



Communities of Practice and the Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network

Report on SWF-funded research and action learning project

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SWF Published Paper, July 2016

This report was produced by the Susanna Wesley Foundation, part of the University of Roehampton, on behalf of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network of the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Further published papers are available from the SWF website: www.susannawesleyfoundation.org

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Acknowledgements

The authors of this report gratefully acknowledge the support and cooperation that they have received in undertaking this study. Thanks are due to The Susanna Wesley Foundation for supporting and funding the project, the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN) Directors for assisting with the scoping of the project and offering advice throughout, and finally, but most importantly, all of the interviewees who freely gave of their time and expertise without which this project would have not been possible.

Executive summary

This project, funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation and supported by the Methodist Church's Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN), concerns the ways in which the Network has been engaging with the notion of communities of practice to promote and sustain transformational change.

The work involved two different strands of research and activity: an Action Learning Project, led by Megan Seneque, around communities of practice and transformational change, and research into perceptions of various aspects of the work and activities of the Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network, conducted by Christopher (Chris) Bond. These two mutually informing research processes and the insights derived from them are reported and reviewed in this report.

The report sets the conceptual framework and grounding for the various methodologies which underpin the different strands of activity. It then offers a summary of some of the data gathered from the research on the work and activities of the DMLN. This summary is structured around three core themes: DMLN members' perceptions, working practices and relationships; structural and organisational considerations; and working with notions of transformational change and communities of practice.

The report concludes by offering a series of questions, with accompanying implications, which arise out of the exploration to date. These questions seek to respond to key themes that have emerged through analysis of the research interviews and which were revealed through the Action Learning Project. They aim to stimulate further debate among the DMLN leadership team and to offer a focus that helps to inform on-going discussions in the Network about working with the concept of communities of practice as a vehicle for supporting transformational change within the wider Church.

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Purpose and structure

This report focuses on work carried out with the Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network and funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation. The work involved two different strands of research and activity: an Action Learning Project, led by Megan Seneque, around communities of practice and transformational change, and research into perceptions of various aspects of the work and activities of the Discipleship & Ministries Learning Network, conducted by Christopher (Chris) Bond. The purpose of this latter 'independent' research, conducted separately from the Action Learning Project, although informed by it, was to illuminate the context in which the Action Learning is taking place, for the benefit both of the Project (to be shaped accordingly) and the wider work of the Network.

The Action Learning Project has been helping to build capability and expand the repertoire of officers (and, through them, their stakeholders) by modelling processes of social learning. As it has developed it has also been illuminating some of the tensions and issues which come with building communities of practice within an organizational context: the second strand of research uncovers some of these and their implications.

The report serves as a means of setting out the different strands of work in the Network with which the team from the Susanna Wesley Foundation has been involved, and the rationale for this involvement. It provides a source of information about the processes involved in transformational change and social learning while allowing the team to reflect back to the directors, coordinators and officers of the Network the insights which have emerged, enabling the sharpening of future activities and interventions. It provides also an opportunity to declare something of the diversity of perspectives which have been expressed in relation to various aspects of the work of the Network and its members.

This report should be seen as part of the on-going enquiry and collaborative approach that has been adopted by both of the key stakeholders in supporting the action learning and research involvements. It explains the conceptual framework for the work which has been carried out, which provides a source for reflection about the processes involved in social learning and transformation, while also setting out the methodology which informed the 'independent' research. The report offers a snapshot of some of the data gathered by this research and some initial reflections and findings in the light of these. In its concluding section it integrates the knowledge gained through the action learning strand with that from the 'independent' research, posing some questions and highlighting some implications in order to provide a platform for ongoing action research and co-inquiry in the DMLN. This is aligned with the principles of action learning and action research and the participatory approaches that have informed the design and evolution of the project. The intention is to engage officers of the DMLN in the process of data analysis and to facilitate further the collaborative approach to co-enquiry that underpins the overall methodology adopted for this research.

Conceptual framework and context

The informing research paradigm for the work with the DMLN, with its focus on participation and engagement, co-inquiry and learning at the level of the personal and the collective, comes from a long tradition of research done ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ people. (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Reason, 1988, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2008, Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996). The research process itself is seen as playing a critical role in building capability within the system to lead transformational processes. Meaningful engagement with research outcomes is part of the action learning/action research process, which is what contributes to building a learning culture – and the internal capability to continue to cultivate this culture over time.

This research paradigm challenges traditional conceptions of consulting and of research, where outsiders engage in ‘independent’ consulting and/or research projects, with the intention of providing recommendations and solutions which participating people/organisations will act on in order to bring about desired change. It also challenges traditional conceptions of ‘change management’ and of who ‘owns’ change. Rather, it sees the ongoing process of change as a feature of human and organizational life and the role of an outsider as accompanying people and/in/across organisations in exploring the problem situations they face and in discerning together collective responses that move them in the direction they seek. Therefore, processes of engagement that maximise personal and collective learning - including learning from experience and across boundaries - are at the heart of the various approaches and methodologies that sit within this paradigm. The attention to both personal and systemic transformation is also a key informing principle.

The various methodologies that have informed this project from inception are situated within this research paradigm and its associated theories of learning and change, including the work of Etienne Wenger, Jean Lave and others on social learning systems and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2015; Lave and Wenger, 1991) and the work of Senge et al (2004), around the U process of evolutionary change (Scharmer, 2007). Many existing learning methodologies rely on learning from the past, while most of the real leadership challenges in organizations seem to require something quite different: letting go of the past in order to connect with and *learn from emerging future* possibilities. Theory U is a framework, a method and a way of being. At the heart of it is the notion of **presencing**, a blended word combining “sensing” (feeling the future possibility) and “presence” (the state of being in the present moment): presencing means “*sensing and actualizing one’s highest future possibility—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge.*” (Scharmer, 2007).

A number of underpinning concepts and principles have been drawn from these methodologies and have informed all dimensions of this project.

Any change initiative needs to be locally owned and led for it to be relevant and transformative. It needs to invite people on a journey of change and create the conditions for authentic participation.

At the time this project was initiated, Sue Miller was working as Research Coordinator with SWF, as well as in the role of ministry development officer within the DMLN. She therefore had deep contextual understanding of the Network, as well as a desire to explore what an action learning and action research approach might offer in building coherence across the Network. She had been exposed to Megan Senegue's work with Theory U and building learning communities for sustainability in the context of Catholic Earthcare Australia and believed that a similar approach would bring value to the Learning Network. Penny Fuller, in her role as Coordinator of the Church & Community Specialism, was keen to explore what a focus on communities of practice might bring to those working in the specialism and to their work as members of regional teams. The approach Megan and Sue adopted was one informed by Theory U: therefore, what followed was a period of co-initiating and co-sensing, with co-ordinators of regional teams responding to the invitation to participate in the action learning projects. This was followed by a phone conversation and an invitation to spend time with regional teams in their local contexts.

Learning (and in particular social learning and learning from experience) lie at the heart of transformational processes. Communities of practice are a key locus for social learning.

