future that we should all inhabit’ (Jennings 2020, 82). I think this begins to describe some of what we were experiencing in our internal structures – that we were constantly being drawn back into mastery – a way of seeing and operating in the world that we somehow got stuck in. A world of whiteness.

JB: Yes, and we didn’t have a diversity of staff and we didn’t have a pattern of working which naturally anticipated and listened to a diversity of voices. We didn’t have the right people around the table within CMS. This meant that as the editing process progressed,
what came out most clearly was a whole range of institutional anxiety. There was an unusual level of scrutiny for an issue of Anvil from within CMS and some of the questions raised portrayed at least hesitancy and nervousness to get it right. I certainly noticed that in myself and I do now, even as I write this. But even then, there is a need to think about what ‘right’ means and from whose perspective.

I guess this is what has been termed white fragility, where somehow, as white people, we manage to make this about ourselves and our own anxieties rather than actually doing something about it. Robin DiAngelo explains this clearly,

White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism. Challenging this cocoon throws off our racial balance. Because being racially off balance is so rare, we have not had to build the capacity to sustain the discomfort. Thus, whites find these challenges unbearable and want them to stop. (DiAngelo 2019, 112)

Even in this conversation, we need to be careful not to make this about us and our anxieties, but about how this increasing awareness moves us from affect to action. Perhaps one way to look at this is to think about where the anxiety is focused. Is this about my own discomfort, is this about staff, mission partners, supporters? Or is this actually about the concerns around the people who have been and continue to be impacted by the history and structures of colonialism and racism? One area in particular which caused a lot of conversation in the editorial process was the criticism of CMS in one of the Anvil articles, that there hadn’t been an apology over the treatment of Bishop Crowther.

CR: Oh – don’t get me started on apologies! Apologies mean legal and financial redress which is why the Canadian government has never officially apologised for the slaughter of its First Nations children, why the Australian government has not apologised to the Aborigines and why CMS has not apologised to the Maori over land taken in a city in Aotearoa/NZ, despite requests to do so. All this seems to be part of whiteness. Malawian missiologist Harvey Kwiyani reminded us in his Anvil article that we need to get over our white superiority, ‘For mission agencies, engaging in mission in a world where racism and white supremacy are discredited will be a new adventure for most of us, but I am certain it will take us closer to mission as it was intended to be’ (Kwiyani 2020, 13).

It made us wonder if we have ever really looked at ourselves as an organisation and asked who is at the table and more importantly who is not? Because of this absence, we simply are unable to view issues such as an apology from another perspective – perhaps a more relational perspective rather than an economic and utilitarian one. Or are we unable to hear?

For me, the unusual level of anxiety across the organisation pointed to our inability to collaborate across differences. This is simply because there is so little difference as a consequence of our lack of diversity. This is a challenge to all of us, and especially within a mission organisation. I recently came across a lovely (if old-fashioned) phrase by a former CMS General Secretary, Simon Barrington-Ward. He wrote about ‘a fellowship of the unlike’ (Barrington-Ward 1999) – what a great aspiration. This then reminds me of African-American scholar and social activist bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), who writes about eros (hooks 1994, 194–195). This is not meant in a sexual sense but rather in
terms of an energy or passion that drives us towards discovery and wholeness as well as towards co-learning and co-creation of knowledge. This is best achieved when we can collaborate together as ‘a fellowship of the unlike.’ Jennings writes about the crowd that surrounds Jesus in their desire for God. He comments that Jesus brings together people who would prefer not to be together – an interesting challenge. But he also reminds us of God’s power to end hostility and to draw us and all of creation into reconciliation – one that we do not control but one that will recreate and reform us. This starts with community, the crowd. ‘We fight against … the segregation that shapes our worlds, and we work to weave lives together.’ He goes on to explore the concept of forming a contrast community. These communities ‘must be formed on the actual ground in neighbourhoods and living spaces’ (Jennings 2020, 43). This is what we were lacking – the shared living spaces where we could experience what it means to be ‘a fellowship of the unlike’.

Another vexed problem that emerged was time. Our contributors had to get their articles back to us in a very short-time frame which they did and for which we were very grateful. But then somehow the whole production process got slowed down so it made us wonder whose time is more important? Was it the time of the organisation whose priorities seemed to take over so that the Anvil production got pushed further down the list? This irritated me enormously as I felt that people had gone out of their way to contribute and now we could not honour our commitment to the original timeline which we had been given. Perhaps I am just a typical Westerner obsessed with time, but this seemed to me to point to a more profound issue of where priorities lay and whose priorities were more important.

