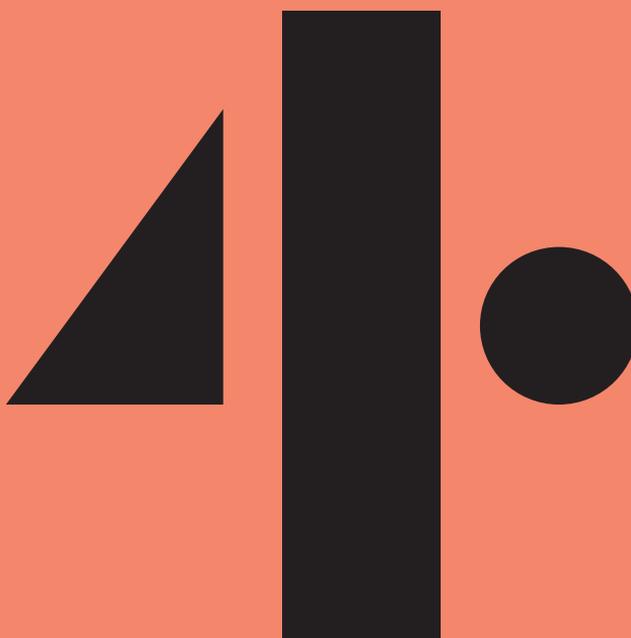


A guide to Ministerial Development Review

Like many of us I long for Methodism to be a better Church in the sense that it is a more effective vessel for use by a missionary God, and that includes ‘turnaround’ – and I am not ashamed of desiring that.

Martyn Atkins



The Methodist Church

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The **Methodist Church** 

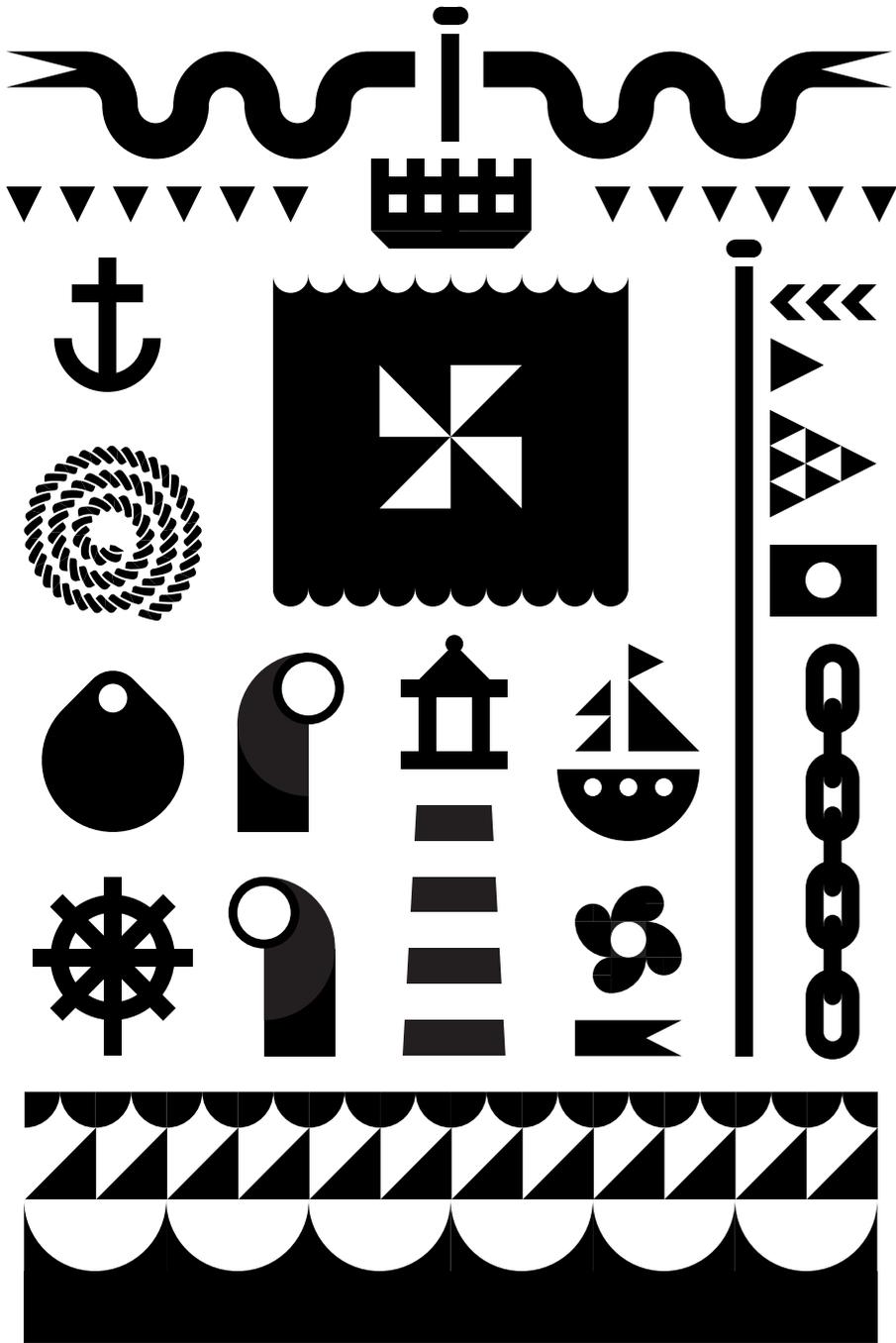
About this guide

This guide is designed for ordained ministers who will be involved in Ministerial Development Review, as well as for those wishing to act as lay contributors. It may also be helpful to those providing administrative support or offering feedback. It offers an overview of Ministerial Development Review, as well as providing supporting guidance and background material which will help all participants to get the most out of the process.

