

SOUTH CENTRAL REGIONAL TRAINING PARTNERSHIP

REVIEW REPORT (revised)

Our consultations have led us into contact, broadly speaking, with six groups of people. Our report identifies these groups, offers a short summary of our findings and concludes with some recommendations. These recommendations are specific to the groups but will, we trust, be of interest to the overall working of the Board. Most of our contacts have been face to face but a few have been by email or telephone. In two cases we have not received a reply to our invitation to meet.

We have become very aware of the complex nature of the RTP and, therefore, apologise if we have not always seen the full picture or fully understood certain issues. We have understood our brief to be to produce a structural review of the operation of the RTP. We have therefore not interviewed course participants or taken other steps to assess academic performance. Partners must (and do) satisfy themselves of this by means of the appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. Likewise, the failure to mention individual people or particularly creative areas of collaboration probably reflects our attempt to keep this report within four sides of A4, an attempt in which we have signally failed!

1.REGIONAL CHURCH LEADERS

As well as being invited to nominate a suitable person to act as a conduit for further discussions, all seven Partners were asked to let us have their comments on the benefits, downsides and possible future developments of the RTP. The URC partner had little involvement and the Methodist partner felt that they, too, were limited in their participation, although it was 'good to be part of a conversation'. Of the Anglican Partners, one diocese was without a bishop, one was about to lose its bishop and another bishop had only been in post for a short while.

All Partners spoke warmly of the RTP, listing as advantages the ecumenical links, the sharing of good practice, the support given by officers to each other, the opportunities for innovative thinking and, in one case, the ability 'to conduct our discussions, if not our arguments, with the Ministry Division with a greater degree both of clarity and of weight'. Most Partners wished that they had more time to give to the RTP whereas one spoke of the privilege of taking part in the annual twenty-four hour conference.

Most of the Partners mentioned the problem of more time being needed than would be the case with a merely local project, though this kind of comment was hardly heard from the officers themselves.

The most popular area for future development was that of Education for Discipleship as the ground out of which all else grows. It was felt that the increasingly shallow level of Christian knowledge both in Church and society justifies even greater resources being channelled into this work.

It should be noted that the Methodist Church has national programmes and criteria for local preacher training as well as developing at national level its policies for Education for Discipleship and CMD and maintaining national oversight of probation (IME 4-5). A District does not have the same degree of autonomy as a diocese. Where policy development is concerned, therefore, the RTP may appropriately regard the Discipleship and Ministries Cluster as its partner, as well as the District.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- i. that all Partners be reminded of the need for their active support for the RTP, and that recently appointed Partners receive a visit from one of the Chairs to ensure that they are properly briefed about the history and ongoing development of the SCRTP.**
- ii. that the Discipleship and Ministries Cluster of the Methodist Church Connexional Team be reminded and briefed as a Partner**

2. MINISTRY DIVISION

Before meeting with the two senior officers of the Ministry Division we had sensed some antagonism between them and officers from the SCRTP. The Ministry Division did not seem to share this feeling, speaking warmly of the commitment and enthusiasm they experienced in their dealing with SCRTP. The Ministry Division did make it clear, however, that their primary responsibility was the support of dioceses and only then RTPs. We concluded that there is a serious flaw in the way national policy is both decided and communicated, and that uncertainty about the future significance of RTPs is an example of this.

The original thrust of the Hind report, setting out a vision for the education and discipleship of the whole People of God, was effectively subverted when the Church of England refused to deploy the financial resources necessary to set up RTPs on a national basis. Consequently, the network of RTPs was allowed to develop in a piecemeal way, effectively amalgamating whatever local resources existed, with the result that a financially and skills-rich region like the south central, a region which, incidentally, also produces the majority of ordinands, stands in stark contrast to some other regions of the country where RTPs are little more than an idea on paper. It is not surprising that doubts were expressed as to the continuing validity of the Hind recommendations and therefore of the status of the Hind report in current practice.