JB: Yes! Somehow, certain people’s time became prioritised over others, not because of conscious choice, but because of the structures that were in place. The theologian and social activist John Hull describes how ‘unjust structures do not develop in order to practice injustice; they develop because they are in someone’s interest’ (Hull 2014, 33). I think this can be seen explicitly in capitalist structures around money, but I’m sure they are also there in the seemingly mundane structures of putting together an issue of Anvil. Who is valued and whom do the structures benefit? John Hull turns to the Old Testament prophetic tradition, one which he thinks is underdeveloped in missiological reflection to the detriment of missiology. He notes that the prophets’ challenge was very often targeted at Israel itself. The prophets weren’t killed because they challenged the structures of injustice in the wider world, but rather because they turned the mirror on Israel and revealed the patterns of life in Israel to be equally unjust, including the priesthood and the temple. It is always going to be uncomfortable to have the mirror turned on us because it shows us that we are not innocent and that despite our desire to do good, we have become complicit in unjust systems. We need to open our ears to hear these prophetic words targeted at us.

CR: I agree. Old Testament Biblical scholar Ellen Davis (2001, 28–29) suggests that when we read Ps 109 we turn it 180 degrees so that it is directed towards us and ask ourselves: ‘Is there anyone in the community of God’s people who might want to say this to God about me/us?’ We are active participants in a rapacious industrial economy, regularly consuming far more than we need of the world’s goods. She then projects this idea onto our great grandchildren’s generation – to say nothing of the present Majority World – who might cry out and lament to God:
Let their memory be cut off from the earth, because they did not remember to act in covenant faith, but hounded a person poor and needy, crushed in heart, even to death. (Ps 109:14-16)

A salutary warning for us here.

JB: If white fragility is the inability to have conversations about race and the problem of structural injustice, then the first action must surely be to listen. The Church of England’s report on race is called, From Lament to Action (2021). Its reflections are not on whether there is institutional racism in the church – the report points to the evidence of that in all previous reports – but rather that we need to move to action. I wonder, however, whether the title is quite right. There were 25 reports on racism in the church in 36 years which made 161 formal recommendations and a realisation that the same recommendations continue to be made (2021, 9). Perhaps if we had truly listened to these prophetic words, we would really have lamented, and having lamented we would have acted authentically. For me, this resonates with our own experience; having published the journal and promoted it, it felt like it was followed by a silence of inaction.

CR: Yes, I remember saying to you that I felt like after it was produced and published, there was a great silence within CMS about it. The edition produced some wider feedback from outside CMS but from within there seemed to be a kind of systemic silence. In fact, the default response has been to set up an Ethnicity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee. On reflection maybe ‘a great silence’ is the right reaction – although I did not think that at the time. I think it would be appropriate if the silence were intentional, reflective and able to absorb and ponder on the pain. I think we do need silence to reflect on our painful past, the legacy of Empire and our difficult and ambiguous present. When I studied the book of Lamentations, recently I was intrigued to note that God’s voice is silent. Biblical scholar Kathleen O’Connor thinks this is a brilliant move on the part of the writer because silence forces us to face the wounds. She writes, ‘God’s silence in Lamentations leaves wounds festering, open to the air and possible to healing. The benefit of exposed wounds is that they become visible and unavoidable. Left exposed, they require us to see, acknowledge, and attend to them’ (O’Connor 2007, 88). Sadly, I don’t think this was the kind of silence we were experiencing – I think it was more a silence around an inability to know how to face this. Brueggemann reminds us that lament can be a form of resistance. The African-American slave spirituals are a good example of this. Perhaps we do need more silence, more lament and then a move to resistance and action. But what would that action be? It feels like the whole system – whiteness, Empire, mastery – needs dismantling – but how? By whom? And can the master’s tools dismantle the master’s house? (Lorde 2018)

JB: I completely agree about different types of silence, Cathy. There is a silence of indifference, and a silence of being overwhelmed. As you say, the silence we need is the silence of repentance and reflection. Reflecting on this, I’m wondering whether the committee, the training course, and the report are all ‘tools of whiteness’. Not that they don’t have their place, but they become the default action to show we are doing something. They give us something constructive to point to but without the kind of lament and reflection you are talking about and can end up maintaining the status quo – as of course the Church of England has noted in From Lament to Action. We also need to question the
ability of a journal issue or academic paper to do this too! As you say, these ‘master’s tools’ on their own certainly don’t seem to be able to dismantle the master’s house.