Book One is essential reading. It provides an overview of the principles which form the backdrop to Ministerial Development Review and of the key elements of the annual review meeting.

Books Two and Three provide important supporting guidance. **Book Two** considers those aspects of ministry which may provide a focus for ongoing reflection as part of Ministerial Development Review, with specific suggestions for deacons, presbyters, superintendents and district chairs respectively. It also highlights those areas which should form the focus for the annual review meeting. **Book Three** provides practical guidance about the review meeting. It sets out the roles and responsibilities of the participants and outlines the preparation required for the review meeting, including the gathering and sharing of feedback. There are some suggestions about how to conduct the review meeting, and how to identify hopes, goals and areas for learning and development. This book also offers guidance about recording the key outcomes of the review meeting, and includes report templates.

Book Four provides background material. It looks at some of the skills and best practice which will support Ministerial Development Review and help to enable positive experiences for all participants.



*“Sailors raise the sail to catch the wind”
“Move, and actuate, and guide”*

Yearning and actively seeking to become better disciples of Jesus Christ, and offering him to others, lies at the heart of being Methodist Christians. It resulted in the Methodist movement coming into being, and my own view is that the future of Methodism is closely connected to the degree to which it is committed today to being a discipleship movement shaped for mission. I share with many Methodist people a desire to grow in Christian hope, passion, witness and kingdom focus. I believe we could and should grow in these Godly ways. Like many of us I long for Methodism to be a better Church in the sense that it is a more effective vessel for use by a missionary God, and that includes 'turnaround' – and I am not ashamed of desiring that. I am convinced that God desires a healthy, more vibrant Methodism, offered anew to God as its proper 'owner' and as a fruitful and willing part of the One Church of Christ, for the sake of the world God loves and in Christ redeemed.

*From Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship and the people called Methodists**

The sharp challenge before us now is the extent to which we are willing to continue to reshape our life together in faithful obedience to God – locally, in circuits, districts, regions, and in terms of the whole Connexion – for the sake of the world. There is always a fertile period for making hard choices which must not be missed, a finite season in which the varied resources and energy needed to implement necessary decisions are available. Sadly what often happens in organisations, including Churches, is that decisions are not made at the point when resources and energy are sufficient to enact them, but are then made, usually reluctantly and as a last resort, when the required resources and energy to implement them are no longer available. Thankfully we are not yet in that deadly and disillusioning place, but I judge that the fertile season when we are able to properly implement the kind of decisions we need to make is fast coming to an end ... Gardeners tend the soil to help the harvest. Sailors raise the sail to catch the wind. I believe the wind of the Spirit is blowing and our varied Connexion is being asked to put the sail up once more.

*From Martyn Atkins, *Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission (the General Secretary's report to the 2011 Conference)**

Contents

- 1 Reflective practice
- 21 Handling relationships
- 35 Giving and receiving feedback

Reflective practice

Reflection and reflective practice have a central place in Ministerial Development Review: it is envisaged that it will be a key source of learning and thus growth and development – which is what the scheme is essentially all about.

Earlier parts of this guide – especially Book Two – are relevant to a discussion about reflective practice in that they provide some suggestions as to what aspects of the minister’s role and ministry might be the subjects of reflection.

What follows is an introduction to reflective practice. A more in-depth approach would emphasise further the ‘theory’ which informs ministerial ‘practice’ and which thus provides a framework for reflection. The role of others in reflection, and the ways in which pairs, ‘sets’ or groups can support and challenge each other to learn from reflection and to apply their learning in future practice, is also an area for further discussion.

Much of what follows will be familiar but it may be presented from a different perspective, thus generating new ideas and thoughts and new possibilities, epitomising the approach which Ministerial Development Review is seeking to validate and encourage.

Reflection and learning

“Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience which is important in learning”.⁶

⁶ *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*, ed D Boud, R Keough, D Walker, Kogan Page, London, 1985

What it is and why it is important

Reflection is a natural and familiar process, often spontaneous and sometimes unconscious, which involves sorting through and making sense of swathes of data that have been absorbed from complex, potentially overwhelming, environments. Reflection is closely linked to learning – individuals reflect on what they have done or experienced in order to shape their understanding and to formulate their ideas. Reflection is about making sense of what we know. It recreates ‘knowledge’ as ‘understanding’ and is often applied “to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution”⁷ – ie to the types of issues and situations which routinely arise in the complex world in which ministers operate.

Reflection is, of course, integral to the Christian life: contemplation, meditation and prayer depend on a reflective approach, and the processes involved feature throughout the Bible. Christians should be particularly well-versed in reflective practice since they draw on a range of sources to help them to grow in their Christian faith and to enable them to apply it to Christian practice. The Methodist quadrilateral represents a prime example of the approaches we will look at below. The quadrilateral is a fourfold approach to learning about our Christian faith and applying it to contemporary issues and to our Christian practice, focusing on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Here, then, is a process of drawing on a range of sources to uncover and discover and, thus, to make sense of, God’s world. Roger Walton in his book, *The Reflective Disciple*, meanwhile, identifies “faithful reflection” as “a core discipline of discipleship”.⁸

⁷ J Moon, *Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development*, Kogan Page, London, 1999

⁸ Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple*, Epworth, London, 2009

The fundamental importance of reflection is, however, also recognised in the world of secular work, as evidenced in the increasing number of professional bodies who require their members to demonstrate that they are ‘reflective practitioners’, ie workers who consciously reflect on their actions and experiences in order to derive meaningful insights. These insights can then be fed into new activities and actions, and thus enhance practice in the future. Reflection in this sense, then, is a planned process whose ultimate objective is learning – positive changes which can be applied in practical situations. The learning comes through acquiring new insights, and these are derived from ‘unpicking’ experiences – taking them apart to examine the elements, issues and inter-relationships, and the causes and consequences of behaviours – and then, effectively, reassembling them to view the experiences through a new lens.

