

Receptivity in Placements: Linking Formation and Learning

1. *Overview*

The project was carried out in the Dioceses of Chester and Lichfield by Rev'd Liz Shercliff and Rev'd Dr Jeanette Hartwell. There were five key objectives:

- To build theory about receptivity as an attribute that links formation and academic learning
- To identify ways in which the processes of teaching and learning in the context of placements might effectively encourage and support the development of receptivity in students prior to and during placements
- To identify strategies by which placement supervisors might themselves recognize and gain skills and attitudes necessary for encouraging and supporting the development of receptivity by students in the context of placements
- To identify ways by which Common Awards can maximise the value of learning from unfamiliar contexts, specifically placements
- To suggest practical ways in which encouraging and developing receptivity might be incorporated into the CRC strategy of Readers being 'infectious learners'.

2. *What we did*

- Online questionnaire sent to Principals of TElS and diocesan Reader trainers
- Online questionnaire sent to placement providers in the two Dioceses
- Online questionnaires sent to trainee Readers in the two Dioceses who had recently experienced a placement in a church other than their own
- Interviews with trainee Readers
- Pilot session on preparing for placement, with emphases adapted to incorporate research findings

3. *Responses to Questionnaire*

- Principals of TElS and diocesan trainers (7 respondents, one of whom had no part time trainee Readers):
 - 'Receptivity' was defined as:
 - 'Ability to learn from new contexts being open to the insights and learning from the 'other''
 - 'the ability to engage with a transformational learning experience'
 - 'An openness to learn from others in different contexts'
 - 'Being receptive to learning and seeing things from a different point of view'
 - 'Learning to listen to our neighbour'
 - 'The willingness to be open to new experiences, share perspectives, and grow in one's understanding.'
 - Enablers of receptivity were seen as:
 - 'Honest conversation'
 - 'an environment that enables people to ask questions'
 - 'personal disposition – some people just can't do it'
 - 'a safe environment in which students can engage with a transformative programme of learning'
 - 'Humility.'

'A willingness to put preconceptions on one side. Equality in the learning community.'

'Humility – recognizing that you may know a lot about your own circumstances, while really knowing very little.'

'Time with individuals who are 'other' from ourselves'

'Positive relationships. Flexibility of thought. Self-confidence and self-knowledge. Secure identity.'

- Receptivity was promoted by:

Trying 'to create an environment that enables people to ask questions'

'Building a healthy community, inclusive worship, sensitive teaching'

'Respecting the life experiences and different gifts that students themselves bring to the course and to their placements'

'Expose to new (often very old) ideas'

'Make time for students to meet people from different backgrounds'

'Support the formation of good relationships between student and supervisor. Encourage an open-minded approach.'

- Barriers to receptivity were seen as:

'Know it all thinking, unwillingness to learn from others, fear'

'Personal disposition, issues to deal with'

'Teachers being too prescriptive about what is to be learned from a particular context. Fear on the part of students that their own views are not respected'

'Belief that "my opinions are as good as yours" and should be prioritised over others'

'Stereotypical assumptions. Lack of exposure to others'

'Closed-mindedness. Fear of failure. Fear of the unknown'

- In response to 'how do you seek to overcome these barriers' principals and trainers said:

'Constant exposure to new ways of thinking – challenge inappropriate behaviour'

'Counselling'

'Allowing the placement to interact with the students' previous assumptions in an open-minded way. Showing consistent respect and empathy for the students' previous experience and views'

'Exposure to new (often very old) ideas'

'Challenge stereotypical thinking where we encounter it. Make opportunities for students to meet others'

'Positively reinforce open-minded approaches and encourage growth mindset. Ensure clear contracting of the placement, to set out achievable and realistic objectives.'

