In 2015, as we gathered this volume’s contributions about Australian Baptist cultural diversity and worship, we both had the opportunity to travel and learn from some other contexts. Such opportunities continue to influence and shape our work as practical theologians and missiologists. The churches of Australia continue to be blessed by the presence of Christian sisters and brothers who have arrived in Australia to live, work, and worship alongside us. The culturally varied church life which emerges, not without its tensions, serves as a vital reminder that much remains to be done if our churches are to effectively minister and witness in the culturally diverse cities and towns of Australia.

Each of us has invested in this second volume of the New Wineskins series because we believe that the church is immeasurably stronger where it engages with the cultural riches of “every nation under the heavens”.

During 2015, I (Darrell) travelled to Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Korea, and the UK. In each of these places I engaged with church and mission leaders from around the world. The range of local, regional, and global experiences that were shared in each of these venues was truly amazing.

In Korea I was privileged to lead the Bible Study for thirty Korean mission agency and church leaders and a further twenty-nine mission agency and church leaders from around the world. Together, sixty mission leaders reflected on the implications of the church growth that Luke reports in Acts 11: growth in a culturally diverse congregation. The Korean Global Mission Leaders’ Forum (KGMLF) was intentional in its ethnic inclusivity: thirty Koreans and thirty non-Koreans from the USA, UK, Netherlands, Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil, and other Asians from Myanmar, India, and China. For such a small gathering this was a triumph of ethnic diversity and representation.

Korea has often been heralded as one of the more ethnically homogenous nations in the world with a cultural worldview that many in the West find challenging. My involvement with the KGMLF encouraged me to consider the rapidly changing nature of Korean society — increasingly open to the influence and impulses of
the global church. As Koreans present at KGMLF became aware that I was on the faculty of Morling College, many approached me and expressed appreciation for the work of my colleague, Mike Frost, and his writings on missional theology. Nobody was more surprised than Mike to learn that he had such a wide readership in a land that many people might assume to be wedded irreversibly to the idea of the megachurch.

In Korea, it is Australian ideas (and those from elsewhere in the world) that introduce the element of cultural diversity and profoundly shape the worship experience of Korean Christians. This second volume of New Wineskins presents us with a more familiar set of portraits from our own backyard. However, it will be important for us to avoid letting their familiarity lull us into a sense that everything is therefore fine and that the Baptist churches of Australia have achieved the vision of a truly ethnically and culturally integrated life of worship and witness. Many of us will recognise that there is still a long way to go.

That could not have been better reinforced than with the presentation of the Director of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) Dr Ruth Powell, at the 7th International Lausanne Researchers’ Conference, meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2015. Her presentation pointed to the cultural diversity of the wider family of churches in Australia and demonstrated that there is still work to be done in addressing misunderstanding, division, and a lack of cooperation. I’m personally grateful that elements of Ruth’s presentation in Kuala Lumpur feature here in this volume, in an article co-authored with Ian Duncum.

As I’ve worked on editing each of the chapters in this volume, I’ve come to appreciate that there are many fine minds, open hearts, and willing hands which are engaging with the increasing cultural diversity of Australia and people who are working to ensure that this continues to be a source of enrichment for our shared life together in Christ as well as a resource for our Spirit-inspired ministry and mission to our culturally diverse neighbourhoods, workplaces, and families.

Also during 2015, I (Darren) travelled to Pretoria, South Africa, for a practical theology conference. The conference input was inspiring, but the country visit was especially insightful. In talking to local people, reading Archbishop Tutu’s No Future Without Forgiveness, and as I learned about the country’s history and its current political and social challenges, I realised that so much is related to cultural diversity and ethnic division. Sadly, this was reinforced by poor theology and the way churches worshipped, until a different story captured people’s imaginations.
The Apartheid Museum had a special display on the life of Nelson Mandela. One of the displays celebrated how he had said: “I will pass through this world but once, and I do not want to divert from my task, which is to unite the nation”. Of course Mandela’s leadership was incredible in uniting the nation and bringing hope for a new day of reconciliation. The country made huge steps forward under his Presidency and the Truth and Liberation Commission. But most South Africans — black, white, and coloured — would say they have now taken a step backward, and that ethnic difference underlies many of the social challenges in the country.

I left South Africa with two strong convictions. Firstly, I was convinced that as Christians we need to offer prophetic leadership and compassionate service for the problems and dilemmas society faces. South Africa is in desperate need of that, it was obvious. But Australia also needs leaders from civil society and the church who will take an interest in issues that are challenging our neighbourhoods — not be preoccupied with what happens within the walls of the church.

Secondly, I realised that among the areas where we need more thoughtful theological reflection and practical action — whether in South Africa, Australia, or almost anywhere on the globe — are our approach to cultural diversity and how we relate interculturally, including how we shape the life of church and our worship together. That is why I enjoyed and appreciated reading the contributions in this volume.

There is still more work to be done — these topics demand our most careful theologising and best thinking. For example, another area we are convinced needs more attention is how our churches welcome and include the contributions of first generation migrants, and then how to best continue to connect with 1.5, second, and third generation young people in nurturing their faith and developing their leadership potential. That may be a key topic of our next National Baptist Symposium and the third New Wineskins volume.

The invitation to imagine and use new wineskins encourages us to be open to new forms and approaches of cooperating with what God is doing in our communities. In these New Wineskins volumes, we invite you to keep reflecting with us, as readers and contributors to future symposia or publications, what “new wineskins” are needed? And as the cultural diversity and disconnect from church increase in Australia, what are the needs and opportunities for transforming our churches and mission?