There are, then, two strands in the translation of this process of reflective learning into the Christian context, and, specifically, into the life of Methodist ministers. First, there is the “faithful reflection” described by Roger Walton which is central to our growth as Christian disciples; secondly, there is the prayerful application of the process of reflective practice which ministers are encouraged to integrate into the outworking of their calling as they fulfil their ordained ministry. There are many parallels between the two strands in terms of the mindsets, techniques and processes involved. More importantly, there is an interplay between the two, so that the faithful reflection advocated in developing discipleship and the prayerful reflective practice involved in developing effective ministry inform and strengthen one another.

Reflective practice

An alternative depiction of reflective practice...

Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a Pensieve,” said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Err,” said Harry who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times,” said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into a basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.”

JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*⁹

And the consequences of not finding time for reflection...

Here comes Edward Bear down the stairs bump bump bump on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is as far as he knows the only way of coming down the stairs; he is sure there must be a better way if only he could stop bumping long enough to think of it.

AA Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*¹⁰

⁹ Bloomsbury, London, 2000

¹⁰ Methuen, London, 1926

What reflection leads to

The insights generated by work-related reflection in the life of a Christian typically fall into several categories:

- **Self** – understanding how our individual characteristics affect the way we work and our learning: what is frustrating, what is easy, what is difficult
- **Others** – identification of the characteristics of relationships with and between key people
- **Task** – identification of successful and unsuccessful strategies; uncovering the links between current projects and others; new ‘technical’ discoveries
- **Environment** – enlarged understanding of the context and of the positive and negative impacts of the organisation, people and processes
- **God** – a fresh picture of God and a fresh understanding of how God shapes our lives and ministry

The insights relating to self may lead to a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses, the uncovering of assumptions and of underlying values and beliefs, the recognition of potential biases, and an acknowledgement of fears. In so doing it is possible to identify areas for development.

There are those who argue that reflection, by challenging personal constructs and theories, can fundamentally change the individual, not only in terms of their cognitive understanding but also in their orientation to the world – self-development is the outcome. “Reflection leads to growth in the individual – morally, personally, psychologically, and emotionally, as well as cognitively”.¹¹

¹¹ WT Branch, A Paranjape, “Feedback and reflection: teaching methods for clinical settings”, *Academic Medicine*, Philadelphia, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2002

Reflective practice

This is, of course, something which God’s people have known across the ages – it is integral to discipleship – but it is useful to examine some the changes which have been found particularly to feed into how individuals relate to others as they perform their work. Some of the specific changes associated with reflection, and identified by researchers at the University of Sussex, are listed below:¹²

| From | To |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Accepting | › Questioning |
| Intolerant | › Tolerant |
| Doing | › Thinking |
| Being descriptive | › Analytical |
| Impulsive | › Diplomatic |
| Being reserved | › Being more open |
| Unassertive | › Assertive |
| Unskilled communicators | › Skilled communicators |
| Reactive | › Reflective |
| Concrete thinking | › Abstract thinking |
| Lacking self-awareness | › Self-aware |

¹² C Miller, A Tomlinson, M Jones, *Researching Professional Education*, East Sussex, University of Sussex, 1994

The prayerful reflection which Christians can use in the context of their work has even greater possibilities for learning and self-development than the purely secular approach advocated by professional bodies. Interestingly, an early writer on the subject suggests that reflective people are characterised by their “open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness”¹³ – characteristics reminiscent of spiritual renewal (see Ephesians 4).

There are those who make a distinction between ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’. Reflection in action, as the term implies, allows the practitioner to redesign what they are doing whilst they are doing it. The reflective process at the heart of the Ministerial Development Review scheme, however, is about ‘reflection on action’ and involves conducting a type of cognitive ‘post mortem’ on experiences to produce a new understanding, although it also involves a commitment to action as a result, which will enable the learning to continue and which may then involve ‘reflection in action’.