Wenger (2015) states that *'communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor... Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.'*

Wenger identifies three characteristics intrinsic to communities of practice. The first is the domain, a shared area of interest which defines the community's identity. Membership implies a commitment to the domain and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from non-members. The second characteristic is the community who, in pursuing their interest in their domain, engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. This involves relationship building that enables them to learn from one another and develop a learning community. 'Practice' is identified as the third characteristic, which distinguishes such communities from communities of interest. The members of communities of practice are practitioners, who, through their interactions and relationships, develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems - a shared practice.

Exploring communities of practice in regional contexts involved a process of co-inquiry; Megan and Sue did not go into regional contexts in order to impose a Communities of Practice framework as a 'solution', but rather engaged in mutual

exploration in the context of six regional teams over a period of twelve months. The guiding assumption was that an exploration in local contexts around what constitutes 'practice' and what it would mean intentionally to form a 'community of practice' would enable the evolution of such communities and provide a framework for leading the development of such communities with District Chairs and other partners in the 'local' context. Learning in communities of practice emerges through the interaction of 'socially defined competence' and personal experience (Wenger 2000: 225). There is, therefore, no blueprint for forming communities of practice, although there are key guiding concepts. Important amongst these is the belief that communities of practice are the basic building blocks of a social learning system, because they are the 'containers' of the competencies that make up such a system. By participating, we define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context rather than assuming this is a given. There is therefore opportunity to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation (Wenger 2000).

Personal, collective and structural transformation are mutually informing processes.

Learning is an interplay between social competence and personal experience. It is a dynamic two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate. It combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures (Wenger, 2000:227). There are always inherent tensions in introducing transformational approaches into existing structures, with their required accountability, reporting and decision-making structures and systems. The value of adopting a learning-oriented approach is that the ongoing negotiation between personal, collective and Network interests are paid attention to, rather than confidence being placed in work plans and other forms of hierarchical relationships to ensure relational accountability. So the creation of a learning culture and relational accountability as the Network seeks to cohere around a common purpose becomes the ongoing responsibility for everyone in the Network. This thinking informed the approach to the engagement with the broader Network, which culminated in the co-design and co-facilitation of the Network Gathering in January 2016, with a focus on participation and exemplifying participation in all dimensions of the Gathering. Theory U was the informing framework for the co-design and co-facilitation of the Gathering, with communities of practice as the vehicle for openly engaging with real differences at the same time as building common ground.

Research methodologies contribute to the transformational agenda.

It became clear through the work with regional teams that an independent research dimension would add further value to the action learning project. The informing framework was one of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which allows patterns and themes to emerge rather than these being pre-defined and imposed.

Such an approach, which values the collection of data from a variety of sources and the generation of theory from this data, fitted well with the principles embodied in the action learning strand. The goal of generating deeper understandings that explain people's actions is also consistent with this approach and supported the goal of exploring how those in the DMLN conceptualise and enact aspects of their role that are related to the desired aspiration to operate as a community of practice, and how this supports the DMLN in its engagement with transformational change. Thus the research sought to develop situated knowledge and deeper insight into how a number of members of the Network perceive the notion of communities of practice and experience and engage in them within the Network. Insights were gained from a series of interviews conducted with Network members. The interviews were loosely structured and more akin to generative conversations than formal interviews. Among the interviewees were some of the people with whom Sue and Megan had worked in regional contexts. They therefore further contributed to the growing insights around the transformative potential of communities of practice. Using grounded theory, rather than pre-defined categories, the emerging themes and patterns can contribute to the ongoing critical co-inquiry within DMLN around what kinds of conditions are required fully to flourish the DMLN as a Learning Network in order to deliver on its mission.

Theory U and the concept and practice of Communities of Practice - and understandings of situated learning and social learning that underpin these approaches - are also supported by action research. This means that participants in the Network are co-researchers and co-inquirers as they explore together different ways of being, organising and working together to achieve desired outcomes. This avoids these concepts and practices becoming the next 'fad' rather than being vehicles for ongoing co-inquiry and transformation.

Generative conversation and dialogue are at the core of transformational work.

The focus on learning and on working at the 'edges' and across boundaries brings to the fore conversation and dialogue as critical capabilities for working with diversity. Wenger (2000:244) notes that the primary source of value creation is in informal processes such as conversation, brainstorming and pursuing ideas. While formal organisational design and processes are important, they only contribute to value creation to the extent that they are in the service of informal processes. This too has been exemplified in the different dimensions of this project. So the focus has been on starting with conversation as a way of generating questions, growing commitment and building community, rather than coming in with solutions from the outset. Once Chris had done some initial analysis of the findings of his research, Sue, Megan, Chris and Christopher Stephens hosted a breakfast conversation with the Directors of the Learning Network to explore the implications of what had been uncovered from the interviews, and from the experience of the action learning project to date. This approach is entirely in keeping with the action research orientation and the commitment to building internal capability to lead transformational processes.

Wenger identifies three modes of belonging through which we participate: engagement, imagination and alignment - all of which are fostered through generative conversation and dialogue processes. All the work of co-initiation, co-sensing, co-inspiring and co-creating at the heart of Theory U is supported by the capacity for dialogue and deep listening.

The research interviews and their analysis

The independent research involved 26 semi-structured interviews with participants drawn from across the DMLN, from the three specialisms, the Regional Teams and the team of Directors. The interviews explored individuals' perceptions of their roles and their identities, their perceptions of the purpose of the Network and its functioning and remit, and of its place in the Church, the nature of the different communities of which they are part and the relationships which they are developing. The interviews were carried out in accordance with the University of Roehampton's ethical framework for conducting research.

In terms of demographics the interviews can be categorised as follows:

- 13 interviewees were male and 13 were female
- 18 of those interviewed were from a lay background whereas 8 were ordained
- 16 interviewees worked within a regional team and 4 of these were coordinators
- 10 interviewees worked either as directors or as specialist team members or coordinators
- In terms of affiliation to a specialism interviewees identified themselves as follows:
 - Church and Community - 11 Interviewees
 - Discipleship - 9 Interviewees
 - Ministry - 2 Interviewees
 - No specific specialism - 4 Interviewees

Interviews were conducted via telephone. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and fully transcribed via a secure transcription service. A summary of the structure adopted for the interviews is attached in Appendix One.

The interviewees were selected through a mix of quota and convenience sampling. Quota sampling involved seeking to ensure that those interviewed represented a reasonable mix based on gender, role, locality and ordained or lay. All those that participated volunteered to participate after email invitations were sent to a range of potential participants in various locations (convenience sampling).

