

## Supporting GMH colleagues and students

U-Wen Low, University of Birmingham

[u.low@bham.ac.uk](mailto:u.low@bham.ac.uk)

A quick introductory note: as with all advice, it's helpful for me to point out that these are contextually dependent, and will not be equally effective for everyone reading. What I've done is provided a broad comment about each topic heading, and then some specific tips; you are welcome to skip through to tips if you are pressed for time, though I do invite you to read my reflections on each topic.

Looking back through these, I think my comments can more or less be boiled down to two key suggestions: firstly, learning to be self-aware of one's own position and privilege, and secondly, understanding that promoting a GMH person's work is not going to harm you.

### **General Teaching:**

One of the most difficult challenges with teaching is the fact of the structure that surrounds us: we are ensconced within a deeply Western, heavily bureaucratised, inherently discriminatory institution (the university). Within that, we as academics are the standard-bearers for our institutions and for education more broadly. This means that we represent not only our disciplines, but also Western education to students from all around the world. We are, for many students, the most visible part of tertiary education. We need to be mindful of the way that our actions can perpetuate or challenge the systems around us; so often, we can inadvertently reinscribe colonial ideologies upon students, creating a vicious cycle. We can break out of the ways that we have been taught and include alternatives.

Tips:

- Diversify your reading lists. Students do notice! For example: do you have non-white, non-male scholars on your reading lists? This doesn't just mean including non-white names who are doing "reader-response" work, but those whose work falls firmly within the realm of "traditional" historical-critical work.
- Ask questions about the sources of knowledge. Are our assumptions Western-centric – and should they be? How might you help your students to grapple with these assumptions?
- The obvious and the usual: make sure that folk are given opportunities to share in seminars. I use digital tools alongside in-person interactions to make sure this can happen (good for neurodiverse students too!).
- Create opportunities for critical self-reflection in class – and don't be afraid to model this yourself!
- Encourage or spotlight a range of methods and approaches where appropriate.

- I'm sure many of you already do this very well, but continue to allow students to voice their opinions where appropriate and encourage their (critical) voice.

### **General Support:**

Here, I hesitate to tell colleagues how to manage their time; everyone's workload and expectations are different, and I am a firm believer in not over-investing in work. However, here are some approaches that I've found helpful. Most of these pertain not only to GMH students, but also LGBTQ+ students and indeed pretty well everyone.

- Find ways to make yourself approachable; it can be intimidating to approach a professor as it is *especially* for a young undergraduate. Renaming "office hours" to "drop-in" hours might be helpful, as might be explaining to students that they are genuinely welcome.
- I keep a small box of chocolate or snacks in my office as a way of breaking the ice with anyone who comes to speak with me during my drop-in hours.
- Listen, and don't speak, when a student is telling you about what they are going through. Empathise, but realise you don't actually understand, and can't put yourself into their position. If you really must tell a story that shows that you can empathise, it doesn't need to go for more than about 10 seconds. The person has shown you a lot of trust in approaching you, and you do not need to turn their disclosure into an opportunity for you to tell them about yourself.
- International students and GMH local students face different challenges! Be sure to be clear about who you are dealing with. International students in particular face draconian requirements and it is helpful to be aware of them (and that their requests are often genuinely urgent). I find that international students' expectations can be quite different, so draw clear boundaries with them.
- Show allyship however you can, in ways that you are comfortable with – this helps students to know you are "safe". For example, I display a rainbow flag on my staff lanyard as a way of signalling to LGBTQ+ students that I accept them without reservation.
- Feel free to never explain a culture that isn't your own.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, do participate and help support cultural events. These are important! Though, note that the point above becomes all the more important.
- A very helpful way of speaking with folk is to turn imperative statements into questions or suggestions. There will of course be times when you need to be as directive and clear as possible, but otherwise, I wonder if tweaking your language might yield better results.

### **Specialised support:**

This section pertains specifically to ways that you can support GMH students in their identities as GMH students. I find a helpful way to think about it is that GMH students may have slightly different needs and opportunities in ways similar to neurodiverse students. The more aware you are of the challenges and opportunities, the better you will be able to provide support, or at least empathise with the challenges that they are going through.