¹³ J Dewey, *How We Think*, Henry Regney, Chicago, 1933

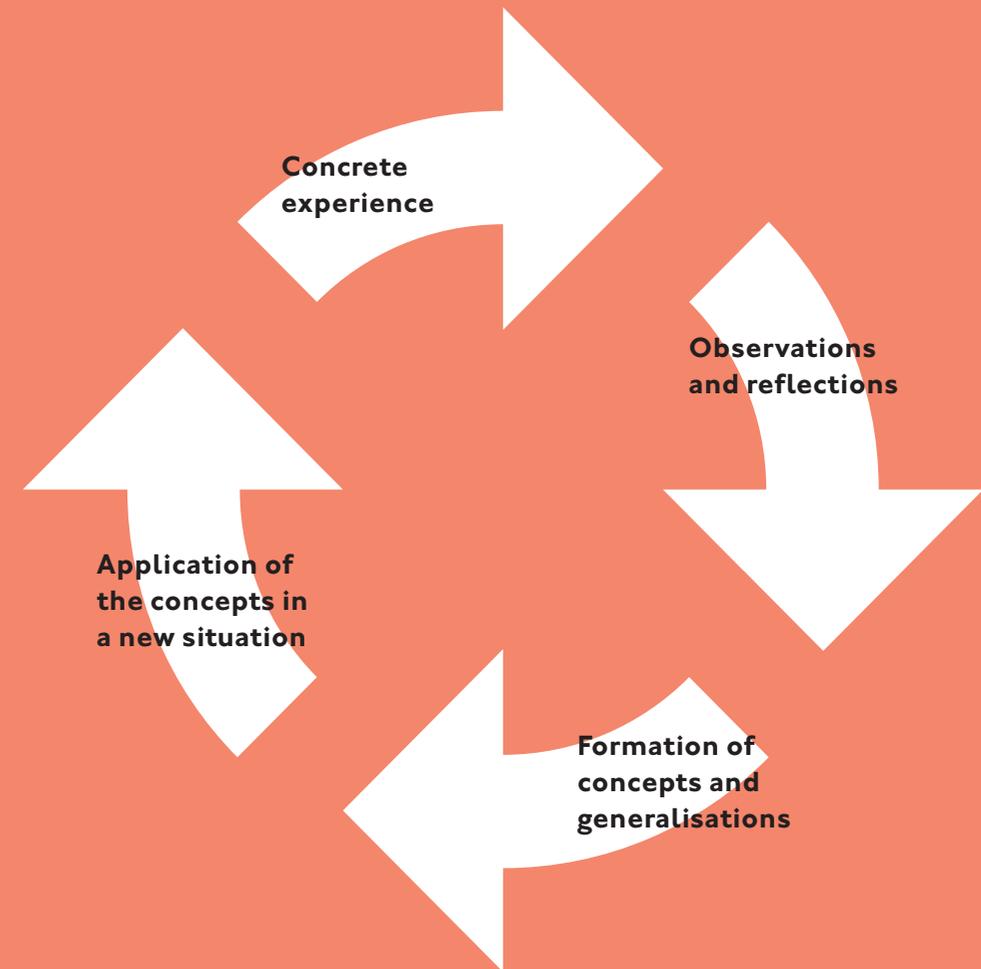
Reflective practice

Kolb’s “model of experiential learning”¹⁴ provides a widely-used framework for understanding the role of reflection in learning and the stages in the process. His learning cycle is reproduced on the following page.

This cycle is continuous: we are continuously testing concepts in experience and modifying our understanding in the light of that experience. Again, for the Methodist, this is familiar. Experience has a significant place in our understanding and learning; we recognise that we gain wisdom and maturity from life experience, especially when we pray and reflect about our story.

¹⁴ DA Kolb, *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1984

The model of experiential learning



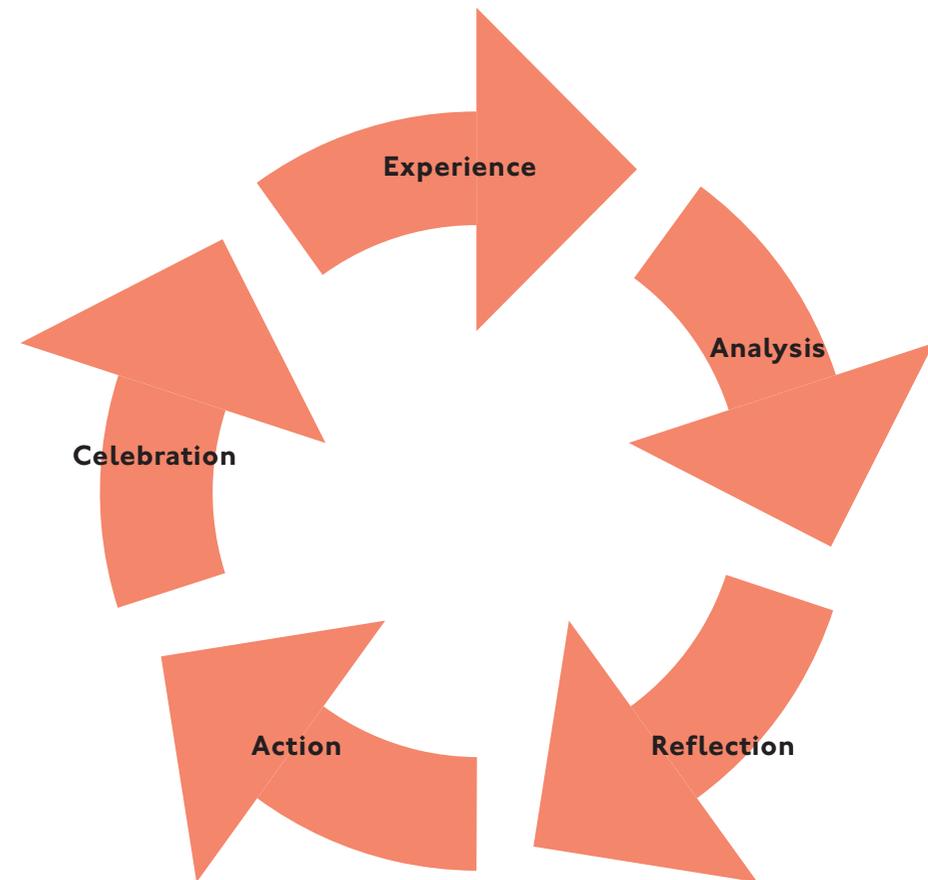
Reflective practice

A framework for reflection

This cycle of experiential learning when used in the Christian context is often known as ‘the pastoral cycle’. A fifth stage is incorporated into this version – ‘celebration’ – which encourages affirmation and the acknowledgement of success, as well as prompting a continuing process. The table below, which depicts the pastoral cycle, also provides a series of questions to accompany the different stages – with God and Scripture as a reference point, ie the source of principles and the ‘theory’ on which further action is founded.¹⁵

