

*Jenny Plane Te Paa*

*‘Ivory Towers, Muddy Grounds – distinctive spaces, distinctive occupants, distinctive injustice’?*

This is my first time to visit Birmingham and thus to Queens, an institution about which I have heard much and always these have been things of encouragement.

My desire to visit has heightened over recent months as I have been so blessed to meet quite unexpectedly with many of you in other gatherings in other parts of God’s world! Just in the last four months I have met with Val Ogden, Bishop Michael Doe, Dietrich Werner, with Omana and with Glory!

It really is such an honour to be here with you all. I am profoundly appreciative of your invitation to be with you over these next few days for this timely and very important consultation.

I am especially delighted to be reacquainted with my beloved brother and dear friend George Wauchope for it was his urging for me to come that initially influenced my decision to make the 30-hour trek literally across the entire world for the second time in just three weeks!

However it is because George and I, (*as I am sure all of us here also*) share in some way an abiding passion for the pursuit of God’s peace with justice for all God’s people, especially for those who suffer so needlessly in too many parts of God’s world, that in fact we are all here having made sacrifices of one sort or another.

Of all the conferences I have been invited to speak at over the past few years I have to say yours certainly has the most tantalizing title by far! “*Ivory Towers, Muddy Grounds*” is such an evocative title – in fact I so wish I had the artistic skill to capture visually something of the imagery this title so readily evokes.

However, limited as I am to *literary creativity*, what I did was take the two descriptors apart (*just for now!*).

I chose first to explore the popularly alleged origins of ‘*Ivory Tower*’. I reread the extraordinarily erotic Song of Solomon, ‘*thy neck is as a tower of ivory . . .*’ and on and on I read, captivated afresh by the enduring intensity of the words of that particular piece of scripture.

Try as I might though I could not make a connection between the context, the subtext, the pretext even, of that beautiful love song and the not so beautiful meaning of what is now popularly referred to as 'the ivory tower'.

The original scriptural referent and the popular contemporary ascription are by now very seriously detached from one another.

One of the more up to date definitions of '*the ivory tower*', which I came across on my intrepid Google searching, was instantly more recognisable. "*From the 19th century it has been, originally ironically, used to designate a world or atmosphere where intellectuals engage in pursuits that are disconnected from the practical concerns of everyday life. As such, it usually has a pejorative connotation, denoting a willful disconnect from the everyday world; esoteric, over-specialized, or even useless research; and academic elitism, if not outright condescension by those inhabiting the ivory tower*".

That pretty much sums things up doesn't it and sadly as I pondered this very wordy definition I couldn't help as an experienced theological educator but resonate with it.

The sentiments expressed in the Google quote are not too dissimilar to those contained in my own frequently critical analysis of contemporary Anglican theological educators and (*especially but not exclusively*) of the theological educational enterprise – the sacred professional sphere within which we are all so privileged to work.

*'Willfully disconnected from the practical concerns of every day life . . . esoteric . . . elitist, condescension by those who inhabit the ivory tower.'*

These are indeed akin to sentiments I have oft expressed in my almost twenty years now of struggling to place in the centre (*not on the optional margins*) of the curriculum agenda of my own college, the increasingly disturbing socio-political, *muddy ground* missional reality of post-colonial indigenous peoples; the still deeply embedded realities of sexism, clericalism and racism; the cruelty of economic injustice, its corollary of debilitating poverty and thus of causal human suffering; of inter-faith studies; of peace studies . . . not it seems, do these things come easily, readily, naturally for those at least, who occupy the top floors of the '*ivory towers*' of theological academia?

My College like so many others around the world has suffered from what I describe as *critical curriculum deficit*.

Even as I now know the historic practice of my college is not that unusual in the global scheme of things, I have never been able to accept what I believe to be the theological indefensibility, let alone the intellectual immorality, this *deficit* represents for our particular academic discipline.

I have never been able to accept the theological indefensibility, let alone the intellectual immorality which curriculum deficit represents for those for whom theological education is in theory at least, intended to benefit.

I am referring here to those who through no fault of their own are destined for lives of struggle and of suffering in the humanly created and humanly sustained '*murky, messy, often massive, muddy grounds*' of our world.

These *muddy unpredictable and often despised places* are those marred by war and by hunger, by poverty, injustice and by terror. It is here that dwell those who I would want to argue are those who are surely *the least among us*. It is these of God's people and the places where they struggle for decency and sufficiency of life that I would want to argue are surely *together* what constitute *God's chosen, God's preferential option mission field*.