Table one below gives an outline of the basic demographics of the participants. In order to ensure anonymity Biblical names have been assigned to the participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Lay/Ordained	Specialism
Ruth	Regional Coordinator	Lay	Discipleship
Mary	Regional Coordinator	Lay	Discipleship
Jacob	Regional Officer	Ordained	Discipleship
Abigail	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community
Benjamin	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community
Hannah	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community
Bartholomew	National Coordinator Team	Lay	Discipleship
Sarah	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community
Miriam	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community
Mark	Regional Officer	Ordained	Discipleship
Rhoda	Regional Coordinator	Lay	Church & Community
Job	Regional Officer	Ordained	Discipleship
Levi	Regional Officer	Ordained	Ministries
Tamar	National	Lay	Director
Hephzibah	Regional Officer	Lay	Discipleship
Leah	Regional Officer	Lay	Discipleship
Jemimah	National Coordinator Team	Lay	Church & Community
Gabriel	National Coordinator Team	Lay	Church & Community
Luke	National	Lay	Director
Peter	National Coordinator Team	Ordained	Ministries
Martha	National Coordinator Team	Lay	Church & Community
Thomas	National	Ordained	Director
Obadiah	Regional Coordinator	Lay	Church & Community
Abraham	National	Ordained	Director
Jeremiah	National Coordinator Team	Lay	Discipleship
Salome	Regional Officer	Lay	Church & Community

Table One: Demographic characteristics of participants in the study

Data and Findings

Initial Thematic analysis

This analysis picks up on the areas explored in the research interviews and classifies interviewees' responses. The key themes against which the data has been grouped are as follows:

Theme 1	Individuals' motivations
Theme 2	Role/function of the Network
Theme 3	Interface between Regions and Specialisms
Theme 4	Crafting of roles
Theme 5	External stakeholders' expectations of, and attitudes towards, the Network
Theme 6	Levels and sources of support
Theme 7	DLMN and the Districts
Theme 8	Implementation of The Fruitful Field Report
Theme 9	Distribution of power and governance structures; impact on the operation of the Network and individuals' work activities
Theme 10	Communities of Practice
Theme 11	Management of change

Table Two: key themes derived from thematic analysis

It is recognised that qualitative data of this type could be analysed through many different lenses but the grouping of data has been driven both by the researchers' academic focus and by the understandings developed through the action learning project. It is acknowledged, too, that some responses could have been matched against a range of different themes but have been categorized within one. It also needs to be noted that, in order to protect anonymity, the lead researcher has made some conscious decisions to omit certain data that is very personal or sensitive and could be directly attributable to or identify individuals both within and outside this study.

For the purposes of this report, the findings have been grouped into three areas. These are: members' perceptions, working practices and relationships (Part One); Structural and organizational considerations (Part Two); and finally, Part Three: Working with notions of transformational change and communities of practice.

Part One: Perceptions, working practices and relationships

The participants discussed such areas as motivation for their roles, ability to shape, craft and use their skills, gifts and graces and their perceptions of the purpose and function of the Network. Listening to individuals' accounts of their involvement and

participation within Methodism or the wider Church and the part this has played in leading to the role that they currently occupy within the Network became a significant focus within many of the interviews.

Many participants spoke openly about the challenges involved in forming the Network. For many, the process of recruitment and transition from previous structures had not been an easy experience. A significant number of participants in the study had previously held formal roles within District or Connexional structures that pre-dated the formation of the DMLN. A significant proportion of participants had in effect transitioned over from previous employment with the Church into a new role within the Network. Most accounts of this transition claimed that it had not been a positive experience and that the process of change had resulted in considerable personal and organizational distress. Despite what many described as a negative experience in relation to the formation of the Network and acquiring their role within it, participants demonstrated high levels of motivation and commitment to working within the Network for the benefit of the wider Church. A number of interview participants, both ordained and lay, expressed their involvement with the DMLN and their role as fulfilling part of a wider calling to serve the Church.

I feel very clear that this is a vocation and really clear that this is a particular calling for me at the moment (Mary)

There were some interesting differences of opinion amongst ordained participants about the nature of calling and whether or not roles within the DMLN were in line with their initial calling to ordained ministry. Whilst many ordained participants viewed their role within the DMLN as fulfilling their calling through a different set of activities than that of circuit ministry a few questioned whether work within the DMLN sat outside their original calling, as demonstrated by Abraham's comment below:

So it would be generous to us just to say yes, we're carrying out our, you know we're all called and we're carrying out our calling in the roles in which we carry out in the Network because for some I think it would be a valid question to ask some of us, is this our way of escaping from what we were originally called to. (Abraham)

Not only did the interviews uncover questions about how working in the Network sits with the original calling to ordained ministry, they also opened up issues around the nature of the relationship with the Church, which differs between the ordained, who are in a covenantal relationship, and that of lay officers, who are in the employment of the Church. This is seen to impinge on line management relationships which may become problematic:

.....the Network is struggling to cope with. I think if were being honest, in the fact that there is quite a bit of work, I would suggest that needs to be done about the understanding of what it means to be ordained, working on the Connexional team and lay. There is some anxiety being voiced by certain presbyters, not all by any means but some, that the covenant

relationships with the conference is not honoured the same way as it is in circuit when you're working for a connexional team. Particularly in a region where you might be being line managed in a way that they are not particularly used to, and often when they being line managed by a lay member of staff. And when the lay member of staff is also sort of in some ways trying to prove that they're new to a role and they want to do it well. etc. So there are some wobbly issues around that area. (Peter)

Extrinsic factors, such as salary and career prospects, were absent as drivers of effort and commitment. A strong motivation for many was the nature of the work and an ability to work towards the wider good of the Church. For a number of participants, the DMLN roles were attractive as they allowed them to apply their skills in areas such as organisational development, change management, and learning and development in a context that resonated with their own faith positions. Ruth and Benjamin sum up the types of motivations that were expressed.

I saw this job advertised online and I thought this could be the perfect combination of my Christian faith and training and education (Ruth)

I just saw it as an opportunity to make a difference, to use the skills that I have in a different context. To use, you know, those skills that I've gathered, organisational stuff, equipping people through change. They were all skills that I could see that Methodism needed. It was very much a case of... Well not really having any option. (Benjamin)

Most participants saw their role and contribution as a seeking to make a difference at a time when the Church is facing challenges related to participation, sustainability and its place within both local and wider society. Many demonstrated a deep sense of the potential strategic difference the Network could make and the need for it to support the Church both nationally and locally in complex times.

I think I recognised that I was uniquely placed to guide us through a period of change. My, sort of, past experience has given me some of the skills needed to do that. And because of the position that I'd been in within the connexional team before getting the promotion, I knew I had the confidence of people... And it was a job that was going to require building trust and confidence, so I saw that I could do that. I also saw that it was a huge challenge, and I really like a big challenge [laughs]. If someone tells me something can't be done, I tend to like to do it. ...And often I've found I've worked in settings where someone has said, oh this is never, you know, this organisation is dead or dying, this isn't going to work. And I really enjoy the challenge of trying to do something with that. (Tamar)

The interviews explored the extent to which individuals felt able to shape and influence the content and activity of their role and the extent to which they felt that their work was prescribed. Many respondents felt that there was a good degree of freedom and flexibility in determining their job role and the manner in which they organized their work and delivered activities. For many this linked to their

motivation for their job role and allowed them the scope and freedom to use their gifts and graces in fulfilling their role.