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Experience | What is happening now, what needs to be changed? |
| Analysis | Why are things the way they are, and who controls them? |
| Reflection | What does God have to say about this? |
| Action | What are we going to do to make things different? |
| Celebration | What have we achieved, and what still needs to be done? |

The pastoral cycle



¹⁵ www.newway.org.uk, accessed 28 March 2011

This pastoral cycle is often applied to collective activity, in the evaluation of social action and community initiatives. Its companion is ‘theological reflection’, which focuses on personal learning and is, again, akin to Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning, and again centred round theology as the source of ‘theory’ in the analysis of experience.

Gibbs, a significant writer on learning and on linking theory and practice, bases his stages for ‘structured debriefing’ on Kolb’s cycle – providing a framework and a series of questions for reflection on practice (see table below).¹⁶ Also incorporated in the table (*in italic type*) are additional questions used by other writers, and (**in bold type**) questions for use in a Christian context, to invite the integration of lessons from Scripture and Christian tradition and the application of theology to the analysis of practice.

A structured debriefing

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Description | What is the stimulant for reflection? (Incident, event, theoretical idea.) |
| What? | What are you going to reflect on? <i>What happened? What did I do? What did others do? What was I trying to achieve?</i> ‘Telling the story’ may help to identify, articulate and describe the situation. |

¹⁶ G Gibbs, *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*, Oxford, Oxford Brookes University, 1988

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Feelings | What were your reactions and feelings? |
| What? | Use images and other representations to help capture your feelings. |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Evaluation | What was good and bad about the experience? Make value judgements. |
| What? | Consider others’ perspectives and interpretations. |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Analysis | What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from outside the experience to help you. What was really going on? |
| So what? | <i>What more do I need to know about this?</i> What does the Bible have to say? What does Christian tradition have to say? Where can God be seen at work in this situation? |

**Conclusions
(General)**

What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?

So what?

What is the importance of this?

What are the implications for ministry and the Methodist Church?

**Conclusions
(Specific)**

What else could you have done?

So what?

What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working?

What are the implications for your ministry?

**Personal
action plans**

What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time?

Now what?

What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

What might be the consequences of this action?

How are your actions going to contribute to the mission of the Methodist Church and to the mission of God?

The role of others in reflection

Whilst reflection is ultimately a solitary activity, others play a highly important role in ensuring that we learn from reflection. Again there is resonance with the fourfold approach of the Methodist quadrilateral – becoming aware of different points of view and reflecting on our story with other Christians are explicit elements of the process of Christian learning in the Methodist tradition. Feedback from others can provide a different perspective from our own and provide more ‘data’ which can then be linked to what we already know and to our current understanding of the situation. Discussion and dialogue can also help us to make sense of what we know – in articulating our perspective and sharing it we build further links and make new connections – so that we can make better sense of experiences and feelings.

It is with the purpose of gaining these advantages that the Ministerial Development Review scheme incorporates feedback and a face-to-face meeting, and involves those who have some knowledge and understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the minister concerned and who can thus offer an informed perspective.

Application during and beyond Ministerial Development Review

When to reflect: Because reflection is being given attention as part of the Ministerial Development Review scheme, there is a danger that it may be seen as something which is carried out immediately prior to the review meeting. It is to be hoped, however, that the scheme will instead be seen as a reflective process which is punctuated annually by a review meeting (into which is fed the learning and insights acquired from an ongoing process of prayerful reflection).

Tools to use: There are various tools which can be used to expose learning. Some, such as reflective journals and logs, can be used to record significant events and encounters, the parts played by different people and one’s own feelings and reactions, and others’ perceived feelings and responses. There are also mechanisms

Reflective practice

to aid reflection which involve others – informal conversations may, on occasion, lead to a sharing of insights, while more formal debriefing (eg following some significant event in the life of the circuit or in relation to the progress of a particular initiative) can be structured to reflect the learning process.

The subjects for reflection: The subjects for reflection will depend on the individual – their issues, context, hopes and goals. Whilst ministers will focus particularly on specific areas of practice in their preparation for the review meeting, it is likely that ministers will, more generally, also want to explore areas of concern, puzzlement, frustration and difficulty, and incidents and encounters which have been problematic or eye-opening. Such ‘critical incidents’ – an unusual or difficult situation, an interaction which made an impression, a communication problem or an incident which led to confrontation or feelings of inadequacy, an incident which led to a different way of thinking or to a questioning of assumptions – may be a significant source of insight. It is, however, also important not to neglect ‘successes’ and ‘triumphs’, sources of satisfaction and joy – reflection is equally important in these circumstances if such positive outcomes are to be replicated in the future – and it is hoped that these will be shared at the review meeting.

Of particular significance will be reflection on aspects of ministry which the individual is seeking to develop. Reflection may help to identify not only areas for an individual’s learning and development, but also any needs for change which lie within a wider context, be it the circuit, district or the Connexion as a whole, since the insights which arise from reflection are not only to do with the individual, but also to do with organisational systems, structures and processes and activities (ie to do with ‘tasks’ and ‘environment’).

