

5

A Relational Toolkit for Curates and Training Incumbents

One contented curate responded to my research by writing, ‘[My TI and I] both worked hard to understand each other; that made for a positive outcome.’ This chapter looks at some of the most common ways that relationships can be transformed from fractious to fantastic. What they all rely on, however, is the commitment from both parties to work on the relationship and accept that we might be the one who needs to change the most.

A Commitment to Direct Communication

Although it is sometimes well-motivated, congregations can exploit and exacerbate the differences between a curate and their TI by playing them off against each other. In her Grove booklet, *Leadership Resilience in Conflict*, Sandra Cobbin talks about healthy and unhealthy triangles.¹⁴ ‘Triangling’ takes place when one person (A) talks to another (B) about a third person (C). Such a conversation becomes unhealthy when A is attempting to pass their anxiety and responsibility about C over to B. In a training relationship, this commonly occurs when parishioners moan to a curate about their TI, or when the TI says to the curate, ‘People have said this about you.’ It is even possible for the curate to collude in the unhealthy triangle by thinking that they are sparing their TI the stress of dealing with people’s complaints. Martin articulated this when he said:

Within a month of arriving it became fairly clear—because I was getting my ear bent quite regularly by parishioners—there were some issues, [my TI] was having some challenges. Which was quite difficult because I had just landed and I haven’t passed any of that on to him because he’s quite fragile and I think he’s probably aware that there are some challenges, and [it] wouldn’t do anybody any good.

Cobbin calls on leaders to model re-triangling, where they do not absorb the anxiety and responsibility which belongs to others. In other words, curates can break the cycle of unhealthy triangling by refusing to be the go-between for a congregation and their TI, encouraging others to own their feedback (both of TI and curate) and give it face to face.

One such opportunity for a curate to give direct feedback to their TI is supervised supervision sessions. However, although an astute facilitator can ask the

difficult questions, it is often not enough for the curate simply to tell the story and hope that the other party picks up on the nuances. Sometimes there is a need to be more direct, focusing on specific actions and feelings as a precursor to discussing how both parties hope things might be different in the future. This is sometimes called the ‘I saw, I felt, I need, I want’ model, recognizing the power of unambiguous ‘I’ statements in conflict resolution. For example, Louise could have used this approach in the situation she describes here:

I think the last time I flipped with him was because I wanted to talk about something and he was expecting me to talk in front of the cleaners hovering in and out, and so when we eventually managed to get somewhere I said to him, ‘You can’t do that, you can’t. How can you ask me how I’m getting on when you’ve got [Sharon] in the background washing up.’

Using this model, Louise could have said to her TI, ‘*I’ve noticed* that you often try to have important conversations when we are short of time and when there are other people around. This makes *me feel* that I can’t say what is really on my mind as we are being overheard and I don’t feel we have enough time for what I want to say. What *I need* is dedicated time and space for our supervision meetings, so *I’d like* us to put regular supervision slots in the diary for the rest of this year so that we know there is a time set aside for us to talk properly.’

Even if it is not possible for the TI and curate to give each other exactly what they are asking for, it is clear what this is and why they think it is important. It also invites the listener to respond with similarly clear ‘I’ statements as they work towards an agreed way forward.

Supervisions

A large number of curates in my research made comments about the (lack of) time their TI gave to supervision meetings. They cited examples where meetings did not happen regularly, were frequently cancelled or postponed, or where the TI had too many other commitments inside and outside the parish to devote sufficient time to training them. TIs also seem to confuse supervision meetings with planning or with team meetings, do not allow the curate to shape the agenda, or do not use the time to reflect properly on the curate’s experiences and what they can both learn from them. This reveals a lack of shared expectations about purpose, format, content and frequency of meetings.

Developing constructive supervision sessions, while critical, is beyond the scope of this booklet. Two resources that are well worth consulting are:

- 3D Coaching, an organization that works closely with many dioceses to train TIs to support and supervise curates by using a coaching model.¹⁵ Their model of creating ‘a container for a conversation’ is a helpful way to describe supervision meetings. The supervision container is formed by having a pre-agreed format, an agenda, space to raise issues and concerns (on both sides), enough flexibility to respond to changing needs, and a written record of what was discussed and agreed.
- Rick Simpson’s book, *Supervising a Curate: A Short Guide to a Complex Task* is helpful for detailed practical advice on supervision meetings.¹⁶

Recognizing the Impact of Personality Differences

Collaborative ministry cuts both ways, and there is much that both TIs and curates can do to facilitate a healthy training relationship. One of these is to recognize differences in personality, and to name these and to agree practical steps to bridge the gap. An experienced TI called Graham once told me about a curate he had trained who was temperamentally very different from him. They used to have supervision meetings on a Monday morning and Graham was self-aware enough to say, ‘Just because I ask for time to go away and think about what you’ve said, doesn’t mean that I’m stalling for time and looking for a way to say “no.” I genuinely need time to reflect on this.’