- Placement providers (18 respondents):

- All regarded placement in a different setting as very important for trainee Readers (on a scale of 0-5, all scored it at 4 and above)
- Opportunities put in place to enable students to learn from placement: regular supervision and feedback

take part in missional activity

regular supervision and feedback

opportunities to meet other members of the leadership team

formal introduction to the worshipping community

lead aspects of worship in different styles

preach

Local opportunities outside church

Working with children in various ways within parish

Engage with chaplaincy work

School assemblies

- Barriers to students' learning were described as:
 - 'students not being available during the week for activities taking place'
 - 'Time to prepare, evaluate'
 - 'mainly her constraints of time due to other work and home commitments'
 - 'Some of the student's own commitments'
 - 'The student is in full time employment. The timing of the placement clashed with work deadlines'
 - 'distance from home and placement context'
 - 'expectations and time limitations'
 - 'They were not teachable. They had other big stuff going on and were distracted'
 - 'Better communication between the course leaders and the incumbent where training is taking place can better help the incumbent to direct the student into the right preaching/leading engagements. The incumbent is always having to rely on the information passed onto them by the reader in training and many of the assignments are given so late that preaching commitments are already fixed and difficult to rearrange. For example - it would be good to know in advance that the student needs to preach on and Old Testament passage, not to be told half way through the term when the rota is already allocated.'
 - 'Their need to set aside pre-conceived ideas of what was "allowed", or how things should be done'
- Trainee Readers (18 respondents):
 - Barriers to learning (several chose the following):
 - 'I felt out of my depth'
 - 'I was unfamiliar with the context'
 - 'time constraints'
 - 'purpose of the placement was unclear'
 - 'placement was not sufficiently challenging'
 - 'anxious about meeting new people'
 - Support to learning:
 - 'Good supervision'
 - 'Good supportive tutors on the course giving us all the information we needed'
 - 'Steady increase in role and responsibility - ie helping to lead a service, then leading with support etc. Also lots of positive feedback from my sermons and exposure to work in the parish different from my role in home parish'
 - 'Opportunity to observe different people. Opportunity to discuss ministry with different people'

‘the opportunity to witness other traditions, the openness of the clergy for questions, the help of the congregation for feedback’
 ‘I was enthusiastic about the placement, so that helped. It was so different to my home church, which gave lots of scope for learning’
 ‘helpful members of the church both lay and ordained’
 ‘Talking to people in the congregation and the Curate’
 ‘The incumbent was very supportive and so were the members of the church. I engaged in some different activities to those I had done in my home parish. Preparing sermons for a congregation you don't know as well is challenging and helpful as a training activity’
 ‘Time spent with the vicar. Time spent talking to members of the church. Attending church events’
 ‘Talking with the ministry team and members of the worshipping community’
 ‘I had asked for an urban church to compare with the type I went to when I was a child. I knew it would be different so went with an open mind. I was not disappointed, because I achieved my objective, in that I was able to understand how urban churches have to have a different approach to the local parishioners to get them and then keep them in the church’
 ‘Excellent in-depth and informative feedback from the supervisor. Both the affirming and critical content was helpful and necessary in supporting progress’
 ‘Being welcomed into a friendly & supportive church with an excellent leadership team’

4. *Interviews about effectiveness of external placements (placements outside the parish)*

- Trying to find trainee Readers willing to be interviewed was informative. When asked, very few trainee Readers wanted to take part, citing reasons such as time constraints, and more interestingly, research not being relevant to their own parish context. Some interviews did take place:
 - How easy did you find it to withdraw from your own parish? What were the barriers?
 ‘I found it very easy to withdraw from my own parish, because I was having problems with my incumbent’
 ‘I found it fairly easy to withdraw from my own parish, however my husband remained there and I am also part of a community group there that I did not give up’
 ‘I found it easy to concentrate on the placement church because my home church is quite big with a large staff, so they don't need me to fill slots on the rota’
 ‘It was hard to withdraw from my own parish. It was going through a hard time and I felt as though I wanted to be with them. My call to be a Reader however couldn't be affected by the trauma of what was happening.’
 ‘I thought I would find it hard to withdraw. I've been in the parish since I became a Christian, and even though they gave me and my wife a hard time when we got engaged – I was only 18 and she was 28 and they thought we were making a mistake, but that's over 20 years ago, so obviously they were

wrong. I didn't find it hard. The gap was good for me. I spent time thinking about what I really think.'

'To be honest it came at a good time. The Bishop had said I could not be licensed because of my sexuality. Getting out of the parish allowed me to reflect and affirm my call to this ministry.'

- To what extent did you become part of a new worshipping community? In what ways?

'I felt very much part of the worshipping community. I was welcomed. I served at the altar and led intercessions. I only preached once, and at a daughter church.'

'I don't think I did become part of the community because the incumbent gave me something to do every week that I was there. I didn't get to talk to people really, other than the leadership team.'