- Sign up to newsletters and groups to keep updated about opportunities. This doesn't cost you anything, apart from a couple of minutes a week. For example, many universities will have racial equality groups which might advertise scholarships or job opportunities for particular ethnic groups.
- If you know that you have GMH students who want to go further, keep an eye out for scholarships, etc. since often students do not hear about these opportunities, or have imposter syndrome.
- Be specific in offering to do things that you might do for normal students like writing reference letters, since quite often GMH students might not feel able to ask for such support.
- Use your position to make introductions, especially to senior scholars. Your networking ability is able to substantially boost a student's profile and create opportunities for them! If you bring a PhD student along to a conference, don't abandon them, but introduce them to folk and invite them to things.
- Be aware that GMH students can face a range of structural challenges, some of which are invisible (and incomprehensible!) to you. So what you think is a "simple" solution might not be all that simple, or might not work. Don't be frustrated, but take the time to understand if they're willing to share.
- Institutional structures are not designed to account for GMH / cultural / religious requirements (e.g. classes on Fridays, Lunar New Year, etc). You likely aren't in a position to solve this, but you can make it less painful, or acknowledge the challenges somehow.
- Be aware of your own positionality. For example, as a cisgendered heterosexual male scholar, I tend to be very hesitant to supervise feminist-oriented work unless I am specifically asked by the student. I find this particularly important for dissertations which are identity-bound; if you are unable to relate, you simply won't understand why certain things are important to your student, and may miss important nuances. A helpful way to solve this might be to see if you have colleagues with the requisite expertise who are willing to co-supervise, or occasionally have conversations with such students.

## Colleagues:

It's an unspoken fact amongst GMH colleagues in the academy that we carry additional burdens simply by virtue of who we are. Our bodies are used to show the institution's commitment to diversity, but at the same time, the institutions are hesitant to allow us to meaningfully contribute (e.g. decolonising the curriculum).

Many of us are passionate about shouldering the burden of "doing" decolonial work because it affects us, in institutions that actively discourage such work and structures which repress it—we effectively have no choice about fighting every day, because we experience consistent microaggressions from the systems. Frustratingly, others are selected and then rewarded for participating in such work, which can often be undertaken by institutions as a box-ticking exercise which doesn't appropriately consult stakeholders, and doesn't effect meaningful change.

- If there are GMH folk in your orbit who are engaged in decolonising work, it's generally a good idea to ask them to participate, or at least consult them, if you want to undertake work that challenges structures. It's incredibly frustrating, for example, when EDI or wellbeing positions are filled by folk who do not engage with GMH issues at all.
- As often visible minorities, GMH students might feel more comfortable speaking to us about their problems – we are automatically "safe" because we are likely to understand the intersecting issues. We are more aware of issues and so become the "go-to" people for solving issues, especially because we often face these issues ourselves. There's no solution for this beyond hiring additional GMH folk, really.
- Given the UK tertiary sector's increasing dependence on international students, the value of GMH is increasingly clear if we speak multiple languages; students have a distinctly different experience with us.
- We have to be the ones raising issues and fighting for change and can often be seen as nuisances. But we are the ones who are hurt, are affected, are oppressed by the day-to-day in ways that our colleagues are not. For example, the race riots last year, or colleagues who are encouraging hanging England flags on the streets. In these moments, be aware of your positionality, and be aware that you might be touching on an issue that is deeply meaningful – and scary – to us. Please don't make the moment about you and how sad you feel about the issue, either. We are the ones whose lives are implicitly threatened simply by existing.
- Lending your support / being an ally sometimes just means being there. Your voice doesn't need to be heard, and indeed can detract from others in the room.
- At the same time, because your voice carries a different type of weight, you might need to be willing to stick your neck out for us. Don't be a passive bystander. Raise the right questions in the forums we are not privy to.
- Don't come into decolonial spaces unless invited. Even then, be slow to speak. Certain folk have a bad habit of coming in and dominating the

conversation and making things about them (women especially understand what I'm talking about).

- Promotions committees at universities are generally not interested in rewarding "being a good mentor to GMH students," or decolonial work that can't be measured in official ways (like the Race Equality Charter). Some of you sit on these committees and can change these directions – I encourage you to look beyond what's on paper to the substance of the colleagues.
- A particular challenge that I have found is that we are often the only visible minorities in our departments, which means our attendance or non-attendance at things is noticed and commented upon. Of course, this extends to other areas of representation. We are called upon to give our time for photoshoots, or to contribute our opinions to surveys, without any recompense for our labour.
- On the note of surveys – you will *rarely* see a true opinion reflected from a GMH person if the survey asks for specific sets of identifying information. We are incredibly easy to identify if we provide one or two characteristics, and some of us have very good reason to be suspicious of institutional guarantees of survey anonymity.
- Some of us GMH folk undertake research and writing work that fall outside the realm of traditional biblical studies, and we might not "look the part," or our CVs might not show the same level of "sustained research work" because (for example) we had to work through our entire education and so could not publish at the same rate, or needed to take any available job to make ends meet, or simply thought it more important to publish on the decolonisation in our native lands rather than spend months polishing a submission to *JBL*. Willie Jennings talks about this in the first few pages of *After Whiteness*. I urge you to look beyond the tangibles when hiring and consider the intangible value that GMH folk bring to your departments.
- One of the most useful things that a non-GMH scholar can do to support GMH scholars is simply to use their position and networks to help publicise our work. I am eternally grateful to my mentors, friends, and colleagues who have put my name forward, and I will always do the same for my own students and colleagues.
- For those who are new to the country especially, the UK can be a minefield of traditions mixed with strongly held opinions. This is even more clearly an issue within our institutions, which have their own traditions or culture which might not actually be explained. I suggest that it doesn't cost you anything to explain things (especially if someone is new), and indeed to take the time to make sure they are appropriately comfortable and have been made aware of implicit requirements.

