

Preface

THIS BOOK IS THE result of a conference on Contextual Theology held at United Theological College (UTC), Sydney, Australia, in April 2009. The conference was sponsored by *Communitas*,¹ the Contextual Mission and Theology Program of UTC. *Communitas* was tasked with the role of creating spaces for encounters that are transformative and life changing for people. Its brief was to offer opportunities for the diverse and rainbow people of God to find exciting and life-giving nourishment through the eyes, stories, experiences, and spirituality of “others,” who would then return to their own communities and daily realities in dramatically new ways. The *Communitas* space is one where difference is not only valued but also welcomed and engaged with in mutual respect, compassion, and love. To paraphrase Sarah Mitchell, a former principal of the college, *Communitas* enables the people of God to join God’s missiological adventure of *kingdom building* in the world, by learning with gusto how to live and act together across the many different cultural backgrounds that are God’s gift in creation.² A core theological concern of the *Communitas* program is rooted in the absolute conviction that theory and practice must walk hand in hand and that this is the only way to expose and experience theology at its very best.

So the theology and philosophy behind *Communitas* totally influenced and shaped the agenda, topic, inputs, and content of the conference,

1. The term is borrowed from the anthropologist Victor Turner in reference to a community in process, one that has crossed a threshold, entering an in-between time and space where the process of transformation—of becoming something new and creating new life—takes place. See Turner, *The Ritual Process*, vii. The program is under the directorship of Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, who was appointed to the post in December 2007.

2. Mitchell, “*Communitas of Christ*,” 181.

which was titled “What Has Contextual Theology To Offer the Church of the Twenty-First Century?” The topic of the conference emerged out of the struggle to articulate some answers to concerns about how theology can be in dialogue with life as it is experienced and lived by twenty-first-century Christians who are very diverse themselves and who live in contexts that are extremely diverse and multicultural. The assumption made is that contextual theology is uniquely placed to provide some answers to these concerns, and the speakers were identified exactly because of their social and cultural locations, not to mention their vast contextual theological knowledge and experiences.

Further, for those of us who are in the business of educating, training, and equipping the people of God for mission and ministry in the multicultural world of the twenty-first century, no less than such a paradigm shift in the epistemology of theology is necessary if we are to be effective in that task. It is not too harsh or radical to observe that in many places in Europe, and in the Western Christian context generally, our theologizing continues to be rather pale and monochrome because theory is still too remote from practice. And even in the Global South, Christians struggle to develop understandings of and ways to communicate Christianity that is free of such Western influence and open to the riches of local contexts.

Surely a sign of good health, as opposed to a sickly pallor, is vibrant color and energy. The conference and this resulting publication are our attempts to articulate what we believe should be characteristic of theology for the colorful and vibrant twenty-first century!

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