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### Reflecting skills

Joyce Rupp (1996, p. 56) talks about 'a journey without maps', which is an excellent analogy for ministry. We don't always know what is going to happen, where we are going or why things occur but reflecting skills help us to make sense of our experiences. Van der Ven (1998, p. 86) highlights the problem people in ministry face: 'because of the complexity and inherent dynamic of the situation in which the pastor is involved, every solution generates its own problem or even problems.' Ben, an experienced schools worker, had a reflective practice 'moment' when a 19-year-old female member of the team took her first assembly. Her input was not as proficient as his, but her age and the fact that she had gone to the school in question meant that she had the total and undivided attention of the pupils. Ben discovered that his age, ability and skill were not the most significant factors in his work. As a result of this reflection he then set about a two-year process of stopping doing such work and passing it onto younger people. In collaborative ministry there will be many such incidents that we can learn from and that result in changed practice.

In the caring professions, reflecting skills, often known as reflective practice, is a core part of initial training and ongoing development. Moon suggests that reflection is one of our basic mental processes and that it is most often used where there is not an obvious solution or material is ill-structured or uncertain (2000, p. 10). Both general reflecting and theological reflection skills are useful in collaborative ministry. Both are about developing, interpreting, improving and assessing our practice with the aim of drawing conclusions which lead to a change in thinking, action, attitude or new insights or approaches. Reflection should make a difference; the word sounds passive but it leads to action. Reflecting is useful for a range of purposes including learning from experience, making decisions, exploring problems, developing theory or practice principles,

justifying decisions to stakeholders, integrating values into practice, self-development or team-building.

Reflection should be seen as a spiral, we sometimes use a toy slinky to illustrate this. You never begin your next piece of reflection where you started the last as reflection should move you on in some way each time you do it.

### **What is reflective practice?**

Reflective practice is 'an approach to professional practice that emphasises the need for practitioners to avoid standardised, formula responses to the situations they encounter' (Thompson, 1996, p. 221). Reflective practice is a discipline, it is an activity that if practised often enough becomes habitual, it becomes integrated into what we do and who we are. In ministry there are rarely situations where we can do what we did last time; it requires us to reflect and work out an appropriate response.

A Muslim woman knocked on Paul's chaplaincy office door, clearly in distress; her son was on the intensive care unit. She did not ask to see a Muslim chaplain and asked Paul for religious instruction to sustain her at this difficult time. This is not a normal experience for Paul. He was not sure what he was most thrown by, the fact a female Muslim was speaking alone with him by choice in his office or that she was asking for spiritual help from a Christian, or that he had no idea of what to say to her. Not wanting to offend, he started with some Old Testament prophets as this would hopefully find some common ground. His knowledge of Islam at that time was limited and she listened to his inadequate wanderings. Not knowing what else to say he finally and very tentatively said that what he used with some Christian families was the 'Footprints' poem and would she like him to read it to her. He was unsure of what she would make of a Christian poem, but thought that prefacing it with 'Christian' would at least give a get-out clause if it did not connect with her or was offensive. He read it and immediately her eyes lit up and her spirit lifted. She said that it was very interesting that he had read this poem to her as the day before her teenage son had been taken ill, his uncle had given him a copy of the 'Footprints' poster to put up on his wall. His mind began again to whirr. How could this be? Were they seeking out Christianity? Had a Christian given it to them? No,

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he soon realized as he reflected on the words of the poem, which he must have read scores of times. It did not mention Jesus but God and there was nothing in this poem that was uniquely Christian. He gave her a copy of the card and they went on to the ward to visit her son, as she had then asked Paul to come and pray for him! This experience and reflection although surprising and shocking at the time resulted in a paradigm shift when he realized how easy it is to read Christological or Trinitarian models into something; we make assumptions that are not always based on reality.