How then has it occurred that the often devastating, life threatening and life denying experiences of those who constitute the priority *muddy ground mission field* are so easily either ignored, minimized, mis-translated, overlooked or even lost in the core teaching narratives of theology?

Doesn't this mean that those of us who name ourselves Christian and Anglican are seriously remiss in terms of honouring our own mandated commitment to God's mission: to the transformation of unjust structures, to the ministry of teaching and of preaching, to the delivery of just social services, to take seriously the plight of the earth entrusted to our care?

How come any self-respecting academic theologian who currently occupies an all important and controlling place in the ivory tower would not want to accord the highest preferential option upon the needs of those whom Jesus himself instructed us to care for?

How has it occurred that the extraordinarily challenging faith experience of those who constitute the *muddy ground mission field* is unable to be translated into the lingua franca of the theological academy?

How is it that so few of the faithful are ever able to be drawn from the mission field communities of suffering *into* the ivory tower where they could **as partners** assist in *subjectifying* their experience in their own languages instead of being perpetually *objectified* in their distress by those who speak usually only one language and who are generally monocultural in their understandings and ways of behaving as well?

All of this is why, as a bilingual indigenous woman directly descended from the first generation of baptized Anglican evangelists and Priests in Aotearoa New Zealand, (*those whose lives were to be tragically inscribed by the resultant effects of colonization*), I have chosen to focus my life's academic work in the broad fields of race and gender politics *and* theological education. Mine is a long overdue redemptive project.

Let me return for a moment to the issue of critical deficit in the curriculum. I often ask myself is this *critical deficit* inadvertently intentional or just simply inadvertent? I cannot in spite of the powerful temptation so to do at times, accede to the populist claim that the deficit is intentional.

Well of course the answer to the question, *intentional or inadvertent?* depends to the largest extent on those who occupy the places of power in the tower; the places where authority resides; where crucial political decisions are taken about control and participation; about the allocation and distribution of resources; about curriculum; pedagogy; assessment; about who gets to teach and who gets to learn; about who gets to benefit; about who gets to succeed and about who is destined not to!

The only others in the tower (*apart from those with institutional authority*) from time to time of course are students, those whose carefully controlled entry through the always narrow gate reduces most except the tiny and elite next generation of leaders, to being merely hapless and powerless recipients of the theological educational largesse of the tower controllers.

Harsh imagery it certainly is but the real question is – is it true?

Is this really a fair portrayal of our beloved theological seminaries, our places of theological education, our special places for teaching and learning the things of God, our sacred places for forming ourselves as teachers and as students to be ever more sacrificial in our behaving, to be ever more humble in our offering of ourselves as servant leaders in God's world?

Well just three weeks ago I was at a meeting of women theological educators held at the International Studies Centre at Canterbury.

There we were drawn from almost every continent of God's world and drawn especially from minority and '*underside*' political and ecclesial contexts. But nevertheless there we were gathered *and* trying to strategise ways of increasing the numbers of women who are both appropriately skilled and appropriately '*freed*' to be considered for leadership appointments in theological education, locally and globally.

We were especially concerned to give priority focus for this leadership development, advocacy and mentoring project to those women from erstwhile '*minority*' communities across the global Anglican Communion (*in this case we were defining minority mostly in terms of geography and ethnicity*). Translated from English into even plainer English, this meant we are seeking with urgency for women from post-colonial indigenous communities; women from sites of particular political struggles; women who have little chance of gaining access to the higher levels of theological educational studies; women who have little chance of achieving leadership within their own Provinces – in other words, women from the *muddy ground missional* realities of life on the underside. Women whose intelligence, experience, wisdom, generosity and theological visioning are of incalculable value to any institution!

Now, surely the fact that we even had to have such a consultation is proof positive enough that women are *grossly* and as it turns out, *unjustly*, under-represented in leadership within the *ivory towers* of institutionally based theological education and certainly '*minority*' women (however '*minority*' is to be defined!) are virtually invisible in all of our essentially elitist seminary and theological colleges sites. Where my sisters and brothers are the '*minority*' women leaders, locally or globally, whom you can name who are in significant leadership positions in theological education either denominationally or ecumenically?

In just three or so weeks time I will be at the triennial meeting of the Anglican Indigenous Network where one of the priority issues on the agenda is this very same issue although not so much of under-representation, but rather that of virtually non-representation, of unacceptable invisibility, in terms of leadership in theological education. I ask therefore the same question. Where my sisters and brothers are the indigenous leaders both men and women who you can name who are in significant leadership positions in theological education either denominationally or ecumenically?