There is good opportunity for me to shape it. In fact it's not as prescribed, not in practical terms, it is prescribed in principle terms like principles of working, not specifically what it looks like. That has actually been very difficult because the expectation on the ground is that we've come with a, if you like, portfolio of training that we will do..... (Ruth)

Yes, I think there's a fair degree of freedom and again maybe that's... there may be a couple of personal reasons for saying that because I could quite understand why people might say the opposite. but I tend to be more relaxed about any sense of, you know, you must follow this plan rigidly kind of thing. I feel more relaxed about, you know, exploring opportunities and developing new things out of my own initiative. Not in an unaccountable way, you know, I'll run everything by both my regional coordinator and the heads of the discipleship specialism, but perhaps I've just got that experience and confidence that helps me not to feel over constrained by a system that I could quite understand could feel constraining. (Jacob)

Actually, I have a huge amount of ability to shape the role. Now, I mean, some of that is... Well, you know, sort of, there's a balance between isn't there, between taking and shaping and being given permission to shape. I think I have taken and shaped it. And sometimes I've had to ask for forgiveness as well as permission. (Tamar)

There's not a massive, you must do this, you must do that. It's very much about seeing what is the need? We get given initiatives that it's then a case of picking up and working out how to use them best in our situation. (Benjamin)

These suggest some degree of job crafting, found to increase engagement and job satisfaction, and which provides an alternative to traditional top-down schemes of job design and role specifications that tend to leave little freedom for individual employees to shape the scope of their role and work activity.

For a few of those interviewed, however, the experience was not as positive. A small number of participants felt that their roles were over-prescribed and that, at times, they were over-managed. Changes in management and organizational structure post -Fruitful Field may have relevance. There was a perception by some of those who had moved into the Network from the previous District based structures that their 'new' role is more prescribed with less perceived ability to shape and influence the nature and content of their work. There would also appear to be some level of regional variation in how line management and accountability structures and processes are practised within the different regions. The observations below are

representative of some of the perceptions held by members on the degree of flexibility in their role.

I think it's very prescribed, there's not much room for creativity. A lot of that has kind of been squeezed. You've kind of got to protect things quite well to create a space. I think it's... depends what you mean by prescribed. If a District Chair up here asked if I can do something, if I've got the capacity and it fits in with what I'm supposed to be doing, I would do it but I won't classify that as prescribed. If my Regional Coordinator asked me to do something I probably would classify it as prescribed because it's coming from the top down, if you know what I mean. (Abigail)

Up until recently, I had very little input into shaping the role. Laterally, there is, there's the beginnings to see the shape of being able to influence the role more, and to build up my own particular gifts and skills into that role. But previously, that wasn't the case... The role itself was very prescribed and without overstating it, or whatever, but impression wise, it felt like a commanding control structure. (Mark)

Well, the first thing... I mean, in my experience I wasn't allowed to manage it myself. It was managed for me by my coordinator and not always, I would say, well. Because it would be restricted and pretty much told where and what to do rather than being able to work with somebody in developing it, which I found unhelpful. (Gabriel)

Others saw a balance within the role with certain elements being pre-determined and other aspects offering more flexibility and scope for individuals to shape it. Sarah sums up this view when she states:

I think probably half and half. I've kind of... You know, there are some things that I suppose within the Church and community group, we do. So quite a lot of our work has been circuit and church reviews..... And there are things that I have I guess initiated, which have been my own passions around spirituality and youth work and retreats and things like that. So, you know I think I have been encouraged to bring to the region my gifts and skills, as it were. (Sarah)

Those who operated in what they perceived to be strong and cohesive regional teams spoke more in terms of both personal and group crafting of the roles that they occupy.

I wouldn't say I've been able to shape it. I would say, as a team we've been able to shape it, in terms of how we do it, quite significantly. Because I think there was a sense that, although there were some boundaries laid down, there was a lot of, you know, this has to be an evolving way of working that you need to evolve. Particularly as we were going into a Connexional team, which was structured around 95+% working in one office in London. And the day that the Network arrived, suddenly a third of

its staff were not in London. And so that, you know, that meant that a lot of ways of working had to change, well, quite rapidly. But actually to get them right took quite a long time. (Luke)

..... in practice, what we have as a team of often very experienced, certainly very passionate learning and development officers who have a lot to contribute themselves, so finding ways of being able to channel that, but in an appropriate way that, you know, allows us to be creative. And actually, in the space around our formal responsibilities, or formal, you know, structures, we actually have quite a lot of flexibility in terms of what we, you know, what we plan and what we deliver. (Thomas)

Overall, members of the Network spoke positively about the levels of support that they received and the relationships that they have formed within the Network and many described good levels of support and management within their regional teams. For a number of those working in regional contexts, however, the nature and pattern of their tasks mean that they work largely independently without much face to face contact with other colleagues. This relative isolation exacerbates the need for emotional support in the face of demanding and sometimes hostile attitudes, as reported by regional coordinators, who were not all convinced that more senior staff within the Connexional Team understood the level of opposition sometimes encountered by those in the Regions:

I think the big thing is it is very isolated on the ground. I've had a right hoo-ha in the last couple of weeks down here and there's been nobody to support me. I mean I support my team if they're in a pickle but there's been no one to support me. When we meet up nationally... For me that's really important actually, because that's the only time I'm with a supportive group of people physically. Actually, although we are all able to pick up the phone and email and so on, everybody is so busy that I don't think that really happens. I think communication on a practical end is quite good, you know, you get to know things eventually and so on but I think it's more the emotional support..... We're not universally loved.... You're in that representative role which means you get a lot of flak thrown at you but it's really directed at the system and not you personally. It can be quite trying to keep taking that, and the upside that the emotional support is weak. (Ruth)

I think if I was to have a concern about support for coordinators, I'm not sure the people in very senior positions in the church really understand the amount of flack we feel, field at any given time, what we're carrying around as baggage. And also, I'm not certain that they get it in the way that our line manager gets it because they're not close enough to the nuances. So that's interesting, and I think that makes it difficult for pastoral support for some colleagues. (Rhoda)

In contrast, others described not only the formal support available from the line management structures but also the support available from the wider Church, outside the DMLN:

A number of places, obviously my line manager. I have two or three people who I use as wise council. Chairs of District, and to a very limited extent, further line management in terms of, you know the touch, with the Connexion. It's light, I think would be a good description, I mean we have the gatherings but other than that it's not a... (Benjamin)

The collegueship to be derived from colleagues within the same regional team was evidently a fundamental source of support to some:

So that's really nice, I really feel part of the team. We feel far too small to serve our vast region. That feels like a problem but as a regional team when we meet we share what projects we're working on. We do have some good debates about what the work we're doing, you know, whether we're being pulled by the districts in the right direction or not. So we act as sort of, support to each other. (Hephzibah)

In discussing the formation of the Network and the process of establishing its infrastructure and ways of operation, there was recognition of the place of Fruitful Field in laying the foundations for the formation of the Network and the key values on which the Network was established:

Well, I would say in principle it's absolutely core in that without Fruitful Field the Network wouldn't exist, or know what it's doing. Whether we've fulfilled all the promises or implications of Fruitful Field is what I would question because it comes down quite a lot to interpretation. So, some people's reading of it, we have done what was expected, and other people's reading of it, we've missed the point in a couple of places. But as is not uncommon in a church, its different interpretations but the same words. (Gabriel)

It's certainly something I'm motivated by and it's one of the reasons I'm still doing the job I'm doing. And I think that was quite a core part, the Fruitful Field vision. I'm not sure, because obviously it was about people, places and pathways, they were the three Ps of Fruitful Field. So the people thing I think is very much at the core of motivation for a lot of members of staff in the Network and why we do what we do. (Jemimah)

The interviews also explored participants' perceptions about the role and function of the Network. It became clear that it has taken some time for the Network to find its place within the wider Church and it is felt that there is still work to be done both within the Network itself and in the wider Church on gaining an understanding of the role and potential of the DMLN. Beyond an understanding of the structure of the DMLN - the nature of the specialisms, regional arrangements and the role of the directors - it was interesting to note that a number of participants struggled to define

the primary role and purpose of the Network. Many were able to articulate what they or colleagues did, how they worked relationally with one another etc. but found it more difficult to position this within a wider frame of reference or clearly articulated strategic vision for the DMLN.