Questions to ask: Questions included in the ‘structured debriefing’ table above could form the foundation for analysing and evaluating experiences or events. A more straightforward list of questions for noticing and noting critical incidents in a learning log are listed below:¹⁷

- What was I trying to achieve?**
- Why did I do what I did?**
- What were the consequences of my action?**
- How did I feel about it?**
- How did those around me feel?**
- How do I know that?**
- What internal factors influenced my decision?**
- Could I have done it better?**
- What other choices did I have?**
- How do I feel about it now?**

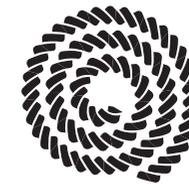
A minister using a learning log might review what they have written every few weeks and prayerfully reflect on it, using the sort of approach suggested in the ‘structured debriefing’ outlined above. A particular emphasis might be on how these insights could lead to a new approach to a specific area of their ministry and on how they plan to use their learning for the future.

¹⁷ Moon, *Learning Journals*

There may be those, however, for whom a personal diary is not feasible or the most helpful way of capturing reflections. Speaking thoughts and observations into a digital voice recorder / dictaphone / iPhone, for playing back at a later date, can be useful, as can consciously going through the process of analysis and evaluation of work-related events and encounters in conversation with trusted, thoughtful others. A pattern of debriefing and reflecting at the end of meetings, and of recording these observations within the meetings' minutes or reports, may also yield reflections for subsequent discussion, as may attempts to evaluate different initiatives, programmes and projects and their impact. These evaluations may yield useful feedback about the work of the circuit / district and the minister's role within it.

Spiritual reflection and discernment

To return to an earlier theme and to conclude on a note of prime importance: prayerful reflection on practice occurs in tandem with the continuing process of discerning God's calling and of the 'faithful reflection' which helps us grow in our relationship with God. These latter elements add another dimension and help to inform the attitudes with which reflection on practice is carried out and the insights which are brought to bear: the combination - eternal possibilities!



Handling relationships

It is helpful to bear in mind what all participants bring to the Ministerial Development Review process:

- Each has needs, feelings and values.
- Each is trying to satisfy their needs in relation to the process.
- Each has perceptions both of themselves and of the other participants.
- Each has perceptions of how the others relate to the review process and the part each should be playing.
- Each has a perspective on the review process itself and how it links to their ministry or role, and to the wider Church.
- Each can influence the extent to which Ministerial Development Review is a meaningful experience which has positive longer term impact.

This complexity means that ‘simply’ preparing for Ministerial Development Review and running the meeting according to the recommended process and associated guidance will not necessarily lead to a successful outcome. Fundamental to success is:

- building an atmosphere which is conducive to mutual trust
- acknowledging that Ministerial Development Review is a joint venture in which the participants are exploring new ways of relating to one another.

Handling relationships

The guidance which follows is largely about building trust and using behaviours which trigger positive responses – ie which make people feel comfortable with the interaction and encourage participation and thoughtfulness. Such behaviours depend on an attitude of mutual respect, a belief in the value and rights of the individual, but also on good-quality interpersonal skills.

Among the obstacles to positive behaviours is the tendency to behave according to habit, to let one’s dominant emotions govern one’s behaviour, to seek self-justification, and to see things solely from one’s own perspective. Whilst it is suggested that participants should all avoid triggering negative responses during the review meeting, the emphasis is on the use of positive behaviours by the ordained and lay contributors. Some of what follows, therefore, is designed largely with the ordained and lay contributors in mind. Much of it will be instinctive or already known, but, given the importance of the review meeting in terms of its potential contribution to the well-being and future ministry of the minister, there is some benefit in articulating the positive value of some behaviours, and the damaging effect of others.

Probing and listening

It is a tendency in conversation simply to check what the other person is thinking rather than to explore what is truly in their minds. This stems partly from the fact that we all think much faster than we talk, and, thus, when listening to another, we tend to jump ahead and draw conclusions which we then check by asking a question. This checking is associated with closed questions, which typically invite simple answers; exploring, meanwhile, involves open questions which typically invite more elaborate, and thus more informative and useful, responses.

When asked a series of closed questions we feel as if we are on the ‘receiving end’ – as if the other person is not really interested in us. Central to Ministerial Development Review is the need to

demonstrate interest in the minister and their needs; consequently the requirement not only for open questions but also active listening. Active listening means participating fully in the communication process rather than remaining passive in it.

On the following page are two lists: the left-hand shows the signs associated with someone who is not listening while the right-hand list shows the signs associated with someone who is listening.¹⁸ Being listened to is almost invariably a positive, affirming and gratifying experience!

18 Terry Gillen, *Exercises for Interpersonal Skills Training*, Institute of Personnel and Development, London, 2000

Not listening

Lengthy note taking

Negative facial expressions

Being too close or too far away

Orientating yourself away from the other person

Appearing too 'laid back'

Being distracted

Fidgeting

Doodling

Losing eye contact

Closing your eyes

Yawning

Clock-watching

Making 'hurry up' gestures

Interrupting

Changing the subject abruptly

Listening

Helpful eye contact

Looking receptive

Making encouraging sounds and gestures

Making relevant comments

Minimal note-taking

Asking relevant questions

Probing

Checking understanding

Summarising

When probing it is best to be brief and simple in one's questioning – ie to avoid asking several questions rolled into one which might imply or indicate that you have already anticipated the response and thus are not genuinely seeking information. It also helps to maintain an even pace in order to avoid the interchange becoming an interrogation. Further, probing involves asking real questions, not ones seemingly designed to trip up the other person – otherwise the interaction will degenerate into a debate or point-scoring exercise rather than the purposeful conversation which it should be.