In thinking about action for me the natural place to turn to is the cycles of action and reflection seen in action research and for me I’m most familiar with theological action research. Some of the key characteristics of theological action research are around collaboration, conversation, and the renewal of practice and understanding (Cameron et al. 2010, 49–60). These practices encourage a diversity of voices around the table, noticing the voices which are missing or not usually heard, paying careful attention to lived practice and having reflective conversations where we anticipate the contribution and disruption of the different voices present (Watkins 2020, 45–46). Theological action research, as already described in the introduction, sees theological disclosure, those epiphanies, occurring when these voices are brought together in real conversations. This means that rather than delegate to a committee to bring back recommendations, the whole organisation follows a pattern of experimentation and reflection, where change is written into the process. The report, the committee, and even the training course anticipate change coming through policy and teaching while the crowd and the cycles of action–reflection anticipate change through the relationships and the reflections done together.

CR: Yes, that reminds me of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s distinction between policy and guidelines. She is a botanist and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potowani Nation and in her wonderful book, Braiding Sweetgrass (Kimmerer 2020, 183–184), which was my favourite read during lockdown, she differentiates between regulations and guidelines. She suggests that guidelines are based on respect and relationship whereas policies are often enforced by the weight of the law. I know we need both but it does seem that the ‘white’ approach of policies, courses, and legal enforcement is not making a lot of progress so far when it comes to enhancing our life together.

This takes me back to Jennings’ metaphor of mastery which we reflected on earlier (Jennings 2020). He maintains that the role and purpose of theological education is to cultivate belonging but instead theological education has become an exercise in mastery. According to Jennings, there are two things that form this distortion. The first is the image of an educated person which is ‘a white self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control and mastery’ (Jennings 2020, 6). The second is that many respond to this image by promoting a homogeneity ‘that aims toward a cultural nationalism’ (Jennings 2020, 6). These factors result in hegemony and homogeneity, neither of which are Gospel values and neither of which will lead us towards ‘a fellowship of the unlike’ but rather towards an individualised faith, utilitarian education and transactional relationships so that many of us experience in the West.

When I read this it just made so much sense to me. It feels like mastery is everywhere: in our government, our institutions, in education, in our churches, our families, and our relationships. Certainly, it has distorted mission in the colonial era. Those early Europeans in new places defined, they designated, they divided ancient tribal groupings, they created borders with straight lines, and they developed racial categories. They challenged and destroyed the vision shared by many indigenous peoples about their sense of identity, their sense of well-being and relationship with the land, creation, and the place. As a New Zealander, I find this a compelling analysis. This is exactly what has happened in my own country of Aotearoa/NZ where the British army fought and killed many Maori who
are the *tangata whenua* (the people of the land), stripped them of their land, stopped them speaking Maori for a period, and tried to define, delimit, control, and master the land and its people. Are we slowly becoming aware of this distortion – not just as it has played out elsewhere in Empire and mission but in our own structures and relationships? Is it exactly this distortion that made the production of *Anvil* so difficult and painful?

JB: Yes and this is where the prophetic voice can help us. I think we need to realise that the prophetic word is never a comfortable word to the powerful. The master doesn’t like to be questioned. The prophetic word is always a disruptive word, because as we’ve already discussed, there are a lot of vested interests which want to keep those structures in place. Amaryah Jones-Armstrong’s reflections on the way *Black Lives Matter* and similar movements interrupt the status quo is really helpful.

The interruptive politics of #BlackLivesMatter and a host of other movements seeking to call attention to the precarity that attends various marginalized forms of life along color lines, border lines, and kinship lines might best be thought of as Spirited interruptions which seek to prompt contemplation. In contemplating the structures and practices that give rise to the inequalities and violences, we are met with the need to interrupt the status quo and confront Christianity’s failures to live justly and walk humbly with our God and our neighbor. We can take the openings these interruptions make available to contemplate the space they provide for rethinking the common good. (Jones-Armstrong 2016, 20)

I think this is what we need to understand. Prophetic voices are spirited interruptions which confront our failures. It’s also interesting to note that she turns to the stance and silence of contemplation as the first action as we mentioned above. Anthony Reddie helps to sharpen this point when he specifically engages mission agencies, ‘It is undoubtedly the case that Western missionary agencies formed a collusive relationship with European hegemony, one that enabled the flourishing of White supremacy while delimiting the agency of black people’ (Reddie 2019). I think we’d like to think of this as being in the past, but as a majority white staff at CMS, how often do we allow our own agency to be disrupted for the flourishing of those from the majority world? What is perhaps even more telling in that question is that agency still remains clearly with white people as we decide whether to allow disruption. But this is what it means to participate in the crowd, not only to permit other voices, but actually to give up power in such a way that we will be disrupted. Perhaps this connects with what Brueggemann has called the myth of scarcity and the liturgy of abundance (Brueggemann 1999). We live in a world where we are told everything is scarce and we are encouraged to hold onto power and get ahead, and yet the liturgy of God is one of abundance. I wonder whether this is another way of understanding mastery and Jennings’ call instead to embrace the Jesus and the crowd. I certainly have experienced this abundance when I have been able to participate in spaces which are not dominated by white voices, but which open up to conversation with and between a diversity of voices; the results have been rich, challenging and enlivening conversations.