Those who were able to articulate this more clearly grounded the role and function within a learning and development context.

Well I think the primary purpose of the Learning Network is to support and enable the learning and development of the whole people of God within the particular community that is the Methodist Church. That doesn't preclude working ecumenically, but our primary remit is within Methodism and those that we work with. (Jacob)

Learning and development is the main thing isn't it? It's just, being alongside churches and circuits and enabling and helping them to develop, which could include a load of things really. When people ask me what I do in my job. I do say learning development. Anything to do with training, anything to do with different age groups within the church, anything to do with...it involves mission, you know. It's all kind of interlinked, so it's just encouraging to be with them to provide the support and resources that they need with any aspect of growth and moving forward and developing. (Hannah)

I think my vision of the Network was always that it was a group of skilled people who were supporting the Church in learning and development. And I think that... And, you know, the way we can share ideas and work together and support each other and all those sort of things that are recognised as what a Network does. (Luke)

... I think that sense of being one of the resourcing... I'm trying to think of the right phrase, but a place of resource, I suppose, to equip, to enable those in the Methodist Church to grasp the opportunities that they have currently, but also to help to transform the church into what it maybe needs to be for the future. I think those are the really exciting things. So in terms of equipping all aspects of ministry, so whether that's lay or ordained, in terms of infusing, enabling, motivating, resourcing those involved in the leadership and the life of the Methodist Church, I think the potential is there. (Obadiah)

Others suggested that the Network was still in the process of evolving and that part of the challenge in this process was reaching a shared understanding of its role and function:

Well it has changed constantly as everybody has different expectations. I think in a way you have to decide it for yourself and hold onto that definition because you get pulled and pushed in all sorts of directions (Ruth)

But I don't get the sense that there's a shared vision that's shared across the Network, across the Learning Network. That's not a shared approach. Everybody is doing their own thing because people are starting from different starting points. (Mary)

It's difficult because it's both. It's both a resource for the wider Methodist church to use and yet it is the Methodist church. So it has a specific role in aiding the development but it also makes policy and guides the whole Methodist church, it's part of the Connexion, part of the Connexional Team. So it's not just a department that handles training. It is also everything, church, it's ministry, and governance as well. It's all mixed up. Does that make sense? (Salome)

For others there was a reluctance to engage with attempts to define what the role and function of the Network might be. Abigail articulates this when she states:

I don't think I've got a shared understanding. But I think that's because I don't agree with what they're putting out to be the shared understanding. They've got... I don't even know what they are; this will show my complete lack of ignorance and non-connection with it. Somebody's put out, is it four priority areas? I can't even remember what they are four or five different areas? One of which was enhanced visibility, I remember that one. I can't remember what they are. For me it's like the enhanced visibility thing, the reason I don't connect with it is because I think... where I am based relationships are very, very strong and things happen because of your relationships and not because of your position. I think that's a cultural difference perhaps. (Abigail)

A key challenge that appears to have impacted upon the ability of the Network to establish a clear shared and widely articulated vision about its role and function is the complexity of the structures that are inherent within the Network and the respective roles of regions, specialisms, MCH-based team members and the institution with primary responsibility for formation. It would appear that considerable effort and energy has been expended on getting the structures in place, on staffing and resourcing those structures, and on working on relationships between the different groupings within the Network. There would seem to be less focus on developing and agreeing a strategic vision and plan for the work of the DMLN:

But it seems to me that we've moved to a place of sort of having the Network up and running now, and saying, okay, so what is the work we need to focus on. Where are the priorities? Where do we need to put our energies to enable the Methodist Church to continue to evolve and change and develop in a way that it needs to, to meet the sort of current and future demands of the church? (Obadiah)

There is also a perception of a failure to capitalize on expertise and knowledge and share it across the Network, with, instead, some fragmentation:

{The Network is} well connected in parts, and not connected in others. I think, to me that partly is due to... I'm not sure that we operate as a network, as I understand, a network, in my understanding. So for me, part of a network is to facilitate the free movement of, let's call it information, for the moment. And without too many stops, gatekeepers, or whatever. I don't think that that happens overly well at times. But when that does happen, you can see sharing, cross-fertilization of information, knowledge, experience, etc. (Mark)

Others are keen for the Network to move forward in using the resources, skills and expertise that it has to contribute to the wider Church, noting the particular challenges faced by Methodism and by organized religion more generally in an increasingly secular society.

And we need to gain more understanding of the wider context - UK, community-based, globally, to understand how Methodism fits into all the facets of everyday life and global life, too and to... It's a way for us to put our ears to the ground and incite change. (Hephzibah)

I think, that we're well placed to do is to re-imagine what Methodism could be in our time. In a way that I think is something that is needed in the church. (Tamar)

The first theme highlights the strong levels of motivation and commitment of the Network's staff. It also raises some challenges about the coherence and cohesiveness of the Network in terms of shared vision and strategic intent. As the Network continues to develop, developing a shared sense of strategic intent is likely to be of benefit in addressing a number of the issues identified.

Part Two: Structural and organizational considerations

DMLN's matrix structure, with many Network members being attached to a region as well as being part of a group of specialists, and with other staff operating at a 'national' level coordinating specialist activity or relating to the Church's committees and wider structures, presents some challenges in terms of an establishing an identity, priorities and a strategic focus for the Network as a whole. In discussion with regionally-based staff it became clear that, for the majority, their primary allegiance and identity resides within their regional role and with the relationships that they forge within their regional team and with their local districts and circuits. Many spoke of their commitment to their specialism but indicated that, in reality, their priority was to satisfy regional and local needs. The observations of Hannah, Mark, Sarah and Jeremiah are representative of some of the feeling of tension:

So what's happening in [own region] was, it was quite clear of what was expected of me. But fitting into the wider team into the whole Network,

the Connexional team, that's been more of a learning process for me and understanding you know, how we fit in and the fact that we have the three specialisms... groups. it's been quite challenging at times, because sometimes you feel drawn to prioritise within your region and really my own region. (Hannah)

Because my main emphasis, or main sort of mode of work is as a regional officer that's mostly what I do. In terms of the specialism, that's really... I only pick up on that when I actually go to the gatherings at Cliff College, when each of the specialisms meet as a cohort, and have conversations, and discuss things....And so, again, that's difficult to answer because I'm probably more Regional Officer than specialist, I suppose. (Mark)

Although my job title is 'Church and Community', you know, I've been doing quite a bit of the discipleship stuff. It's quite hard to put solid boundaries around some of the, you know, around some of the specialisms. So, I suppose I've had more of a sense of being a part of the [regional] team, rather than being Church and community team. Does that make sense? (Sarah)

And, I think the implication behind that is that the Regional team have got a huge task to do, and there's not that much room, perhaps, left to do creative stuff that might be sent from the specialism - and we really hadn't tried to do that. We've tried to, more, to be coordinated and to help disseminate good practice. (Jeremiah)

For many members of the Network their experience was that, in practice, many of their activities at a regional level blurred the boundaries of these specialisms. Some regional officers explained that practical considerations such as the geography of a region meant that they and other team members often worked across specialisms, whereas others expressed a view that much of the work at a local level was by its nature complex and interdisciplinary, again encouraging working across specialist boundaries.

