

Groupwork and Christian Formation

Rationale

Genuine meeting between persons is intrinsic to the work of God in creation and redemption – through each other, in the Spirit, we grow and experience healing. With each other, we build fellowship in Christ and come to a common mind in him. From each other, we receive Christ's (sometimes uncomfortable) ministry of love. Human groups have strong dynamics which tap into our deepest past experiences – it can be difficult to be oneself, to say what one means and to hear others speaking as themselves. Christian gatherings are at one and the same time a manifestation of the body of Christ, and human beings stuck with one another, with our hopes and histories and frustrations and yearnings.

An appreciation of the complexities of the working of groups is thus important *at the level of the individual*. Our understanding of ourselves is always partial, and there are facets of ourselves about which we can only learn through others. And only to the extent of being present to others as genuinely as possible (compatible with personal security) can the minister 'bear reality' and go any significant way towards incarnating the presence and concerns of God.

But the understanding of groups is also important *at the level of the group*, the fellowship in Christ. There are strong indications in the New Testament that the charisms of ministry are held corporately within the ecclesia (e.g. Rom. 12.4-8, 1. Cor. 12.4-30, Eph. 4.1-7). So the ordained minister is not to be seen as the omniscient leader, who merely leads groups efficiently to accomplish tasks, but as the self-aware discernor and enabler of gifts in order so that groups can both function as a whole, and experience the creativity and joy of life in the Spirit.

However, the Church's use of groups and meetings tends all too often to be characterised by poor cultures of communication, uncreative uses of power (both by ministers and laity), and low levels of openness and mutual accountability. PCC's and Church Council meetings are often dreaded rather than anticipated!

Healthy relating in groups is thus an essential element in Christian formation, and also a key element in ministerial practice – the more so in these days of collaborative ministry. It needs to pervade the organisation, so the core staff are committed to establishing this within their own working practice, to valuing to the full the student presence and student contribution in shared meetings, and to encouraging healthy relating within the informal flow of meeting that pervades the residential programme

Beyond that, the Course sets aside specific time for examining these issues as part of our shared formation in Christ, and to enable students to be aware of good practice in working with groups. That means encouraging students to move beyond unhealthy cultures of dependence, and enabling them to recognise such factors as projection. It means also examining processes, and recognising that the process of working together may be as or more important than any task the group has set itself.

The aim of the programme is severalfold:

- ❑ to explore some of the resources of scripture and tradition for understanding right relationship between persons
- ❑ to allow candidates to learn by experience how intricate and powerful are the interactions in human groups
- ❑ to give students introductory input on the theory of groupwork, and on its relation to theology
- ❑ to help students to understand the roles that they and others tend to assume in task-based groups
- ❑ to give students space to reflect on their learning and on the impact it is having on their interior lives as persons
- ❑ to enable students to reflect, personally and theologically, upon situations that arise within church groups, and to propose healthy patterns of change within such groups

The stress will be on providing a culture in which understanding and experience are integrated, and views can be held in tension with the views of others. This is not however an area of the training in which every session can be given a closely defined outcome. The process needs to take totally seriously the gifts and experience of our students (including their right to challenge the process, and our task in modelling how such challenge is engaged with). The process is moreover about formation in the Spirit, and the outcome will therefore take different forms in different students. The model of learning is experiential as well as didactic.¹

Confidentiality in the groupwork thread: The only report that will be made to the staff meeting is whether students have participated in the learning process. The facilitators of the sessions would raise with the student any issues related to non-engagement before any report was made.

The learning journal should show evidence of participation in the learning process of the group. Guidance will be given by the Course Staff about how confidentiality is to be maintained in the learning journal.

Evaluation of the groupwork thread: There will be space within the programme for its internal evaluation, but the groupwork thread doesn't form part of the review session at the end of each weekend. That's because we want you to be reflecting on the process within a space safe enough to share what you need to share in some quite sensitive areas, and opening the space out to others in an evaluation process is not necessarily helpful to this.

¹ Whereas the didactic model puts the emphasis upon acquiring information from an external source or authority (for example: the teacher or the text), experiential groupwork is an opportunity to bring into consciousness what is already known or has been experienced. It allows for that which already known to be reflected upon and digested in order to render it more useful. Typically, it is a place where connections can be made between knowledge acquired through lived experience and through learning. The experience of the group and the connections made in it are themselves something new. The approach to assessing and valuing what is learned through these two models is also different. In the didactic model the student comes to know that he or she has learned through the process of examination, writing and assessment. In the experiential group the participant knows that they have learned by an improvement in the quality of their relating to the group as a whole, to the conductor and other members of the group.