

**The 2017 Susanna Wesley Foundation conference theme was Changing Church. Contributions touched upon many aspects of change experiences and management, opening up questions for future exploration. Here we give an overview of some of the themes and ideas that emerged, with links to the other materials arising from the conference. The text boxes contain comments and questions offered by participants during the conference.**

An emergent theme at the conference was the importance of emotions in relation to change processes, whether they be fear, anger, bereavement, or hope. [Lucy Berry](#)'s poems touch on these aspects of change and explored the inevitability of cycles of change as part of life.

*'Is it possible for us to approach change not fearfully but welcome it with anticipation?'*

The conference explored change resulting from internal reflection on matching values, practice, and 'fitness for purpose'. Discussion drew out how organisations could benefit from 'safe enough spaces' for critical

*'Is pain and hardship something to be avoided or embraced in the process of transformation?'*

reflection: room for brave listening and honest conversation that welcomes the inclusion of emotions. These spaces offer an organization the chance to assess the match between their identity and their practice, and to explore the

effectiveness of each one (See [Esther Stevenson](#), [Keith Elford](#), and [Megan Senegue](#)'s case studies.

Groups can then find a way to balance the rootedness of tradition, identity and faith on one hand with the cultivation of new shoots that will thrive in fresh contexts. [Dave Dickinson](#) highlights the role of the creative arts here, opening up space to engage with change and find time for hibernation as well as growth.

Shifts in the wider context may make a building, a set of practices, or an organizational structure in need of evolution.

Transformational change can then result in unanticipated new life and structures that may be very different from their previous incarnation (see [Colin Ride](#)'s case study). As [Gary Hall](#) writes, when it comes to change we should expect the unexpected.

*'What is church?'*

The conference highlighted how it may take a high degree of endangerment before we acknowledge the need to leave the safety of the known harbour

(See [Keith Elford](#) and [Siôn Rhys Evans](#)).

*'It is easier to remain with the 'known' even if it's not working well because the 'unknown' is deeply threatening...we always want to be in control.'*

Even then the most well-prepared voyagers might still have to be willing to lose sight of land before we can see a new port.

Here again at the conference we encountered the need to attend to the emotions associated with change when such change can appear to be an unstoppable, powerful, and independent force moving towards us (like a tsunami). This way of thinking about change can easily generate fear and a defensive posture.

*'We live with needs for 'assurance' which cannot be provided within a change process.'*

Transformational change is something liminal, generated in and through relationality, blending the personal and the

*'How can the church do blue-sky thinking when all they can see are the clouds?'*

collective (see [Megan Senegue's](#) paper). While 'at sea' together, we will encounter unanticipated role reversals and learning opportunities. Researchers find themselves

pastoral care workers, methodology itself impacts the change process it seeks to examine, missional workers seeking to bring transformational change to a community find themselves changed (see the videos of Anna Ruddick and Keith Elford's [workshop](#) and [excerpt](#). Negotiating change is always a subjective, embedded practice, as [Susy Brouard's](#) discussion of theological action research (and her full [presentation](#)) illustrate.

This conference began with an attitude of dialogue and seeks to continue the conversation, providing resources, and seeking to be resourced by the wider community. Healthy, open relationships are therefore at the heart of negotiating change, and the most important of all is that which we have together with God, as [Mark Wakelin](#) observes in his theological reflection which closed the conference.

*'Who sets the agenda for change? Are we following or leading?'*

**To continue the conversation, check out the resources linked here, and contact us via our [website](#).**