Johns (2004, p. 2) uses the term 'layers of reflection' and identifies five stages that move from doing reflection to reflection as a way of being:

- 1 *Reflection-on-experience* Reflecting on a situation or experience after the event with the intention of drawing insights that may inform future practice in positive ways.
- 2 *Reflection-in-action* Pausing within a particular situation or experience in order to make sense and reframe the situation proceeding towards desired outcomes.
- 3 *The internal supervisor* Dialoguing with self while in conversation with another in order to make sense.
- 4 *Reflection-within-the-moment* Being aware of the way I am thinking, feeling and responding within the unfolding moment and dialoguing with self to ensure I am interpreting and responding congruently to whatever is unfolding. It is having some space in your mind to change your ideas rather than being fixed to certain ideas.
- 5 *Mindful practice* Being aware of self within the unfolding moment with the intention of realizing desirable practice (however desirable is defined).

It would be interesting to work on this as a collaborative ministry team so that reflection becomes integral to the way that we work. The tools in the final part of this chapter introduce some ways of approaching reflection methodically and activities suggested in some of the other chapters also encourage reflective approaches.

Reflection can bring rich insights. At meetings of the Grove Youth Series Editorial Group <[www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk)> the day begins with a reflection, which may be based around a story, an experience, an object, a picture, and often each person present shares their

insights. The sum of our reflections is much more enriching than just listening to one person and it highlights new perspectives, different interpretations and fresh ways of seeing something. This is helpful in getting us into a creative, reflective way of thinking at the beginning of a meeting.

### **Reflective practice processes and tools**

This is a basic framework for reflective practice which lists the steps we need to go through:

- 1 *Name* What is the situation/issue/dilemma/problem/question?
- 2 *Explore* What do we hope will emerge from this reflective practice process?  
What is the end result/product/consequence . . . that we are looking for?
- 3 *Analyse* What is/could be going on?  
Have we made any assumptions or presuppositions?  
How do we/others think/feel?  
What would our values, motives, goals, agenda, purpose, tradition, discipline want to say?  
What theory or previous experience informs this?  
We can also add faith, the Bible, theology, Christian tradition and culture here as tools for analysis.
- 4 *Evaluate* What were/are our options?  
What would we change/do differently?  
What are the possibilities?  
What are the strengths and weaknesses of these?  
Why did we come to this conclusion/do this . . . ?  
Again we can draw in faith resources at this stage.
- 5 *Outcome* What is the outcome of this process?  
New learning, different practice, action, insight . . .

### **Critical incident technique**

A succinct version of this is offered by Thompson (2006, p. 55) who has a four-stage process:

- 1 identifying an incident that has caused concern;
- 2 clarifying what happened in that incident;

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- 3 seeking an explanation for what happened;
- 4 looking for alternative explanations.

### Gibbs' reflective cycle

Gibbs offers another process in what he calls a 'reflective cycle' (cited in Moon, 2000, p. 73):

- 1 *Description* What happened?
- 2 *Feelings* What were you thinking and feeling?
- 3 *Evaluation* What was good and bad?
- 4 *Analysis* What sense can you make of the situation?
- 5 *Conclusion* What else could you have done?
- 6 *Action plan* If it occurs again, what would you do?

### Generating options and possibilities

Brainstorming is a core activity in reflection where you identify as many answers as possible to a question or reasons for a behaviour or solutions to a problem, etc. Trying to do this by seeing things from a different perspective can be helpful, for example, from the standpoint of someone else who is not represented in the reflection group, or from five years in the future.

### Issue-based questions

If you want to focus on a specific issue then generate a list of questions to explore. This is one we use with youth workers on power.

- Consider a situation/incident/event, e.g. a pastoral encounter, an argument in the youth group over use of the pool table, a discussion at the deacons' meeting over some damage done in the church hall, a discussion on how we are going to celebrate our centenary, responding to a request at the PCC from a yoga teacher to use church for classes, etc.
- Where is/was the power?
- Who has the power?
- Who was disempowered?
- Who was disempowering?
- Who did not have power?
- Who would like power?
- Who did/might abuse power?

- Who needs power?
- What is power in this context?