I think the division into the three specialisms is clunky at best and I've yet to find a single piece of work that didn't actually belong in all three specialisms. So it comes down to which lens you're using to look at things, rather than anything inherent in their being which tells you where it is. So... And I've got maybe four pieces on, literally four pieces of work on my desk at the moment which aren't particularly related to each other, but in all of them I need to have a consultation with people in the other two specialisms. (Gabriel)

I think the regional team works well. I think us having specialisms is a good thing. I'm not sure that they've got the right three titles. I think church and community, and discipleship are very close relatives to each other. As is discipleship and ministry so it's quite difficult I think for the discipleship string to actually work out the difference... You know what's their USP? But

I think it is working, I think... I think we need to look again maybe at how that is broken up. Whether or not discipleship, and church and community need to come together more. I don't know, that's something that I think needs thinking about. (Benjamin)

There was a general perception amongst many of those interviewed that the specialisms themselves were at very different stages of development. The general view amongst those interviewed was that the Church and Community specialism generally had a clear understanding of its sphere of practice as did the Ministries specialism, which many perceived to be the vehicle by which many conference decisions relating to training were delivered. There was generally less clarity about the role and function of the discipleship specialism with many, including members of that specialism, acknowledging that it had taken some time for this grouping to locate its role and place within the overall Network.

And I think the Ministries Specialist is quite an interesting one because it has a very distinctive role.....and a very distinctive outcome, you know, which is around the sort of training of presbyters and deacons and lay preachers. I think both the discipleship specialism and our specialism don't have that clarity so I think they're a bit more difficult to define in terms of its impact, if that makes sense. (Sarah)

I think that the discipleship specialism has really struggled to find its feet, find its identity and find what it's about. And there's several reasons for that. Discipleship is not a defining word. So Church and Community, there's almost some definition within that with whom you relate to and what your responsibilities are. Ministries, there's some definition within that about who you relate to and what your responsibilities are. Discipleship, potentially underpins and covers everything. And the danger is that because it's seen as everything it's then not seen as anything. (Leah)

I think it's a fair perception in the fact that there are clear lines in the fact that really, ministry development is there to deal with those ministries that the church has recognised. So for example sort of starting, I think I would say at Worship Leader level and moving through the various sort of recognised ministries. So there is that, and certainly when it comes to discipleship the constant question is well, what is discipleship you know, what isn't it? If that makes sense? So it makes it clear in that way. (Peter)

Others expressed how the division of the Network into regions and specialisms, whilst it can potentially bring some benefit, can also create tensions in terms of prioritizing work. A number of participants questioned the basis on which the specialist pathways had been formed and whether it was actually clear what the primary or key purpose of each specialism is:

There is a tension that we live with, in all different directions yes and it's about managing that. It's a dance really of who are you going to please, who are you going to let down, how are you going to manage your own

wellbeing, how can you say no. Yes, when it comes to the three specialisms there was a time when each specialism was sort of forming its own identity so there were three communities of practice. And of course being in one I did not understand the other two, I could have become quite critical of what they were doing or not doing. So there were tensions there. I think I've reached a stage of just accepting that they're different and yet they're not different. We're all much the same, we just do things differently. We're all actually working on discipleship, ministries and church and community, all of us. (Salome)

Meanwhile, one of the key challenges that many members reported were those associated with working with key personnel within Districts following the change from a District-based structure to a Connexional/national and regional structure which came with the formation of the DMLN.

I wonder if on reflection we perhaps rushed a little bit into working regionally and might have been better served by evolving our work regionally. Because I think people within the districts might, my observation is, and again that may be right or wrong, that they are still struggling to get to terms with a regional identity and way of working. And I know within our region we are often now, you know if we do a day event, we're often offering it in two locations within the region because of geography, because of diaries and things like that. And I think there's still quite a long way to go in having a really strong sense of regional identity. (Jacob)

Many interviewees attributed resistance from the Districts to the perception among the District Chairs that they had lost considerable power, control, and, in the minds of some, financial resource, as a result of the implementation of the new structure.

In many ways I don't think this new structure works as well as the old structure did. I think the districts need people that they can ask what needs to be done locally. The benefit of it, the flip side of that of course, is that in the previous role they just had my skills and what I could bring whereas now they can draw on a number of us potentially and potentially people from elsewhere. They could have done that before but it never worked, it really never happened in practice although it could've done. (Abigail)

I think it's changed quite a lot, really. And part of it is collateral damage that the power structures within the church are interesting and before, we were considered to be the property, in inverted commas, of districts. You know, you're our, you're our officer. Even though we were employed Connexionally, people still felt, even though I was assigned to any given district for half of my role because I worked half time in two districts, I was theirs and now I am no longer theirs. I am no longer theirs to govern, manage, control, feel part of, you know, the sense of loss around that, both

the district chairs and district leadership teams in those places, is very painful. They don't like it. (Rhoda)

The DMLN wasn't widely welcomed. I think people were looking for the older model of what had been offered as district trainers, development officers, and have struggled to understand what our role is - because of that first year we hadn't really fully articulated what we believed that to be. (Job)

I think The District Chairs have really struggled with it, some of them more than other. But the ones that have struggled with it and struggled with it the hardest have struggled with it because when they had district staff, District Training Officers, they could tell them what to do and they either did it or they did their own thing. But, they felt a sense of power and a sense of control over what was going on in their territory, if you like. I think now they feel a little bit challenged by some of the wonderful and exciting people that we have on the team and some of the things that are being asked, by the Conference, to be done in their district. (Tamar)

The transition to the DMLN appears to have been smoother where strong personal relationships which existed in the previous structures have transferred into the new structure and where there has been some previous experience of working across District boundaries. Mary outlines in her region how this has assisted her and members of her team in working with key local stakeholders.

And in the old system there were regional training forums, I had relationships with all of the chairs of the district here anyway. And they trusted me. So when the new role started, they were willing... Because they trusted me, they were willing to give this new thing a try. And they gave us, they gifted us really a transition year in our first year at the Learning Network. And they basically put no demands on us in terms of delivery at all in our first year. To let us try and work out what the heck was going on. (Mary)

A key strategy that many regions have used to try and overcome some of the levels of suspicion and resistance at a District level has been to strengthen and develop the role of regional forums.