Now there are some who would say there is a perfectly reasonable set of explanations for this situation and these range from the *pathological* explanation – the one about why women and indigenous people are simply not predisposed to the rigorous intellectual demands of academic endeavour, at least not those which are of course prerequisite to any eligibility for leadership.

Women are of course (*it is popularly alleged*) additionally *prone* to being distracted by our prior commitments to children, to spouses or other care giving duties! In the case of indigenous women all of the above apply and of course indigenous men and women are also *allegedly* so readily distracted by all of our prior commitments to tribal duties especially those, which are to do with the wellbeing and care of our communities.

It is because of these last mentioned cultural practices that indigenous peoples are so readily deemed ‘*unreliable*’ by those who are now numerically, economically and politically dominant and authoritative in our societies. Our *alleged* propensity also for taking inordinate amounts of time for tribal family related duties is also so readily and quite uncritically, deemed irresponsible!

Then there is the very unintelligible *mathematical* explanation – this is the one, which rationalizes, that women and indigenous peoples *with appropriate qualifications for leadership* actually hardly exist and therefore it is very difficult to find any of us when appointments arise.

In some post-colonial contexts this argument assumes even more bizarre proportions when it is claimed that as a result of intermarriage with colonial descendants then ‘*real*’ indigenous peoples (*meaning with full native blood quantum and therefore presumably with full native predisposition whatever on earth that might mean!*) are also difficult to identify.

And so ostensibly without the *numbers* available for appointment what else is there for well meaning liberals to do but throw their hands up in feigned despair declaring they have tried everything possible to find a suitably ‘*qualified*’ minority person, none have appeared on the horizon and so by default, ` dominant population group appointments continue to be made.

Nowhere it seems is deeply compassionate, highly analytical prayer filled thought, involving parties from both the *places of ivory* and the *places of mud*, being given to just what is required to radically disrupt and

permanently transform the humanly created and humanly sustained injustice that is represented in the *titular dichotomy* we have before us.

Nowhere it seems are the critical questions about how much more enriched we all stand to be from embracing the fullness of all of God's created humanity. Nowhere it seems are the critical justice questions about tokenism being asked?

Why do we need and or want '*under-represented groups*', '*minority people*', '*indigenous people*', and '*women*', in the academy, in the ivory tower?

Is it merely to salve the collective conscience of those who hold power and authority in the tower who can then triumphantly declare, '*see, we have one or two*'?

Or (*and I pray!*) is it just faintly possible that consultations such as this are indicative, are the beginning cracks in the previously impenetrable walls of the towers?

Are we possibly witness to the beginnings of real recognition of just what gross institutional injustice our humanly constructed and maintained theological educational ivory towers have come now to represent.

Is this about *this Queen's ÔtowerÕ* wishing to transform itself into becoming a willing agent capable of radical revisioning, of risky restructuring and of very real redistributive practice?

Is it in order that all *in this tower* on this day might now be poised to recognize that real missional justice can only be achieved when *all* are involved in the responsibility for identifying, alleviating and then eliminating the conditions of the muddy ground – when real Christian charity is understood as beginning not from the safe haven of our own homes but from within the experience of the insecure, unpredictable, despised places and peoples, those whose context we are each in our practiced avoidance, responsible for creating and sustaining.

Real Christian charity can only begin with each one of us committing ourselves unconditionally to realise every human being's right to have a home – one free of the dehumanizing mud of enslavement, of hunger, of poverty, of preventable disease, violence, discrimination, of a poisoned toxic environment . . . isn't this what self-respecting theological educators would want our call to the ministry of teaching of and for God's mission to be working toward? Isn't this what we understand we are each called to do

when daily we say as we pray to God, ‘*that thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*’?

My friends, we have work yet to do! The imagery we have before us in this amazing title is *tragically* not merely visual, it is as we all know, very deeply embedded in the institutional and attitudinal realities of our beloved ecclesial environment.

We can however (*thanks be to God!*) always begin the redemptive journey for God’s justice. There is no official starting line for this amazing journey; only a starting *place* and it sure isn’t within the ivory tower! Rather it is in that *place* within each and everyone of us, where we more intuitively recognise the *suffering other* and we find ourselves finally being unable to look away, where we find ourselves no longer able to stay silent in the face of injustice of any kind.

At the Canterbury meeting I developed a set of ideas based on three guiding principles or practices, which have helped me narrow down how I want to focus my own educational leadership practice. I described these as not necessarily the ‘fruits’ of my experience but rather the hard nuts of ongoing struggle. I repeat them again here for your consideration.

