

WHAT IS OUR IDENTITY IN A CHANGING CHURCH?

Why Continuing Ministerial Development aims to address not just what we do as ministers, but how we are. By Tim Fergusson and Sue Clements-Jewery

A changing identity



Eighteen months ago, I (Tim) left pastoral ministry to take up a post in the Ministries Team at the Baptist Union. The job, to support ministerial development, was

one I was keen to land. So I began my new role with a sense of anticipation and excitement about the season ahead.

And yet, there was a huge amount about pastoral ministry that I regretted leaving behind. The energising nature of the new role was a joy, but at the same time I missed much of what I did or, rather, what I was. Being a church minister is a vocation and it is inevitable that I gained from it a sense of identity. In the move, I had stepped away from my role as preacher, pastor and person-about-the-community. I was left wondering where my identity would now be found.

If this sense of uncertain identity arose in me out of an anticipated transition that I had willingly chosen, how much greater our perplexity when what defines us is taken away without our agreement. How are we affected when faced with the loss of our role? How do we manage a sudden change in how we are known and what we are known for?

An unexpected and unwanted change in our identity can happen for a range of reasons, but 2020 was unusual in bringing this change to so many ministers. Those of us who felt competent and secure in our preaching literally no longer had a platform. Those of us who thrived on pastoral visiting were prohibited from entering people's homes. Those of us who focussed on being present in a community discovered it had retreated behind doors. So what is our identity in a changing church? Have we suddenly found our skills to be little valued? Do we fear that the way of church we are familiar with, will vanish altogether and if so, what will that do to our sense of purpose?

For a happy few, the opposite applies and we have been propelled into the limelight because of our digital proficiency or freedom from institutional structures. But the shock of success can bring its own challenge to our self-perception.

Continuing Ministerial Development, or CMD, aims to address not just what we do as ministers but how we are. It is concerned not just with the skills we require to cope with a change of season, but also with what this change is doing to us. The third of the five CMD habits is **accountability** to someone beyond our ministry setting. One way we can exercise this accountability and find help for addressing questions of role and identity, is through pastoral supervision.

Photo: Christian Bisbo Johnsen | unsplash.com

How pastoral supervision can contribute to CMD



Sue Clements-Jewery is a member of Oakes Baptist Church in Huddersfield. She is married to Philip, a Baptist minister, and was formerly chair of the

Yorkshire Baptist Association Ministry Group. She is now a senior accredited pastoral supervisor and chair of APSE, the Association for Pastoral Supervision and Education, and here she explains more:

Pastoral supervision has been defined as 'a relationship between two or more disciples who meet to consider the ministry of one or more of them in an intentional and disciplined way'.¹

Supervision takes place in a regular, safe, confidential space where trust is built between the person being supervised (the supervisee) and a supervisor external to the minister's context. The supervisor is trained to facilitate exploration and reflection. The emphasis is on the ministry and vocation of the supervisee. The aim is to support them and enable them to become the best they can be as those called by God. Supervision is always work-focussed but is not a quick fix and is most effective when there is commitment to work with a supervisor for a period of time.

Pastoral supervision has three strands – normative, formative and restorative – which are woven together in different proportions according to need. These are best illustrated by images of a compass, a growing plant and a re-chargeable electric bike.



1 NORMATIVE asks the questions, "What is good practice?" "How do I get my bearings in a changing landscape?"

Commitment to best practice comes through considering standards and ethics. It explores issues such as safeguarding, risk management, boundaries, practice dilemmas, the implications of the changing context of ministry.



2 FORMATIVE asks the question, "How do I grow from here?"

The emphasis here is on professional development and growth: Like a plant that has outgrown its pot we can all get stuck in familiar ways of operating. This is an opportunity to explore personal and professional needs along with the resources and training needed for current and future challenges. The formative strand enables ministers to get out of their comfort zones, grow and flourish.



3 RESTORATIVE asks the question, "How do I sustain my ministry and be in it for the long haul?"

This strand looks at the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual impact of the calling on ministers. An electric bike can be ridden some distance but when its battery runs down the bike has to be off the road until it is fully charged. The restorative strand involves a commitment to wellbeing, developing self-understanding and self-care through the discharging and re-charging of batteries. It enables the renewal of vision.

During the lockdown, pastoral supervisors have reported an increased demand for supervision sessions from ministers right across the denominational spectrum, who find themselves in unfamiliar territory without the usual landmarks. Supervision sessions became available online very quickly. "Who am I now?" "I've lost my bearings, help!" "Who am I called to be?" and "How do I keep going?" are questions and concerns I have heard regularly over the past few months. Working with the three strands encourages ministers to grow and flourish.

To find out more about pastoral supervision and how to access it, please go to: pastoralsupervision.org.uk



¹ The Methodist Church (2017). *Responsible Grace: Supervising in the Methodist Church*. London: Methodist Publishing. Section 1.3.