Other personality differences which can lead to tension include approaches to conflict and disagreement (whether people prefer to avoid it or face it head-on), how they make decisions, how they prioritize and organize their time and how they give and receive feedback.

When exploring these differences within a team, it can be useful to use one of the self-reflection tools provided by the secular leadership world. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Belbin’s team roles, the Enneagram or the Four Leadership Energies are just four examples of such tools which have been used by dioceses to help teams to thrive by learning to recognize and respond to differences in personality, temperament, gifting, ways of approaching issues and responses to pressure and unforeseen circumstances.

No reflection tool is perfect and assigning personality types can be unhelpful if we use them to define and pigeonhole people. However, they can be really useful for spotting some of the ways people are different from others and for opening up conversations about how they can understand each other better.

Recognizing the Impact of Theological and Stylistic Differences

Very few people come through the discernment process and initial training with exactly the same theological outlook as they started, and ordination is not a process of fixing what they will think and believe for the rest of their ministry. In a perfect placement, both a curate and their TI might expect their interactions with each other to lead to a growing understanding of another point of view and reflection on how their own mission and ministry might be enhanced by insights from other church traditions. In practice, however, the church tradition of the TI—especially if this is shared by the church congregation—is likely to be the normal practice with which the curate is expected to conform. When the outworking of this is questioned it can be interpreted as undermining the theological convictions of the TI or church.

A tool which can help to move discussions about ‘how we do things around here’ away from the threatening territory of tradition is the ‘four voices of theology.’ Helen Cameron and others identified different sources of theological knowledge within a church community as ‘the four voices’ and stated that they all need to be attended to by anyone undertaking thoughtful Theological Action Research (TAR).¹⁷ The four voices are:

- *Espoused theology*—the theology embedded within a group’s articulation of its beliefs.
- *Operant Theology*—the theology embedded in the actual practices of the group.
- *Normative Theology*—scriptural, canonical or liturgical texts which are named by the group as its theological authority and which can inform and correct operant and espoused theologies.
- *Formal Theology*—academic theological resources used to explain or expound their belief.

It does not take much imagination to think of examples where a church’s operant and espoused theologies are out of alignment, or where normative theology is not really transforming the practices of a group.

For example, one curate talked about the differences between their TI’s espoused theology of eucharistic presidency and the operant theology seen in his practice. When talking about their curate, the TI was quick to stress the importance of being trained for every aspect of ministry—their espoused theology was one where priestly ministry was shared among those who were

ordained. In practice, however, the curate reported that their TI hardly ever let her preside at the eucharist and the focus of the procession was always the TI.

When exploring why something is the way it is, it can be helpful to see that practice, articulation and belief are all carriers of theology. When there is a consistency between the different voices, it is clear why a particular practice is right or appropriate. When you recognize a dissonance, it can be an opportunity to think creatively about how changes to your practice are needed to align operant theology with espoused theology.

The Value of Different Types of Accountability in Different Types of Curacy

Times are a-changing for curates and curacies. I am aware of curates who are successfully dividing their time between a parish church and a bishop's mission order (BMO), one who is leading a church plant in their deacon year, and others who are joining formational communities, being licensed across a whole deanery and who will be part of a diocese's response to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic in establishing online churches.¹⁸

Here the same common difficulties are still a danger, but some are amplified. The most pressing problem for curates in these new contexts is confused lines of accountability.

Curates in a normal parish placement can be overwhelmed by the sheer number of different people who are involved in their training, especially when it comes to knowing who they can raise issues with and who has the authority to do anything about them. Where a curate has a split placement or is working across an even wider area, these relationships need careful negotiation, especially when deciding how a curate's time will be allocated, who will meet them for supervision and who will offer feedback on their ministry.

The opposite problem can also exist for those who are accountable to a board of trustees (in the case of a BMO) or directly to a bishop or archdeacon. Here, it is possible for everyone to assume the curate is being looked after by someone else, but the hands-off nature of the relationship means that their training incumbent is now not close enough to model ministry, offer feedback and give real support.

None of this is to say that innovative curacies should be stifled; quite the opposite. If curates in these roles are to thrive, however, extra attention needs to be given to creating role descriptions and agreeing expectations around supervisions, observations and learning outcomes.