'I did feel part of the community, although I saw my role there more as supporting the vicar, who doesn't have a team'

'My placement was a lot longer than usual – almost 18 months. This was because my incumbent was suspended. I settled well in the placement parish and felt part of it'

'Ha! I literally did become part of a new worshipping community. When my wife and I returned to our home church after the placement it felt like we were hearing what was being taught from the front for the first time. We couldn't go along with it. In fact, we were horrified. So we left and I will be licensed to the church where I did my placement'

'I was part of the leadership team and learnt a lot from the vicar and curate, but my partner also attended with me, and we got married while I was on placement. The congregation gave us a gift and has us both up at the front to pray for us on the Sunday before the wedding. So we both felt very welcomed and part of it'

- How 'at home' did you feel in the new congregation? Why?

'It was like being part of a family'

'I felt at home because if the vicar was short of someone to lead a children's group, which did happen, they just asked me to stand in and I did. I felt at home in the sense of being there to get things done not to get to know people'

'I don't think I was part of the congregation, more one of the leadership team'

'I didn't feel entirely at home, because the parish wasn't as evangelical as I like and I was a bit guarded about what they believed'

'It was the – their ability to accept. They were more loving whereas the other church was very correct – dotting 'i's and crossing 't's doctrine-wise'

'Obviously being gay and accepted is a big part of it. And we were at home and welcomed'

- What was your purpose on placement? Did it change during the placement?

'I decided to use the assignment for the Understanding Congregations module as a way of setting my purpose. It was great. It meant I spoke to all sorts of people I would not have done otherwise'

'I wanted to be involved in children's work because that is what's needed at my own church. I ended up doing that almost to the exclusion of everything else'

'I felt as though my purpose was to support the vicar. I am pretty experienced in terms of preaching, although not normally in the Anglican church'

'The purpose was to observe other practices in the Anglican church, but because of difficulties in my home parish I ended up staying. I supposed the purpose of it was to form me as a minister, but I wasn't willing to change my convictions'

'It turned out that my purpose was to observe, but God's purpose was to move me on'

'My purpose was to learn from a different vicar and be part of a less evangelical church. It didn't change, and I appreciated it a lot'

5. *Some Conclusions*

- The collective responses seem to indicate that placements are geared to ministerial practice – placement providers and students in particular focus on what can be **done** in the time available. Learning is expected to come from the leadership team and to be assessed in terms of leadership. There is little consideration of learning as reflective or immersive. We would therefore suggest that the balance of placements be shifted from practice to reflection, specifically linking academic learning with the placement and with theological reflection.

We hope to support placements in our own dioceses with a reflective learning journal encouraging attentiveness to learning from the community, rather than identifying problems and proposing solutions.

- In both dioceses, trainee Readers are regarded as being 'on placement' from the start of training, initially in their home parishes. To date the incumbents of trainee Readers have been encouraged to offer opportunities early in training for preaching, leading worship and taking prayers. We intend to trial the opposite approach from September 2019, in which trainee Readers will do nothing from September to December of their first year in Reader specific training, other than sit in the congregation. This will, we suggest, reflect a 'Mary model' of discipleship – sitting at the feet of Jesus, and of the congregation, listening and learning. This period will be followed up with a reflective piece of work, for inclusion in a reflective journal, entitled 'What did it feel like to stop?' We hope that this laying down of duties will encourage personal reflection rather than focus on 'what needs to be done'. Such a shift of emphasis will also, we feel, make a move to context-based learning, which might encourage potential new Readers. We also envisage the home parish incumbent becoming co-responsible for the final decision with regard to licensing. This would avoid the perennial problem of diocesan staff being expected to take on the decision-making process alone.

- At present external placements take place in the final term of the first year of Reader specific training. We would move this to the first term of the second year of Reader specific training and see its role as confirming both call and capability for Reader ministry.
- We also suggest (for us) shorter placements – six weeks - followed by one or two 'guest leading/preaching' opportunities. We hope this might encourage Readers to see themselves as deployable, in support of CRC strategy.

In short, we believe that lack of receptivity is due to an unhelpful focus on **doing** things, rather than on reflexivity, and recommend changes to facilitate re-focusing.