Paul often uses reflective practice tools in his work as a chaplain. Gregory came to see Paul because a job had been offered him after only a year in his current post; this was a dilemma. Together they explored the frustrations that Gregory was experiencing in his current job and the attractiveness of a way out. However, at the analysis stage Gregory realized that this new job would not be the easy answer he thought as he recognized that it would mean a lot of management and administration when his passion was face-to-face work. In evaluating his options he realized that it would be a case of out of the frying pan into the fire and he decided to stay. However, the offer had unsettled him and he became aware that he had made a mistake taking his current job and resolved to look for one which was a better match to his calling and gifting.

Having 'stop and think' times in our practice to develop what we do is valuable; we would almost say essential. Designating times for this to happen works well as does appointing a facilitator to encourage and aid the reflection. Working on real-life situations helps us develop skills and understanding for when we face other complex situations in the future and helps us integrate new learning.

### **Theological reflection**

Theological reflection is related to reflective practice; it uses the same or very similar processes but additionally engages with our faith at every stage. We could describe it as being like a child with one parent who brings professional knowledge and expertise and the other who brings theological skills. Which one has the most influence depends on us!

Theological reflection involves asking where God is in this situation or experience and making connections with Christian tradition, theology, the Bible, our faith and experiences of ministry. It is about the God we find, not the God we bring. It assumes God and the principles of the kingdom are already present; it becomes our task to discern where and how. Theological reflection should lead to the integration of new knowledge or understanding into our practice, attitudes, frames of reference, etc. The process can be significant:

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'Theological reflection changes lives. The practice of theological reflection helps us take religious insights, which are fleeting, and gradually move them into our permanent structures of perceiving and interpreting experience' (Killen and De Beer, 1994, p. 111). In asking our students how they benefit from reflecting theologically we get a range of responses. It:

- helps me gain a bigger picture and brings a wholeness to my practice; it brings practice and theology into partnership;
- gives me models for practice, e.g. incarnation, liberation;
- helps me to stop and think about my practice and ways in which I can move forward, helps evaluate strategies, brings personal and professional development and motivation;
- helps me not to compromise my Christian principles and brings consistency between life and practice – integrity; helps keep me humble and open to learning from others;
- challenges perceived ideas, preconceptions and helps me identify root motives and issues;
- gives me confidence, empowers me through exploring the 'why' of what I am doing;
- bonds workers together if done corporately;
- gives me a greater awareness of God and the seeking of God in everyday situations, to understand God's guidance and keep God at the centre of my youth work.

### **Key questions to move from reflective practice to theological reflection**

Classically, theological reflection gives primary authority to experience although some people will prefer to reflect starting from the Bible or theology. These reflections encompass:

- What within our faith resources helps us make sense of, resonates with, surprises, challenges, is reflected in, speaks to, listens to, critiques this situation/issue, etc.?
- What within this situation/issue helps us make sense of, resonates with, surprises, challenges, is reflected in, speaks to, listens to, critiques our faith, mission, ministry, actions, attitudes, understanding, calling, thinking, etc.?

## **What do you reflect on?**

The simple answer is anything, 'The mundane and the joyous moments serve just as well as occasions upon which we may reflect and learn to think theologically' (De Bary, 2003, p. 121). For example, as a youth worker we may have gone into a school, are walking along the corridor with the deputy head and suddenly one of our youth group comes up to us and gives us a hug and kiss. How do we avoid this happening again? Or we may have noticed that numbers are dropping off at the luncheon club or that we seem to have lost a little of our joy for the everyday tasks of our job or there seem to be tensions in the team but we can't quite pinpoint why.

## **When to reflect?**

When most of us think about reflection, we think about an activity that takes place after an event. Schon (1991) talks about reflection before, during and after an event. During the annual carols by candlelight, which is the most important service of the year for the local community, one person in the team is asked to make notes as to what is working, is too long, has gone well, etc. When the team debrief the event they use these notes alongside others' recollections from the service. Being purposeful about reflection can be helpful as before an event we can be caught up with all the finer details of organization and after an event it can just not happen at all as we move on to the next pressing commitment. A more formal evaluation process as described in Chapter 10 may be helpful in this sort of instance. Sometimes it is a fine line as to whether you call something reflective practice or evaluation.