### **Discipline specific:**

- To do contextual work, which is often devalued and ridiculed, most of us have undertaken the same training as you do, we just choose to go in a different direction which is less “valued” and indeed often less “career-building.” It’s not that we cannot do the historical-critical work; many of us just don’t see it as important in the same way compared to our work.
- Here’s an idea: if you’re doing edited volumes, why not include one or two GMH perspectives?
- I’d suggest that it’s helpful for the academy to consider some of the hurdles we place before others in biblical scholarship, and the implications of these hurdles. For example: a submission of mine was rejected from a high-profile journal with the rationale being that I had not appropriately engaged with French / German literature in writing my article. This piece of feedback was utterly ludicrous for an ethnically Chinese person who had grown up in Malaysia and Australia – I simply would never have had the opportunity to learn French or German to the requisite level, and quite frankly, given my position would have found the extensive literature from South Korean scholarship to be more helpful. Such gatekeeping serves only to ossify our discipline and ensure that it is impenetrable to all but the wealthy and those who have been born to the right places at the right time.
- Politics of citation – in the 80s, Richard Delgado made an important contention that for the most part, white male scholars cite white male scholars. We know that this is very much the case in biblical scholarship, and we have the power to change that. Broaden your citations!
- Even if it doesn’t interest you, why not read some of the work coming from GMH scholars that isn’t historical-critical? You might learn something about yourself, or even the texts around which we all gather.

### **Some solutions:**

Allow me to conclude by offering just a couple of suggestions of ways we might begin to shift the balance. I’m by no means advocating that we eliminate white scholars, for example, or even cease using the well-worn historical-critical methods we all know and love. I suggest that change can and should be incremental, and at the same time, there is always more that we can do to make things better for others. To me, perhaps the most important point to make is that these issues are so often *intersectional* – that is to say, issues that affect GMH folk often find correlates in issues that affect disabled folk, or women, or LGBTQ+ folk. My hope is that as we find solutions for one, we think also of the other, and become an increasingly inclusive community of scholars who continue to be united around the texts of the New Testament.

- Hire more GMH folk! See my earlier point about some of the “hidden” work that GMH folk do. We will make a difference in your institutions, and students

will be excited to see scholars who look like them. This includes consciously appointing GMH folk to committees or panels.

- On that note – consider who you have on your hiring and promotions panels. Are they filled with white male scholars who will preference white male scholarship?
- Create and publicise scholarships for GMH folk – people will apply for things if they know such things exist!
- Create opportunities in crowded spaces, and approach specific people to take part in these opportunities since they may not feel comfortable putting themselves forward. For example: at an academic conference session, you might create a space for inviting a GMH scholar or student to share amidst the usual submitted papers.
- Encourage and support GMH up-and-coming scholars. Their success will not eclipse or detract from yours.
- Find your own ways of creating opportunity and encouraging scholarship. For example, I always preference non-white, often female PhD students who want to do non-traditional biblical studies work.
- Read (and cite) work by non-white scholars, including from journals you might not normally cite. David Horrell's recent special issue an excellent example.
- Champion decolonising work – not just by reading it, but by citing it, by sending it to people, by helping make it more prominent.
- Partner with GMH folk to produce work!
- Learn to speak another language!

### **Some recommended reading:**

Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans, 2020).

Regina Rini, *The Ethics of Microaggression* (Routledge, 2021).

Richard Delgado, "The imperial scholar: Reflections on a review of civil rights literature." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 132 (1984).

[https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1210&context=fac\\_working\\_papers](https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1210&context=fac_working_papers)

Sara Ahmed "Making Feminist Points" *Feministkilljoys* (2013).

<https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>

Any work by R.S. Sugirtharajah.