Firstly as teachers we must surely be involved in *institutional activism* or that unending need to strategise and agitate creatively and relentlessly for ways of *normalizing* the ecclesial educational environment so that ultimately any one of God’s peoples leadership in all spheres of church life is universally perceived as natural, as rightful, as a God given normative state of affairs!

Gone then would be the exclusion zones, gone then would be the nonsensical, ridiculous, cruel practices of selective human exclusion. Gone then would be the inherently stupid and theologically indefensible ways of trying to justify why the humanity of women, young people and gay people is somehow lesser than that of any other distinctive group within any given society.

In this idealised scenario all would find ourselves relating without fear, suspicion, prejudice, bigotry. Present instead would be the deeply spiritual instinct for witnessing to the inherent goodness, richness, incalculable value of all of God’s diverse peoples ∅ all created perfectly in God’s own image and likeness and all therefore eligible for any place at all in the sacred institution we call Church!

This then is called, the achieving the '*kingdom of God*' project!

It is fortunately only a once in and for all of lifetime project!

Seriously though this one is profoundly complex and elusive and while I don't have time now to traverse all of the necessary points of activism, I have already mentioned just a couple.

I suspect too that we all already know that it is only through increasing our own theological literacy as well as that of many many more of those of our sisters and brothers from the *dark places* of life's struggles, that we can even begin *together* to more confidently address all of those myriad theologically indefensible bases which are readily asserted by way of justifying the historic exclusion and subordination of those who are either born into or who are deemed through no fault of their own, to be deserving of, *only the mud*.

Secondly I raise the principle and practice of *politicised mentoring*. This is about intentionally raising up the next generation of minority or previously excluded leaders. It has to be intentional, it has to be political and it has to be radically disruptive of tired old patterns of institutional self-preservation.

By this I am imagining strategizing for best ways of creating prescriptive opportunities and appropriate mentoring for those identifiably capable of achieving at the highest levels of theological scholarship but who are currently structurally, attitudinally, physically and economically denied access to the resources necessary not only to pursue educational advancement but indeed to leadership possibilities as well.

What is needed here I believe is a global redistributive strategy and not just one of localized and ultimately self-interested benevolence.

Here is something of a two-fold project. Firstly there is a need to identify those *capable* of and *deserving* of, achieving in theological education, (*just a couple of minor subjective categories in here!*).

Critical questions arising include, who does the identifying and the mentoring and why? Who ought to be involved in the project and why? What is the difference between mentoring and patronizing in cross-cultural contexts? What resources are needed, who has them, who needs them, who decides upon their potential re-distribution? Who really benefits from the

entire process and from the outcome? What does all of this have to do with prevailing models of theological education?

My third principle is to do with what I describe as capacity for *spiritually intellectualised re-visioning* of theological education. Here I am suggesting that it is actually *'only'* curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, in fact the entire ecclesial learning environment, which requires revisioning!

Curriculum for whom and for what, curriculum by whom and with whom? Pedagogical differences are essential but who decides upon the differences, which really matter? Fair assessment is never neutrally achievable so how is justice best served?

The politics of theological education as we have all experienced these are as potent and as critical as those in any other form of education! And it is true that these politics do take on a very specific intensity for those of us endeavouring to find strategic ways forward into a new and open future freed of all the unnecessary colonial, tribal, classist, sexist, clericalist or any other *'excess baggage'*.

For a start though while all of this is I believe of critically urgent importance I have always found the best way to proceed in life is in the same way I am now teaching my little grand daughters to be and this is with one gentle but increasingly confident step at a time.

And so all we need is what we have so magically found quality time to do here in this clearly proudly *not so ivory of towers* and that is to create intentional prayerful holy space for purposeful conversation and for mutually respectful listening.

We have set aside time to focus upon envisioning together what is needed to enable all the people of God to be moved toward a future richly imbued with every imaginable and necessary diversity, every rightful and God-given promise of freedom for flourishing - a future finally utterly radicalized for us all by its unmistakable, undeniable, missional relevance!!

For now then I wish you every Lenten blessing as we move once again with deepest devotion toward the time of our Lord's sacrifice made so utterly selflessly and offered with such abundant love in order that we might all have such fullness of life.

Surely then the least we can do in grateful response to God is to ensure all of our efforts are similarly directed toward ensuring that same fullness of

life is indeed available to all in God's world and not just to some. *Injustice, especially injustice in theological education, has to end with each one of us.*  
Amen.

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