Building rapport and facilitating a positive meeting

Rapport comes about when people:

- feel comfortable with one another
- understand one another
- trust one another.

To an extent, rapport depends on people getting to know one another or already having a positive relationship, but it is also possible to take steps to remove some of the obstacles. On the following page is a table which describes both rapport-builders and rapport-breakers:¹⁹

¹⁹ Gillen, *Exercises for Interpersonal Skills Training*

Handling relationships

Rapport-breakers

Talking more than listening

Using over-formal or convoluted language

Using parental language – “ought”; “should”; “can’t”

Using words or phrases which are not authentic or do not add to the conversation – “with all due respect”; “let’s be honest”; “obviously”

Suggesting that you know what someone else is thinking

Being dogmatic and emphatic

Countering the other person’s suggestions and proposals

Being defensive or attacking

Rapport-builders

Listen more than talk

Use everyday language

Use adult-to-adult language

Be authentic; use meaningful language

Probe rather than assume

Make tentative suggestions and encourage consideration of these

Ask questions about the other person’s proposals, suggestions and ideas

Focus on facilitating understanding and conferring to find

It is possible deliberately to set about creating a feeling of comfort, trust and understanding by using some techniques:

- **Matching body language** – ie making your body language similar to the other person’s: not an exact match so that you appear to be mimicking the other person, but something which is not in opposition to how they are sitting, positioned, etc
- **Pacing** – ie listening and questioning in such a way as keeps pace with the other person’s conversation: this involves asking questions for clarification, summarising what the person has said and reflecting back their words to them. It also involves not judging, evaluating and telling the other person things or constantly giving one’s own opinion.
- **Signposting** – ie introducing what you are saying to help the other person to categorise it and to enable them to work out the purpose of your contribution: eg “Here’s a suggestion...”; “Here’s an example...”; “Let’s take a hypothetical situation...”; “Let me check my understanding...”; “On the one hand... on the other hand...”

In Ministerial Development Review, three people are involved in the conversation, and signposting is important to signal to the other participants what ‘thinking mode’ you are in: whether you are thinking about the ‘big picture’ or whether you are concentrating on the detail or on the practical aspects; whether you are using a rational approach or focusing on emotional impact. This allows each person to align themselves with the discussion rather than dismissing the contribution as unhelpful or ‘out of tune’. By introducing the nature of one’s thinking or the purpose of one’s particular contribution using signposting, the participants can be more receptive and absorb the contribution more easily, rather than being distracted by trying to sort, categorise and fit the suggestion or comment into their own picture of the situation.

Handling relationships

Sometimes there does need to be an attempt to harmonise the group's thinking – which is where a facilitating role may become important. A facilitator will attempt to coordinate the discussion by moving it from one topic to another, but also from one mode of thinking to another: perhaps from problem-oriented thinking to solution-oriented thinking, or from negative-thinking to positive-thinking.

There are also various other behaviours and principles which will be helpful to ensure that the review conversation is positive and productive:

- A common understanding of what the discussion is trying to achieve
- A shared understanding of the process – ie an understanding of how the dialogue and meeting will 'work'
- An understanding of different perspectives, roles, preferred ways of thinking, etc
- Cohesion – a sense of shared purpose and a shared desire for a positive meeting

Articulating these desires, purposes, processes and perspectives will be helpful: again, a facilitator can check for different understandings and draw out any lack of commonality or acceptance. Expressing and explicitly acknowledging differences will be necessary before the group can move towards a common goal, an agreed process and mutual understanding.

Helpful facilitating behaviours are summarised below:

| Aspect | Helpful behaviours |
|-------------------------|---|
| Goal and process | <p>Suggesting goal or process; referring back to goal or process</p> <p>Is the goal clear? Is it accepted?</p> <p>Remind people if they ignore it</p> <p>Is the process clear? Is it accepted?</p> <p>Remind people if they ignore it</p> |
| Understanding | <p>Probing; seeking information; checking for understanding</p> <p>Clarifying</p> <p>Listening</p> <p>Building on another's suggestions</p> <p>Suggesting alternatives for consideration</p> <p>Do you understand others? If not check for understanding</p> <p>Do others understand you? Signpost; check they understand</p> |

Cohesion

- Inviting contributions
- Coordinating thinking modes
- Summarising input so far
- Relating input to goal or process
- Suggesting a way forward / decisions
- Summarise opposing views and suggest a way forward

Controlling emotions

Whilst it is to be hoped that most participants will embark on the process of Ministerial Development Review in a positive frame of mind and in anticipation of a helpful conversation, there may well be uncertainty and, thus, anxiety, about what is entailed. In some cases, the prior relationship may not be very healthy and the different parties will come to the review meeting in a negative frame of mind. When emotions, such as anxiety, are strong, it can be difficult to control and use behaviour positively. Negative reactions are often fuelled by negative self-talk in which we tell ourselves that we can't cope, or that the situation is going to be difficult, or that people will not listen to us or that they will respond unhelpfully. By replacing negative self-talk with positive inner dialogue we may find it easier to adopt more positive behaviours when faced with an awkward or unfamiliar situation which we feel ill-equipped to handle.

Allied to this negative inner conversation is the tendency to see situations almost entirely from our own perspective and then see this as the whole reality - and this perception of reality may cause us to become over-anxious or defensive.

