Skills and Good Practice in MDR

A guide for ordained ministers and lay contributors involved in review
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Reflection and reflective practice have a central place in Ministerial Development Review (MDR): it is envisaged that they will be a key source of learning and hence growth and development.

Chapter Two of the MDR Guide provides some suggestions as to what aspects of the minister’s role and ministry might be the subjects of reflection.

What follows is a brief introduction to reflective practice.

What reflection 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’.

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 practice. The Methodist Quadrilateral is a prime example:
This is a way of expressing how Methodists have approached doing theology, although the Methodist Church in Britain maintains that Scripture is the supreme authority. The Quadrilateral identifies four primary sources for doing theology:

- **Scripture** – what the Bible says
- **Tradition** – what the Church has taught over the centuries
- **Reason** – using your God-given gift of thinking and reasoning to interpret both scripture and tradition.
- **Experience** – the experience of the Holy Spirit working in the believer, the Church and the world – the witness of the Spirit speaking to us and guiding us now.

For more information about the Methodist Quadrilateral, see this section in *Worship: Leading & Preaching* (user name: guestaccess; password: guestaccess):


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*, identifies “faithful reflection” as a core discipline of discipleship and of developing effective ministry.¹

The fundamental importance of reflection is also recognised in secular work contexts, 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 in order to enhance practice in the future.

Reflection in this sense 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, as it were, reassembling them to view the experiences through a new lens.

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What reflection leads to

The insights generated by calling-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 organisations, 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 personal development.

David Kolb’s “model of experiential learning”\(^2\) provides a widely used framework for understanding the role of reflection in learning and the stages in the process. His learning cycle is reproduced here:

This cycle is continuous: we are continuously testing concepts in experience and modifying our understanding in the light of that experience. Again, for Methodists this feels 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.

The process of being a theologically reflective practitioner should therefore be a cyclical one: as fresh affirmation is gained or new insights are given, these contribute to the process of further reflection.

In its simplest form, this circle or cycle can be expressed in the following diagram:


For more information about Theological Reflection, see this section in Worship: Leading & Preaching (user name: guestaccess ; password: guestaccess): www.bit.ly/prepare1-2

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 MDR 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 MDR

When to reflect

Because reflection is being given attention as part of the MDR scheme, there is a danger that it may be seen as something which is just carried out immediately prior to the review meeting. It is to be hoped, however, that the scheme will instead be seen as an ongoing reflective process which is punctuated annually by a review meeting (into which is fed the learning and insights acquired from the ongoing process of prayerful reflection). Regular reflection is also an integral part of the minister’s supervision programme.

Tools to use

There are various tools that can be used to expose learning. Some, such as reflective journals and private blogs, 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. A minister using a reflective journal or private blog might review what they have written every few weeks and prayerfully reflect on it. 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. There are also mechanisms to aid reflection which involve others – informal conversations or more formal debriefing (eg following some significant event in the life of the circuit or in relation to the progress of a particular initiative).

The subjects for reflection

The subjects for reflection will partly be drawn from the topics listed in Chapter 2 of the MDR Guide (relating to particular roles and responsibilities) and will partly 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 they 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 that 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 that 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 may not only be to do with the individual, but also to do with systems, structures, processes and activities.

**Spiritual reflection and discernment**

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 that are brought to bear.

**Handling relationships**

Simply preparing for MDR 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 that is conducive to mutual trust**.

The guidance that 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. Much of this guidance 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 common 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 ‘yes/no’ answers. Exploring, on the other hand, 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 MDR 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.

You may like to look at this short video from the Clear Lessons Foundation about active Listening: https://clearlessonsfoundation.tv/play/clc420?share=qccHuYMukpE8ybQ7q – you may need to sign up to watch the video (signing up is free for charity workers and volunteers).

Below 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 actively listening.³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not listening</th>
<th>Listening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lengthy note taking</td>
<td>Helpful eye contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative facial expressions</td>
<td>Looking receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being too close or too far away</td>
<td>Making encouraging sounds and gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientating yourself away from the other person</td>
<td>Making relevant comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearing too ‘laid back’</td>
<td>Minimal note taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being distracted</td>
<td>Asking relevant questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidgeting/doodling</td>
<td>Probing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing eye contact</td>
<td>Checking understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing your eyes</td>
<td>Summarising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yawning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clock-watching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making ‘hurry up’ gestures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing the subject abruptly</td>
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When probing it is best to be brief and simple in one’s questioning – i.e. 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. 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. Below is a table that describes both rapport-builders and rapport-breakers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rapport-breakers</th>
<th>Rapport-builders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk more than listen</td>
<td>Listen more than talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use over-formal or convoluted language</td>
<td>Use everyday language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use parental language – ‘ought’; ‘should’; ‘can’t’</td>
<td>Use adult-to-adult language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use words or phrases that are not authentic or do not add to the conversation – ‘with all due respect’; ‘let’s be honest’; ‘obviously’</td>
<td>Are authentic; use meaningful language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest that they know what someone else is thinking</td>
<td>Probe rather than assume</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are dogmatic and emphatic</td>
<td>Make tentative suggestions and encourage consideration of these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter the other person’s suggestions and proposals</td>
<td>Ask questions about the other person’s proposals, suggestions and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are defensive or attacking</td>
<td>Focus on facilitating understanding and conferring to find commonality</td>
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It is possible deliberately to set about creating a feeling of comfort, trust and understanding by using some of the following techniques:

• Matching body language – 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.

4. Gillen, *Exercises for Interpersonal Skills Training*
• **Pacing** – 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 their words back to them.

• **Respecting** – not judging, evaluating or *telling* things to the other person or constantly giving one’s own opinion.

• **Signposting** – 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 MDR, 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.

Sometimes there does need to be an attempt to harmonise the group’s thinking – which is where a facilitating role may become important. Either the lay contributor or ordained contributor may find themselves taking up this role. A facilitator will attempt to coordinate the discussion by moving it from one topic to another, and also sometimes 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, processes, perspectives and purposes 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.
Controlling emotions

Whilst it is to be hoped that most participants will embark on the process of MDR in a positive frame of mind and in anticipation of a helpful conversation, there may well be uncertainty and 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 self-talk, 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.

It may help to deliberately shift our ‘perceptual position’ 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 the emotion.

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

Defusing other people’s anger and handling conflict

Occasionally, the review meeting may raise sensitivities to such an extent that it exposes anger. When people are angry they use various ‘hooks’ that 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 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 effectively 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 (ie perhaps by summarising the points they have made)
  - explains your own feelings in the light of this understanding
  - makes a suggestion that 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...”.

The key principles of giving feedback are covered in Chapter 3 of the MDR Guide, but below there is some further discussion about how to give constructive 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 that 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 are doing and how each is contributing to the overall effort. Therefore, 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 and how the environment and context in which they work helps or hinders their ministry, and they should discuss together actions for helping to resolve any problems.
The place of constructive critical feedback

Whilst the overwhelming focus is on positive feedback, there will be cases where there are problems that need to be addressed. The focus for any constructive 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 constructive 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 and receiving constructive 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:

As a giver of feedback:

- 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.
- 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 that can be changed. Avoid commenting on personality or anything that the person will not be able to see for themselves. 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 critical feedback 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.
As a recipient of feedback:

- 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 MDR 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.

For more information, see these presentations on:
Receiving Feedback – www.bit.ly/2zDsoBq

Resource
W Kolt and R Donohue, Managing Interpersonal Conflict, Sage, London, 1992
Remember, the Connexional Team is available to help you.

A full list of contacts can be found at:
www.methodist.org.uk/connexionalteam

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