

The logo for the South Central Regional Training Partnership features the text "South Central Regional Training Partnership" in a dark font, centered within a light-colored rectangular box. This box is flanked by large, stylized square brackets. The entire graphic is set against a background of a faint, light-colored oval.

South Central Regional Training Partnership

Ministry Development Review: further thoughts from Revd Dr David Heywood

Life-long learning under God's loving rule

In their different ways, each of the four Gospels draws attention to the call of the first disciples as significant element in Jesus' ministry. In each case, the Gospel story is not simply an account of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, but of the way in which he trained and equipped the disciples to take responsibility for his mission after his ascension.

From the very first, Jesus' call was a summons to participate in his mission. Its fulfilment required a period of learning and development, summed up by Mark as 'to be with him and to be sent out to preach' (3:14). As Sylvia Wilkie Collinson points out (*Making Disciples*, Wipf and Stock 2006), the 'being with' comprised a variety of learning experiences. One of these was formal instruction, in which Jesus taught his disciples using memorable summaries, such as the Beatitudes and the parables. However, such formal instruction took place in the context of the informal learning that arose through the disciples' responses to incidents in Jesus' ministry, questions thrown at them by his opponents, the challenges of sharing a common life together, questions arising from the mission itself and their role as assistants and trainees. Being 'sent out' involved carefully staged preparation, such as a storm at sea in which Jesus demonstrated his power to protect them, a visit to Nazareth to observe one end of the spectrum of possible response, as well as specific teaching, such as the parable of the sower. It involved learning from experience followed by reflection, as Jesus took the returning disciples aside to debrief them. At the heart of Jesus' teaching methods was action and reflection, a method appropriate to actual and potential followers at all levels of ability and stages of commitment.

Learning through action and reflection continued after the ascension, when the disciples, now designated apostles, took on responsibility under the Holy Spirit for Jesus' continuing mission. Most obviously, the early church had to wrestle with the issues that arose over the inclusion of the Gentiles as part of God's community, but significant challenges also included organisational challenges arising from the mix of cultures in the early Christian community and the need to respond to persecution. The most vital and central aspect of this learning was not so much growth in understanding and skill as the transformation of character. At the heart of the mission in which the disciples were engaged was the sharing of God's love. To participate in this mission required people actively engaged in learning to love through allowing God to transform their attitudes by the work of his Holy Spirit.

Thus, the apostle Paul emphasises the call to transformation of life, as people learn to live together in loving community and extend the grace they have received from the Lord to their neighbours and even their enemies and detractors. His goal was nothing less than the maturity of all God's people as they gradually came to share the character of Jesus (Colossians 1:27-29). Such growth could only take place in the context of loving community (Ephesians 4:11-16). For Paul, the local church was to be a learning community, in which God's people would practice the disciplines required by the call to love one another and serve their neighbours.

One of the characteristics of Paul's mission was his commitment to working in teams, of which some members were clearly in the role of apprentices, learning 'on the job' through sharing in the common life of the team as well as being entrusted with particular tasks. On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas took the young John Mark along with them; and when, disappointed by Mark's seeming unreliability, Paul split with Barnabas, he lost no time in recruiting Timothy to take his place.

Ministry and development

Ministry and development thus go together. The call to serve is an integral part of discipleship, often expressed as a particular vocation and equipped with particular gifts. Ministry not only arises as an aspect of discipleship but itself contributes to personal transformation, as the follower of Jesus, engaged in ministry as a response to his call, is called to love the 'unlovely', undergoes sacrifices, encounters the presence of sin in the world and in themselves, and meets opposition.

For all God's people, lifelong learning is an integral element of discipleship and ministry. For those in licensed ministry, an important aspect of ministry review, alongside affirmation and accountability, is the discernment of the ways in which the minister is being called or challenged to learn 'on the job' through action and reflection, and at times through formal instruction. Such learning may be thought to embrace the three dimensions of 'competence, confidence and calling'. The minister may need to learn and grow in the knowledge and skills required to fulfil her ministry. She may need to build her confidence, perhaps through working and reflecting with others. She may need to be encouraged and helped to discern the direction of Christ's continuing call and perhaps look for ways of responding.

Career development is an area that Christian ministers can sometimes be reluctant to discuss or acknowledge. The past generation has seen the breakdown of the one-size-fits-all model of ordained ministry, in which every parish clergyman was assumed to have more or less the same set of roles to fulfil. With the end of the one-size-fits-all vicar has come the end of one-size-fits-all reader ministry, so that local lay ministers now also fulfil a variety of roles depending on their context and skills. In this context, progression from curate to incumbent, incumbent to training incumbent, team leader, area dean, archdeacon and bishop can clearly be seen as a type of career development, each stage involving further responsibility and requiring further skills. Specialist roles alongside and as part of this development, such as church planting and chaplaincy work, also require specialist training.

It is essential, therefore, that all those in licensed ministry to be equipped with the skills required to become effective life-long learners. Central to such skills is shared reflective practice, allied to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study, through which the minister learns to recognise and respond to the short- and long-term challenges of ministry.

Like all learning, life-long learning in the pursuit of excellence in ministry requires a balance of support and challenge. In the case of the ordained minister it is essential that God's people 'recognise, trust and sustain the ordained minister' (ACCM 22, 1987). Such trust and support will include the willingness to release their ordained ministers for further training and to provide financial support for periods of retreat as well as for training courses. Dioceses need to provide MDR within a secure pastoral framework, such that the dimensions of affirmation and discernment of the direction for future development do not become swallowed up by reflection on the apparent fruitfulness of ministry. Ministers also need to be challenged to recognise and respond to the need to grow and develop in ministry. Becoming an effective

life-long learner requires the ability and self-awareness to recognise those areas in which competence or confidence are lacking and the willingness to respond by seeking out appropriate help or further training. Thus, the preparation for MDR may appropriately include a reflection on a recent learning project, whether formal or informal, with appropriate questions to help the minister to recognise how the learning took place, what factors helped or hindered and what remains to be learned. Growing in the capacity to learn from experience is one important means by which the minister become more effective in ministry.

The journey of transformation

Ministry is an aspect of discipleship, and discipleship is a journey of transformation. The call to ministry, with all the challenges it throws up, is likely to be a significant God-intended means by which the Christian is challenged to grow not only in his or her capacity for further service but in depth of relationship with God. For each minister, and possibly for the reviewer also, MDR is a moment on that journey: a place to stop and reflect, to take stock and to look forward. In order to support the call to lifelong learning, the review needs to combine support and challenge, affirmation and accountability, in such a way as to facilitate a focus on continuing development.

David Heywood, October 2017