The concept of 'perceptual positions' may help. It is possible to tap into this concept by doing the following:

Describing what the situation looks and feels like from your position

Describing what the situation looks and feels like from the other person's position (the feelings here are important: you need to pretend you are the other person)

Describing what the situation looks like from the viewpoint of an independent, fair-minded and solution-oriented observer

Finally, returning to your own perceptual position and, once more, describing to yourself what the situation looks and feels like - hopefully, the process will have removed a lot of emotion from the situation

The elements of this sequence may have some resonance within Ministerial Development Review. Each party will come to the process with a different set of perceptions about Ministerial Development Review and about their own, and others', role within it, so it may be helpful to try to think through the different possible perspectives besides one's own.

Defusing other people's anger and handling conflict

If only rarely, the review meeting may raise sensitivities to such an extent that it exposes anger. When people are angry they use various 'hooks' which can prompt negative thoughts also in the people they are addressing. Among these is a tendency to exaggerate and over-generalise, to be patronising, and to start using autocratic words such as "should", "must", "ought" or "can't" - ie 'parental language'. The positive self-talk mentioned above is

Handling relationships

Book Four | Skills and good practice in Ministerial Development Review

useful when facing aggressive behaviour. It is helpful to stay calm, to acknowledge what the other person has said, and to probe in order to help them begin to communicate more clearly and calmly.

Handling conflict requires:

the ability to remain, or appear, calm, with neutral body language and good eye contact

the ability to keep the confrontation (and accompanying exaggeration, generalisations, and belittling remarks) in perspective – and to be clear about the overall goal

active listening

use of ‘the three-part sentence’ – a sentence which:

- **acknowledges and shows an understanding of the other person’s position (i.e. perhaps by summarising the points they have made)**
- **explains your own feelings in the light of this understanding**
- **makes a suggestion which leads on from these feelings, but which is not over-insistent... ie “I understand that your position is..., however, this is how I feel... so I think that we might...”.**



Giving and receiving feedback

The key principles of giving feedback have been mentioned elsewhere, but below there is some discussion about how to give critical feedback – and how to receive it. Before examining the skills and techniques involved, it is worth reiterating and expanding on some of the principles of feedback, and highlighting the value of ongoing mutual feedback. Where practised, this will make the review meeting a more natural event which grows out of an established constructive and developmental relationship.

- Feedback should highlight behaviour and results or consequences (not personality or ‘style’) – the focus is the task, not the person.
- Feedback is about emphasising successes and reinforcing effective behaviour, and giving people an opportunity to change behaviour, as appropriate.
- Ideally feedback should not be confined to an annual review situation but become a natural part of reflecting on how things are going. Regular mutual and informal feedback should be encouraged alongside the annual process.

Feedback in a wider sense is about communicating information about what has been achieved, progress made and any problems encountered, and then using this information to work together to build on successes and to solve or alleviate problems. Ideally it should be reciprocal and an integral part of organisational life – and involve looking at how all parties (including the organisation) are doing and how each is contributing to the overall effort. Thus, for ministers in a review situation, all participants should be open to receiving feedback and the ordained and lay contributors should invite the minister to comment on the extent to which they feel they are supported, how the environment and context in which they work helps and hinders their ministry, and should discuss together actions for helping to resolve any problems.

The place of critical feedback

Whilst the overwhelming focus is on positive feedback, there will be cases where there are problems which need to be addressed. The focus for any critical feedback should be on agreeing an action plan to prevent the situation happening or problem arising again – it is not about securing confessions, convictions and publicising failings.

Giving critical feedback provides an opportunity to address the problems, enhance the underlying relationship and provide a clearer picture to the recipient of what needs to be changed. If mishandled, however, the process can be highly detrimental, undermining the credibility of the person giving feedback – the style of communicating feedback then becomes the issue rather than the actual problem.

Giving critical feedback – some techniques

Critical feedback can be part of supportive, well-intentioned communication and can be constructive, if handled according to the following guidelines:

Give people plenty of opportunity to raise issues themselves.

See yourself as a coach engaged in joint problem solving and use exploratory questioning to tease out areas of difficulty which are acknowledged as such by the person concerned.

Make it clear that your intentions are not to undermine but to help.

Use clear and unambiguous language. Avoid emotional, personalised, and aggressive language at all costs.

Having used unambiguous language, explain why you think the issue is a problem.

Make sure you acknowledge the recipient's response, by summarising it and repeating it back to them.

Focus on specific behaviours which can be changed – this can be perceived as constructive. Avoid commenting on personality or anything which the person will not be able to visualise. The person needs to be able to 'see' the behaviour in their mind's eye if they are going to be able to think about changing it: "You are often aggressive" is much less easy to 'see' than "At yesterday's meeting you shouted" or "You did not allow others to speak", "...and this happened last week, too".

Link criticism with some guidelines to help solve the problem. The person needs to know what you expect them to do and to accept that what you are suggesting is fair, reasonable and possible to carry out.

Receiving critical feedback – some skills and techniques

Listen to the feedback and examine it honestly to see if there is any substance to it, even if it is delivered in an emotional, personalised and aggressive way.

Use the ‘four R method’:

- **receive** the other person’s comments (don’t interrupt or deny the validity of the criticism; avoid defensiveness or counter-attacks)
- **repeat** what they have said as objectively as possible (ie reflect back and show that you have understood what the person is saying)
- **request** the other person’s ideas about how the issue should be dealt with (move the conversation to a constructive place in which you can deal with specifics rather than generalised criticism)
- **review** the different options and agree a way forward.

The method suggested here is one which is associated with a collaborative style and is one which should characterise the whole of the Ministerial Development Review process – an approach which explores the other person’s viewpoint, explains your own perspective, and then creates a sense of resolution and a way forward for the future.

References

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