Another example where the lack of clarity on issues of central policy came to light was the way in which OMC feels itself to be undermined by the Ministry Division's validation of a joint Wycliffe/St. Stephen's course which will attract students from the same limited pool. This apparent adoption of free market principles along with the major uncertainty about the future of academic funding for theological training is in danger of undermining morale amongst some of the most dedicated and experienced training providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- i) that the House of Bishops require the Ministry Division to conduct a national survey of RTPs with a view to assessing their long-term viability. This should involve a clarification of the future status of the whole Hind Report.**
- ii) that the newly appointed Director of Ministry be invited to a Board meeting to explore ways in which previous misunderstandings might be sorted out and avoided in future.**

3. REGIONAL OFFICERS

Most of the officers we met spoke enthusiastically about the RTP, even though that involved more time at meetings than would otherwise be the case, plus the fact that geographical distance can also be a problem, both for officers and for participants on some of the courses. This general enthusiasm was also evident in the case of the Methodist officer who seems to have a healthy view of the RTP which allows her to opt in as and when appropriate rather than being committed to it as a full time job. We have the impression that there are excellent levels of trust and collegiality among the officers marked by the absence of any real 'inter-diocesan competitiveness'.

There is a feeling that changes in personnel, when they occur, are smooth and that newcomers find it easy to integrate because of the warmth of welcome they receive from colleagues. There is genuine satisfaction at some of the achievements of the RTP, especially the end of curacy assessment scheme and the development of plans for CMD. One officer raised the possibility of designated officers leading roadshows in various parts of the RTP region as a means of encouraging more lay trainees to be recruited. More than once we heard real appreciation of the wisdom and hard work of the two Chairs. Similar praise was offered for the support given by the staff of Sarum College.

One particular area of frustration surfaced a number of times, expressed vividly by one officer who said that 'bishops will always trump the RTP!' The hope is that, as the RTP continues to produce well-designed ways of pooling valuable resources and enables the development of well-designed training programmes, the more maverick bishops will see the value of listening before acting. One way in which this may well become a requirement is the general trend in all the churches towards proper 'conditions of service' policies.

For most officers the context in which their ministry is really grounded is in the Project Groups (see below)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- i) that officers continue to explore the sharing of good practice.**
- ii) that episcopal 'malpractice' be challenged, remembering that bishops have feet of clay as well as teeth!**

4. CMS

Although CMS could feature alongside other Training Institutions we feel that it is sufficiently different to warrant a section on its own.

Whilst there may be continuing issues that need resolving around the national validation of pioneer ministries it is clear that CMS, through its Pioneer Ministry Hub, is pushing the boundaries in an exciting and innovative fashion. The current students in training are a very mixed bunch and are mainly looking towards lay ministries, though this could well change with time. Working in partnership with the Church Army and other church-planting agencies should enable CMS to be exploring new ways of 'being church' that are not constrained by older parochial models, although they are keen to honour the more static, inherited models and, wherever possible, collaborate with them. The investment of £20,000 from the RTP to this new work could well prove to be seed-corn that produces a multiple return.

We were surprised and encouraged to learn that CMS has entered into partnership with Ripon College, Cuddesdon, rather than with its more natural ally, Wycliffe Hall. A brief conversation with the principal of Cuddesdon endorsed the respect in which both parties hold one another. We believe this symbiotic relationship can only be a strength for the RTP as a whole.

Another issue that we raised with the Director of CMS, as well as with the Principal of the OMC, was the apparent absence of any teaching on the importance of the worldwide church in the various curricula for ordained ministry training. Given the convulsions that worldwide Anglicanism (and, no doubt, other denominations) is currently undergoing, we feel that the huge experience of CMS could easily be brought to bear on discussions of human sexuality, post-imperial power, multi-faith mission contexts etc. How to inculturate the Gospel in a society that is now cross-cultural is something that the C of E badly needs to learn.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- i) that the RTP strongly support CMS in its attempts to gain full Ministry Division accreditation and funding.**
- ii) that serious consideration be given as to how the knowledge and experience of CMS in relation to the world church might be incorporated into training modules for ordained and lay ministry.**

5. PROJECT GROUPS

We found varying degrees of cohesion within the work of the project groups. The Education for Discipleship group functions mainly as a forum for mutual support and the sharing of good practice for diocesan officers: there are no shared programmes. The Continuing Ministerial Development group has developed a policy which has been adopted by all dioceses within the RTP, but is aware that adoption does not necessarily lead to implementation. The validation by the Ministry Division of a Local Ministry Framework for the RTP is regarded as a highly significant achievement by all concerned. The National Advisor for OLM described the RTP as 'one of the most active, positive and innovative that I've encountered'.