## **Theological reflection process**

This is a simple three-stage process Paul developed from the classic see, judge, act model. This resulted from a piece of reflective practice in realizing that the word 'judge' is interpreted negatively by many, particularly in a youth work context. It also adds a range of resources or perspectives that you may want to reflect on or from. At each stage we choose one or two words to work with that resonate with us.



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### **Observe, assess, respond**

For each of the three phases, choose one or more of the key words that most resonate with the topic, issue, situation, dilemma, etc. that you are exploring, e.g. what sort of observing were you engaging in? The lists under 'Consider' give you a wide range of contexts that you need to think about in relation to the reflection; choose the ones that are pertinent to you.

#### *Observe*

Where, when, who, how, why, what are you observing?

This stage encourages us to really get under the skin of what we are reflecting on, to ask again and again, What is or could be going on?

*Purpose and key words* Detect, investigate, insight, imagine, scrutinize, perceive, examine, witness, explore, discover, probe, glimpse, discriminate, discern, become aware of . . .

*Consider* Situation, dynamics, agendas, expectations, fears, hopes, human development, group theory, pressures, personality, gender, ethnicity, class, disability, culture, state of mind, health education, atmosphere, environment, weather, motives . . .

#### *Assess*

What, why, when, where and how are you assessing?

This stage is where we have a conversation between our experience and ministerial and theological resources and work to a conclusion.

*Purpose and key words* Mediate, arbitrate, adjudicate, critique, decide, judge, conclude, ascertain, determine, consider, pronounce, realize, review, evaluate . . .

*Consider* Past experience, church tradition, theology, Bible, metaphors, theory, power, history, ministerial principles, professionalism, social and political context, culture, subculture . . .

#### *Respond*

Where, when, how and why should you respond?

This last stage is all about outcome. In the light of the conclusions of the previous stages, what have we learnt or would do differently next time?

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*Purpose and key words* Do something, proceed, be active, act, react, change, take action, start, move towards, learn, initiate, develop, begin, instigate, initiate, plan, think differently . . .

*Consider* Restrictions, expectations, hopes, need, resources, desires, short/medium/long-term plans, vision, reactions, consequences . . .

This process can be used to reflect on almost anything. The more tools we access from our Christian faith the richer and more rounded our reflection will be and we need to ensure we progress to an outcome.

An example of collaborative theological reflection happened when the three of us were on an away day to reflect on our work with the Midlands Centre for Youth Ministry. We reflected on the degree course in youth and community work and applied theology that we run and noted that we have put a lot of energy into ensuring that students meet the competences needed to gain a professional qualification in youth work but had not articulated as clearly the ministerial formation of our students. We explored a metaphor of streams and in talking and reflecting together a concept emerged of holistic learning and formation where we focus on five streams: professional, ministerial, personal, spirituality and academic. Everyone involved in the course now gets a bookmark which has both the words and a picture of interwoven strands.

To conclude a collaboratively taught module on ministry, Paul facilitates an exercise where students explore their values and calling, individually and corporately, as Christian youth workers. After a morning of preparation students displayed their work in the chapel and contributed to corporate posters on such issues as 'What does it mean to be a Christian youth worker?' or 'If Jesus was speaking to young people today, what would he say?' Finally, they together visit each person's work to discuss issues arising from what is presented. Ideas such as these are developed in *Tools for Reflective Ministry* (Paul Nash and Sally Nash, SPCK, 2009).

### **Issues around reflection**

The way we reflect is partly dependent on who we are, our age, gender, ethnicity, personality, disability and other factors that shape our perceptions. Farley (2002, p. 17) illustrates the differences from the perspective of a theologian:

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Even as a theologian is contextual by way of location and situation, even as such things as gender, ethnicity, nationality, language and economic system render the theologian biologically and culturally specific, so is the theologian contextual by way of participation in a community of faith.