So I think when looking at it, when we formed a regional forum with the three district chairs, I think probably until this time last year there was a resistance from a couple of them who weren't particularly enamoured with the idea anyway and, as far as they were concerned, they'd lost district staff and hadn't really gained anything as such and struggled to see us as a resource, as something actually more than what they had previously. (Miriam)

And I think I see the forums being much more places of discernment about what particular aspects of work are done, rather than, initially, there was a

lot of aggression about, you know, we want to do what we want in each region, we don't want all this Connexional stuff dumped on us, if you like. But I think there's now... There's now a recognition that some of this Connexional stuff is quite good, and actually meets the needs. And so forums now are reflecting on where they are, and what their particular needs are, and what particular pieces of work they need to respond to that. So, I think for me it's the growing... I think the forums will grow in their importance in the structure. (Luke)

The expectations of key external stakeholders and attitudes towards the Network were explored with interview participants. A number of respondents, particularly those who had experience of previous structures, noted how there was a strong expectation that the Network was the training arm (in the sense of formal courses and programmes) of the Methodist Church:

I think one of the frustrations is, you know, right from the get-go people have gone well Learning Network, what do you do then? Like, in a cynical way and actually it's very hard to describe it. They haven't been satisfied until we've produced a program of events that says this is what we do and that is really just a part of it, so....., it is actually about promoting learning across the board in the region. You know, that's not an add-on that's what underpins it. It's promoting a culture of learning. (Ruth)

I do more formal training that I didn't do before. I did do training but there's a lot more emphasises on that and I think there's a real danger in the new role that it becomes a training network and not a development network. I think there's a big... There's quite a big push to get dates out there for training. I think my preferred model, which I see more benefit in personally, is, apart from some things that have to be done like safeguarding and that kind of training, the more formal stuff, I think the better training probably comes out of working alongside people. Looking at what their needs are and then putting something on. Rather than the other way around, so the training needs to come out of the development model. At the moment the development comes out of the training model. I think that's been the switch for me. (Abigail)

Some described how the change from the previous based district structures to the regional structure of the Network had led to a significant change in the perceptions that other key stakeholders in the Church had towards them. This was the case even when there was a history of previous relationships between the Network member and external stakeholder: the perception was that the Network would be more distant and centrally managed.

And that meant that all of a sudden we were seen as other. We were seen as outsiders, even though we'd not changed, we'd not changed the way we helped people, worked with people. And we are now able, either to be blamed for that or to be used, and there is a constant and consistent sense

of those people from Connexion, you know, coming here, telling us how to live our lives. We pay our assessments for them. What are they doing for us? Rather than seeing it as what are we doing for the church Connexionally. (Rhoda)

Benjamin notes how the Network is continually evolving but that one of the challenges that it faces relates to communication in managing its relations with external stakeholders. This resonates with a number of comments made by interview participants about the need to increase the visibility of the Network and its activities and develop a communications strategy for the Network as a whole.

I keep on getting asked how the DMLN is going and I keep on describing it as a toddler. So there are some things that we do quite proficiently and there's some things that we fall down on. I think we need to address the things that we don't do very well yet and for me the key... One of the key things around there is communication and I think we need to work harder at the communications aspects of it. (Benjamin)

For some, gaining increased visibility involves branding and image and developing a strong identity for the Network that can be easily communicated. For others communication was far more about building strong relationships within the Church based on trust and a recognition of the significant and important contribution that the Network can make to assisting the Church with many of the challenges that it faces.

The second theme explored above highlights a number of organizational and structural considerations that became evident through both the Action Learning Project and the independent research. A key issue concerns where individuals see their primary affiliations. Many have stronger affiliations and working relationships within their region than with the Network as a whole or with the specialist groups. A number of respondents articulated both ideological and practical issues associated with the interface between regions and specialisms and outlined some of the tensions this could cause in shaping and developing their practice. The other key issue to emerge from the discussions largely relate to the transition from district to connexional oversight and 'ownership' and a regional structure.

Part three: Working with communities of practice

In exploring with participants the role and ability of the Network to promote and work with notions of transformational change, there was a diverse range of comments and observations. Many of these related to governance and hierarchical structures within the Methodist Church and the perceived impact that these had in relation to the role, status and activity of the DMLN.

A recurring theme was the role and status of the Network within the wider governance structures of Methodism and the impact that this has on the way it operates, the priorities it works with and the power bases that it has available to it to promote and encourage transformational change within the Church. For some, as noted below, the governance and perceived hierarchical structures were experienced as a constraining factor on their and the Network's ability to make a significant contribution at strategic and policy levels.

I think they have much more of a functional view of us, that we're there to deliver. Deliver the decisions of conference and so that they want the feel of putting on this conference and that conference, you know, just doing what we're told rather than actually contributing to the agenda and saying well this is what... Actually we're the people hearing, more than anybody, what people think they need. So we are in a position to feed that back up to the decision making bodies but it's almost like no, know your place, you're there to do what we tell you. So there's that thing going on. (Ruth)

Well... And church governance in general... Yes. It's... It's a mighty beast, I'll put it that way. It's a mighty beast. ... So for example I, a learning and development officer. I have a boss, who is a regional co-ordinator. My boss has a boss who is the director of pathways. My boss's boss has a boss who is the director of the Network... My boss's boss's boss has a boss who is the Connexional secretary. And they have a boss who is the general secretary of Conference. So for a church that claims to have no hierarchy and to not be hierarchical. I do now feel at the bottom of quite a long food chain. (Leah)

....actually, on the ground there's a lot of... There's so many hierarchies, there's so much power and control and it's really inconsistent. Some people are really open-minded and I would say they were, let's call it a practitioner of communities of practice, in who they are. And other people are those traditional forms of church and, unfortunately, those with power often are put... You know, those who are in not power, but those who have perceived power let's say, operate in those hierarchical, traditional forms of church that, I guess, they grew up in but... And it does stop change; I could give you so many examples of that. (Hephzibah)

In terms of the relationship between the Network and the more formalised and established decision making structures that exist within Methodism many referred to the Network as being akin to the Civil Service and the Network's role being to support the implementation of the decisions made by Conference, in the same way that the Civil Service seeks to support and help enact decisions made by Parliament. However, this is not how the relationship is universally typified and the following demonstrate how different and opposing conceptions are in operation:

And I think there is another dynamic from the Network....these two quotes that I was given by two senior leaders within the Methodist church, one

saying the Network is the church at its best reflecting itself back to the church and then another senior leader within the church seeing the Network as if it were the civil service of the church and the Network isn't the church the Network is there to support the church in what it does..... I think those two definitions, those two visions of it do play out quite a lot within discussions. And I would be an advocate I think of the second view that in effect we're more like a civil service than we are like a church, you know, we're supporting what the church is doing. (Bartholomew)

And then in effect we all recognise I think within Methodist ministry if we've been tied to it that we serve the Conference, that it's our authority, this democratic ideal, so when it suggests there are things that we should be doing you know, that's who I'm happiest to fall under, and the people who are vying for attention and power within that system, you know, it's natural, it's human, I'd rather kind of be on the outside of that rather than on the inside. (Job)

Jacob and Magdalene express views supported by a significant number of other interviewees that if the Network is not careful it could get caught up in trying to position itself and prove its significance rather than concentrating on the real challenges and issues that Methodism is facing. In particular, there was concern expressed about the motivation for, and nature and model of, work planning which was being introduced within various parts of the Network.