Nevertheless, the same problems recur across all the groups. The uncertain future of HE funding, while perhaps opening up new long-term possibilities, is casting a pall over all development work. The devolution of work from national to diocesan level, already encountered in quality assurance for the LMF, and impending in work on bullying and harassment and annual ministerial review, is creating an administrative burden that officers are unable to sustain: some work from home, or from inadequate shared offices, and may have little or no administrative support. Project group members may thus be unable to prepare adequately for meetings or to follow them up. The administrative support provided by Sarum College is invaluable to the RTP as a whole but is necessarily limited. Project groups are uncertain as to their ability to spend the RTP's money on development work (as opposed to running expenses). Complex requirements such as quality assurance for the LMF create training needs which the RTP alone is unable to meet.

One underlying structural problem compromises the work of all the project groups in two highly significant ways. Failure to implement the RTP structure equally across England means that all the groups working in this outstandingly active and well-resourced RTP find themselves at best ill-fitting and at worst undermined at national level. (Lack of appropriate structures at national level also makes it difficult for the Methodist Church, the main non-Anglican partner in the RTP, to be properly involved in consultation and development.)

The same failure means that there is no overall mechanism to ensure robust implementation within the RTP itself: too much depends on the energy, resources and goodwill of individual Partners. Expansion of the RTP would compound this problem unless openly addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. that the RTP undertake (probably with external facilitation) consultation between partners as to their level of commitment to its various activities, such consultation to include all the relevant church leaders**
- ii. that the Board find means to provide project groups with (a) a financial framework that will enable them to take more responsibility for the scope and extent of their work (b) administrative support**
- iii. that the Board support project groups in developing a more robust structure (e.g. by means of membership lists and contact details)**
- iv. that the RTP pay particular attention to Education for Discipleship**

6. TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

The RTP relates well to STETS and the Oxford Ministry Course (OMC). At the time of writing it is not clear what will be the impact on the RTP of the Ministry Division's validation of the Wycliffe/St Stephen's part-time course.

STETS sees itself as part of the RTP and derives institutional advantage from it. While it also has a role beyond the RTP's boundaries, the new 'open market' in IME 1-3 appears on balance to be a threat to STETS as well as to the RTP. STETS concurs with the CMD project group as to the value of bringing IME 1-3 and IME 4-7 into closer relationship. Fragmentation of IME 1-3 provision would make this more difficult. The new STETS Fd course validated by the University of Winchester is deliberately 'mission-shaped': Such an approach would be appropriate across all areas of the RTP's work.

We have already mentioned the anxieties felt by OMC concerning the future development of the joint Wycliffe/St Stephens course. This development could prove to be a challenge to the long term stability of OMC which is still only five years on from its break with St Albans. We feel, however, that there are real strengths in the rooting of OMC within the life of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, such that the continuing level of support from the college should enable OMC to weather the storms. The written responses from the two principals of Sarum and Cuddesdon indicated a significant commitment both to the concept of the RTP and to a desire to undergird the work of the course dean or principal. We would not be surprised to find that this style of co-habitation could even lead to a form of marriage at some future date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. that the RTP work with the training institutions on mission-shaped training at all stages**
- ii. that the RTP work with the training institutions on the relationship of the methods and outcomes of IME 1-3 to IME 4-7**
- iii. that the RTP seek clarification from the Ministry Division as to the relationship between training institutions and RTPs**

CONCLUSION

The light-touch review we were invited to undertake has proved to be both more demanding and more rewarding than we could have anticipated. We are very grateful for the chance to have been involved, and had we been a team of OFSTED inspectors we would certainly be awarding an 'outstanding' grade.

We have no doubt that the SCRTP has achieved a huge amount in the three years it has been operating, and we recommend most strongly that it continues. We also believe that, because of the richness of its resources and the quality of its members, it has a great deal to offer the national church as well as the partners in the South Central region.

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21st August 2011