When reflecting in a group some of this needs to be acknowledged as often conflict emerges because of our differences, which are not always identified as contributing to the conflict. Spelling out our pre-conceptions and assumptions as we begin to reflect together can help us understand each other and realize some of the inferences and roots of what people say. Sally, for example, reacts badly to non-inclusive language being used but doesn't always remember to suggest this as one of the ground rules.

Although there is not scope here to discuss this in detail, learning styles impact the way that we reflect and we need to try and ensure that the activities we use relate to people's preferences. Learning from reflection will be more effective if this is the case. Honey and Mumford (1992, pp. 5–6) describe people as activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. Activists 'involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences.' Reflectors 'like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives . . . and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to any conclusion.' Theorists 'adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories'. Pragmatists 'are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications.' Many of the exercises and ideas in this book can be presented in a way that can facilitate participation from people of a variety of learning styles.

Reflection can happen by chance encounter as well as deliberate intention. Being willing to hear from those who do not usually have a voice can have powerful consequences. A pastoral care worker mentioned to the minister that one of the women from the parent and toddlers group she was seeing, who had recently had a miscarriage, was disappointed that the church did not have any sort of memorial service so that the event could be publicly marked. The leadership team considered the idea and invited another local church leader who had experience in this to come and talk to them.

They decided to go ahead with the project and much to their surprise had nearly 200 people at a service. This happened because they listened to someone on the fringe of the church.

If we work in a multidisciplinary collaborative context it is interesting to reflect on whether we should draw on theology in reflection if some of our partners are not Christians. Tanner (2002, p. 116) makes this challenge:

Theology's warrant now centres on the question of whether theologians have anything important to say about the world and our place in it. What, if anything, can the Christian theologian positively contribute to the search for the true and the right on particular issues of importance in the twenty-first century?

In working with Christian students who want to do youth work in both faith-based and secular settings we are aware of a desire on the part of many not to have to leave their beliefs at home. Finding ways of helpfully introducing insights from our reflection that are theological or biblical in origin may often need to be part of the final stage where we determine what our response is and how we will enact it.

### **Reflecting in a group**

Paul was sharing in a Communion service and was reflecting on a postcard of a stained-glass window from the prayer chapel at Buckfast Abbey in Devon. The window is about the size of the side of a two-storey house and shows Jesus, arms outstretched, behind a Communion table. Each time Paul prays in that chapel he hears Jesus say, 'Come' and this has had a profound impact on him. When Paul shared this thought with his fellow pilgrims, a woman in the group shared that this is not what she heard or felt at all, she heard, 'Go.' This obviously resonates with the biblical mandate of Matthew 28 to go into all the world and the cliché that we have a go-spel, not a come-spel. Paul still reflects on this many years after the event, acknowledging that he was both shocked and upset that the woman did not hear the same thing as he did from his special place. But the engagement with a wider group of people took him out of his comfort zone, and when he goes into the chapel now, he still hears 'Come' but also remembers that Jesus says, 'Go.'

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Reflecting in a group helps us get a shared perspective on an issue and helps us to understand each other and hopefully work together more effectively. Having 'stop and think' times can be really valuable. A ministry team has an away day each year which explores some of the big picture and philosophical issues relating to their ministry. They have an external facilitator who encourages and aids reflection as well as asking questions that may not have been thought of. Honestly engaging in reflection requires a degree of vulnerability and will work best in teams where there is trust and the commitment to be collaborative. Taking it in turns to bring something to reflect on is helpful, ideally prepared beforehand, so the session has a focus and real-life situations are explored. In these sorts of circumstances new learning often emerges which can be integrated into existing knowledge and understanding.