CR Yes and Brene Brown debunks the scarcity myth also. She claims that the opposite of scarcity is what she calls ‘wholeheartedness.’ According to Brown, wholehearted living requires living with risk and uncertainty as well as practising gratitude and generosity (Brown 2013). The practice of gratitude challenges the scarcity culture and helps our communities to flourish. In the West, we have grown up in a transactional culture which can...
encourage a more utilitarian approach to life and relationships. What if we lived with more of a gift-culture mentality where we gifted our time, talents, services for the delight of doing so and for the good of the wider community, the crowd. This would then deny a scarcity culture, allow us to live out an abundance mentality and rejoice in the rich diversity of conversation and relationships from many cultures and perspectives.

JB: With any conversation, I think we could probably keep talking about this for a while, but as we finish we agreed we would reflect on what we had learned through the process. So Cathy, what do you feel you have learned?

CR: Gosh, I have learned a lot and this conversation has really opened up so much for me. I have learned about my own white privilege and my white fragility – how easily that emerges and can take over. We are used to being at the centre. It is hard to learn to de-centre myself. I have really appreciated the mastery metaphor and the suggestions of Jennings and bell hooks that we need to experience difference by being in shared living spaces, by listening, and by making space for one another. That will require some intentionality, patience, and time. I have learned to listen to my body – that feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, and discomfort are pointing towards real and genuine issues that need to be faced. As our faith is an embodied faith I think that it is important to listen to what our bodies might be telling us. I have learned that friendship and hospitality are important – but hospitality on other people’s terms, not mine. Perhaps I need to learn to receive more often than to give, to be the vulnerable guest, rather than the bountiful host. I have learned that so much of mission is constructed around a white imaginary and that we need to dismantle and to reimagine that. This means denying mastery, giving up power and making sacrifices. For those of us who are white, this might be God’s greatest disruption in our lives – far more significant that Covid-19. Finally, I have reflected much on mastery – perhaps there is mastery within all of us that we need to acknowledge and repent of. Then we can try to be in the crowd following Jesus, be in those shared living spaces of difference and diversity where disruptions can occur to unmask and challenge our mastery. What about you James – what have you learned?

JB: For me, the fact that this feels like one of the first times I’ve experienced structural injustice reminds me of my own privilege – the papers in the edition of Anvil pointed out how for many these were daily struggles. This is really humbling. Similarly to you Cathy, I’m learning that these emotions – anxiousness, defensiveness, and discomfort – are not to be overcome (mastered!?) with logic and process, but opportunities which can lead to lament and action. It has become clear to me that we cannot deal with this by some sort of tokenistic invitation around representation, but we need a much more radical change. Our organisations and churches need to be these diverse spaces, not just calling on people from the majority world when we need them. But more than that, I am realising how impoverished we are when they are not at the table, how much we are missing out on when we just passively accept a white status quo. I think another phrase that will stick with me is ‘the tools of whiteness’. This helps me to identify the times when we want to turn this into a problem to be dealt with rather than an opportunity to receive the prophetic challenge. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to think about committees, reports and training programmes in quite the same way.

While I am committed to reading more widely, and being more aware, I think my main action is to make sure I’m consciously putting myself in those diverse spaces, and as you say Cathy, receiving hospitality and welcome. As I reflect on the edition of Anvil, I know
that I would have done some things differently, but for me the bigger challenge is to think about how, as CMS, we can be an organisation where those voices are round the table, and there is naturally a diverse team to work on such projects. My hope for the particular journal edition is that it would continue to be one way that people can encounter voices, sit with the discomfort, and be opened up to a richer future. As Dupe Adefala reminded us in her interview in the issue, ‘How rich the kingdom of God is! This is richness that we need to begin to build upon’ (Adefala 2020, 63).

**Concluding remark**

Have we got off too lightly? We are reminded of Anthony Reddie’s challenge to own issues of whiteness as our problem. It is all too easy to hold the structures at arm’s length, not to own that we are part of those structures and that we are complicit. For us, this is just the start of an ongoing reflection, an ongoing struggle, and a commitment to listen, to learn, and to try to change.

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