- In Chester Diocese I trialled a 'preparing for placement' session with Readers in the first year of Reader specific training (our year 2). It focused on the false self/true self ideas of Thomas Merton, and encouraged students to pay attention to learning from unexpected places. An overview of the session is attached in Appendix 1, with thanks to Rev'd Graham Turner.

Appendix 1

Foxhill Readers' Talk 2019 - Notes *Prayer to a Disruptive and Compassionate God*

Prayer is as much (if not more so) about what needs to be disrupted and dismantled in us as things done by God.

We spend most of our lives on the circumference and sense that the 'inner life' is hard to access, somewhat unreal and quite fragile

Thomas Merton called the circumference of life the False Self. It is who I think I am – it is not *really* who I am. The False Self is tied up with role, reputation, status and image. Western culture has excelled on emphasizing this. We live in a very externalised and image conscious world.

As the False Self is *who I think I am*, the great 'control tower' of this is the mind. It is located in the head. The False Self likes to critique, analyse, judge, compare and compete. While it presents as being robust and indestructible, it is in fact extremely fragile and highly offendable. In its anxiety it asks the question, "Am I loveable?"

The False Self is not necessarily bad. In fact it is necessary. It gets things done. It has helped develop modern technology. Society needs roles to function. It is what modern psychology calls the ego.

It is hard to change ourselves. Will-power and the tactics of the False Self together with rule and laws is not sufficient. (cf. Paul in Romans 7). We cannot change ourselves, something has to happen *to* us. The False Self resists change. It likes to be in charge. The failure of the False Self is seen in celebrities who often end up turning to drugs to dull their pain, but also in our lives too.

The inner life, that Thomas Merton calls the True Self, is who we really are. The True Self is completely indestructible (whereas the False Self highly fragile). It is the mark of God within us, the image of God, his spirit, our soul. There is nothing that can touch it. The shame is that most of us are unaware of the True Self most of the time, as we live completely in our heads.

The True Self does not need easy answers. It does not need to split the world into good and bad, smart and stupid, pretty and ugly, 'on our side' and 'not on side'. It is radically content. It is the mind of Christ that is not tied into compulsive thinking and judging (the dualistic mind).

How does one spend more time living from the True Self rather than the False Self? The saints say there are two ways: through great love or through great suffering. It seems that most of us are so entrenched in operating from the False Self that great love is not enough. Great suffering is the only thing that will destabilise the ego. (See Peter's humiliation, Paul's so-called conversion, Prodigal Son parable.)

The ego is not the problem in and of itself. The problem is our *attachment* to the ego, the False Self. Sometimes we would rather die than give it up. This is why we are called to daily dying in the gospels.

When we live from the True Self we are in the present moment. The head always takes us out of this moment. The False Self cannot compute death, love and mystery. The True Self lives easily with them. (With Trinity also.)

The great suffering we have to go through is symbolised by the desert and the dark valley in the Bible. Today, it is sometimes called liminal space – the threshold between two 'rooms' of life.

The True Self cannot help but love. Love is not so much a work as an outpouring. It feels natural. The True Self does not fear. It is able to see God is all places. It does not look outside of itself for happiness as it has a continual flow of joy from within. It does not have the emotional ups and

downs of the False Self, as it is not insecure. It does not try to fix the world, it is a gift to the world. The True Self does not seek to escape the world into a false world of peace. The True Self can find contentment and bloom in the most inhospitable places. It does not seek to be 'religious' or 'spiritual' – it is just real. The True Self needs to be discovered or uncovered.

Contemplative prayer is a way of praying that seeks to put the False Self to one side for a moment or two each day so that we can 'breathe' from the True Self.

Books:

Thomas Merton – New Seeds of Contemplation

Richard Rohr – Falling Upwards

Eckhart Tolle – The Power of Now

Parker Palmer – Let Your Life Speak

Exercise

Romans 8

¹Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

⁵those who live according to the **false self** set their minds on the things of the **false self** but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

⁶For the mind set on the **false self** is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

⁷because the mind set on the **false self** is hostile toward God

⁸those who are in the **false self** cannot please God.

¹²we are under obligation, not to the **false self**, to live according to the **false self** - but to the Spirit

¹⁶The Spirit Himself testifies with **our spirit/True Self** that we are children of God,

²²we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

²³ even we ourselves groan within ourselves,

²⁶the Spirit also helps our weakness; for **we do not know how to pray** as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

³¹If God is for us, who can be against us?