## **Problem-solving**

Theological reflection can help in problem-solving. One of the benefits of theologically reflecting in a group is that it gives an opportunity to deal with situations or problems that otherwise may not be dealt with properly or may continue to fester below the surface. Dom, a young person in Jack's youth group, said he was giving up his mechanics course at college. Jack spoke to Dom and sought to persuade him not to give up, he did not have long to go and soon he could get a job and earn some money. Dom decided not to go back to college and was still out of work and college a year later. Jack was troubled about how he and others had handled the situation but as he was not sure how to deal with this concern he decided to raise it at a team meeting as something to reflect on. The discussion led to exploring what 'shalom' meant for Dom and how they as youth workers needed to be trying to work towards that with him. They realized that they had taken his responses at face value and hadn't really tried to get to the bottom of what was happening or to engage him in working out what God was calling him to and supporting him in a journey to find that out. One of their aims as a church was to help people find 'life in all its fullness' (John 10.10) and the youth workers acknowledged they had let Dom down because none of them had got close enough for Dom to feel secure in sharing what the issues really were.

Theologically reflecting on this type of situation gives us the opportunity to engage positively and learn from an experience even if we felt we failed or didn't do all we could. This can be especially helpful to those of us who have a tendency to avoid conflict. Both the conflict and diversity chapters contain material that help take us forward in similar situations.

### **Theological perspectives**

A word which is used in both the secular and biblical perspectives on reflection is 'wisdom'. Moon (2000, p. 9) identifies wisdom as a concept that encompasses higher-level reflective skills. Wisdom from this perspective includes an ability to cope with uncertain knowledge, understanding that knowledge is fallible, realizing the limitations of problem-solving strategies and the ability to make astute decisions. Wisdom in this understanding implies a relationship between knowing and action. There is also a body of wisdom literature within the Bible that may be helpful to explore in parallel with this as part of the desire to integrate both professional and biblical/theological insights. Proverbs encourages us to seek after wisdom and seeking God is a part of reflecting for those looking to integrate their faith and practice:

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures – then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 2.1–5)

What place prayer, waiting on God and listening to what he has to say plays in reflection in collaborative ministry will probably depend on the tradition and context of the ministry but a dialogue between experience, theory and theology can provide some of the most rounded insights.

Sharon was part of a peer support group and when the group met each member would be given the opportunity to share an ongoing issue within their work. It could be a problem, concern, dilemma or reflection, good or bad. On one occasion Sharon shared a conflict with her training minister that was causing her significant stress. The

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group listened carefully and began to ask sensitive questions trying to get below the surface of the issue. In response to one of these questions, Sharon suddenly blurted out, 'He just reminds me so much of the way my dad talked to me.' At this point another member of the group asked gently, 'Do you think that's why you might be reacting so strongly to what he says to you?' Sharon suddenly realized that her response to the minister carried with it much of the pain she had experienced in childhood, when she had received little encouragement and much criticism from her father. This realization encouraged her to seek help in working through her childhood experiences and made a huge difference in her relationship with the minister, as she was able to separate her childhood experiences from her current relationship.

### **Reflection and collaborative ministry**

Reflective skills can help support collaborative ministry in a number of ways:

- It gives a framework to explore personal experiences within a larger setting.
- It provides tools to examine practice and processes as a team.
- Reflection accesses corporate wisdom.
- Reflecting before, during and after collaboration gives opportunities to maximize learning.
- Theological reflection gives a Christian framework to ask questions of ministry.
- It may save us from hasty, knee-jerk or other inappropriate reactions.
- It gives a process for processing problems, worries, personal and corporate dilemmas, etc. that might otherwise not be processed.
- It aids professional, ministerial and spiritual formation.

### **Points for reflection, discussion and action**

- Is reflection an integral part of your practice? If not, why not?
- Where are you on John's layers of reflection continuum? What do you need to do to move on to the next level?

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- What is a recent incident or issue that would benefit from reflection time? Why?
- What is your default resource for theological reflection? Can you start with your experience or do you tend to begin with the Bible or theology?
- What opportunities are there to introduce corporate reflection?