And again this might be sort of a bit of a cul-de-sac, but I think there's a rather interesting cultural battle, battle might be too strong a word, but cultural something going on within Methodism at the moment about order and regulation and work plans and all that sort of stuff., so there's some big, big cultural stuff going on behind all that. So yes, I guess age, stage, you know, whatever, self-confidence; I don't feel as constrained as I could imagine some others might. (Jacob)

In a secular world if you don't believe in God that's deep reflection and listening to you, the human being, responding to that. It just feels like obvious stuff. And in faith communities I personally can't understand that you step in to something that's quite heavily structured when I don't think, you know, God wants to work in heavy secular structures that we seem to now be working in in the Methodist Church. (Hephzibah)

One of the challenges in developing a strong vision for the Network would appear to be the fact that the Network has recruited a number of experienced and 'established' figures from within Methodism. Whilst this brings important experience and expertise, it also brings the possibility of some jostling for position, while strongly held divergent ideological, philosophical and theological views may be difficult to mediate in the context of an unofficial hierarchy of wisdom.

There are certain power struggles amongst those people who would see themselves as leaders within this whole system and trying to figure out,

you know, how many different very able and intelligent people can work together in one way, is, you know, still a growing challenge for us. (Job)

One of the steps that they have taken that has made a big difference is that they've stopped being top down in the organisation of the gatherings. They've got a group of people who wanted to take on board, running and organising the gatherings. So the topics and the structure now are not that of senior management's ideas of what we need to do but have been developed with a group of people. I'm not on that group but the people that are doing it are doing it because they wanted to. So it's purely voluntary and I trust them to do a good job and they have. So the last gathering was done by us, I guess. I'm beginning to sound almost socialist and communist you know. (Salome)

Most of those who participated in the interviews had engaged in some way with the discussion and activity around Communities of Practice currently taking place within the Network, with those in the Church and Community specialist pathway being seen as having had the most active engagement in this area. Perceptions about the potential role and contribution of communities of practice were explored with interview participants to determine how far the approach was seen as having potential in developing a culture in the Network that enables it to work with notions of transformational change.

Overall there was broad support amongst those interviewed in working with the idea and values associated with developing the Network as a community or communities of practice. For many this resonated strongly with their own preferred models of working and operation.

I warm to the Community of Practice ethos that's really been at the heart of my ministry for the last 30 years. I have concerns that the Network perceives this as another means of doing. And my experience has been that Communities of Practice work best, and it's only my narrow experience, work best when they are ad hoc, and not institutionalized or codified. And that's my big concern at the moment. That this is the next way to do things, and that's not to take away from the all that Community of Practice thinking, particularly, in terms of transformation because that's what we should be about, anyway.... My deep concern is that it becomes a sort of either an imposed or an artificial overlay. And then, in actual fact, it works contrary to the spirit of what it's about. (Mark)

And so I've been very excited in how we're beginning to work that out in a practical way within The Network. And I was, I mean, that was all my understanding about the underpinning of how we put The Network together, was all about creating this, co-creating it, doing it together. Because I firmly believe that, actually, something done together is much more solid and much more rounded and much more holistic, than

something created by some kind of visionary leader who tells you what to do. (Tamar)

Questions arose about what the Network means when it talks about communities of practice and what would it look and feel like if it were to be fully operating as such a community. Issues were raised in relation to how communities of practice develop, levels of intentionality amongst participants, and processes for gaining shared understandings and values. The responses below highlight some of the key issues that were highlighted:

But what are some of the core values that might underpin that, the frames of reference, what types of models or approaches are there to ways of working. If you're trying to embody what it means to be a community of practice. I think; that's where we're at the moment. (Ruth)

Yes, I think, I mean, probably my main observation will be that there is confusion and there's a lack of clarity about what we mean by community of practice. So I think some would understand a community of practice as being about an intentional community that is there to help those who are part of us to develop the discipleship resources if you like but the stress would be on the community part of the community process. Whereas others I think are much more about being community in practice, where the practice is emphasised and who would see us as a network as getting together in order to produce certain outcomes and would emphasise that much more, so I think there's a spectrum (Bartholomew)

And I suppose my understanding of communities of practices is that you have to have a common task and work on something to be part of a community. And I'm not sure at the moment that everybody in the Network knows what their common task is. (Sarah)

But it's just really interesting that communities of practice are almost understood in name only but not in practice. It's almost seen in the districts or in the circuits and the churches by those who aren't in the Learning Network as more like a theory that's in a file on a shelf that they can pull out and use in a meeting and it would be fun. But it's hard to have... Well, it's a challenge to have a more in-depth understanding of what this actually means for humans, you know. This isn't a professional want or a way you can host a meeting better, it's a way of sort of, being, a way of effectively being to bring about change as well. And so there's a distinct difference in how the Learning Network are operating and moving and how we are then supposed to operate in this way that we believe in at the grassroots level. (Hephzibah)

Some expressed concern that the Network might get tied up in trying too hard to define what it meant by communities of practice and slip into a trap of paralysis through analysis. For some, an action research based approach that developed the

notion, ideology and model of working through practice was their preferred approach.

I think we focus too much on it I think, is my reflection, rather than getting on with the work. I think communities of practice are very, very good. I like the theory that Megan did and all that kind of stuff, I'm quite a theoretical person, I'm process driven. So I liked all that, but I feel like I've just gone on and on and over it. It seems almost like the reality of it is nothing different to what we do anyway. In a sense that we gather together people who've got interested concerns, whether it's about morality or about mission or about circuit stewards. That's still happening anyway and for me it was putting a bit theory behind it. (Abigail)

I think there's a danger of it becoming the latest fad. I think the principles of community of practice are excellent. Okay, but I think, as with all things, don't be governed by the law... The letter of the law, be governed by the spirit of the law and get them to work... (Benjamin)

Others who were interviewed were able to articulate the potential they saw for working with a model of a community of practice and how that might assist with meeting some of the structural and hierarchical tensions identified earlier in this report.

I don't think we have a shared sense of what our big purpose is here at all. And I would argue that our... One of our big purposes is about developing sustainability. And within that it looks to me like some of the community of practice stuff is a useful tool in doing that and a useful model in that. (Mary)

A community of practice in the Network would support and encourage the other communities of practice in which I find myself. And would encourage me to be integrated in that broader sense....I think there's a lot more to being a community of practice than doing or talking about it. And I think... I can't see how a community of practice works unless it's built on relationship... (Leah)

I think there's a sense that within the Learning Network that we do need to have much more of a sense of togetherness as a whole Network, rather than risking feeling like 11 individual teams, or in fact, more than that with the specialist teams as well. So I can see a real benefit in us working together on what it might mean to become to be a community of practice to the whole Network. I think the challenge always, for me, is ensuring that the theory results in practical output. And I know that sometimes the conversations need to move to a deeper level, and sometimes that can be enough for things to move on. (Obadiah)

Rhoda, however, articulates concerns expressed by a number of participants that, unless working as a community of practice is seen as a systemic initiative and

practised as such across the Church, there could be the potential for a real disconnect between the DMLN and other parts of the Church with significant levels of frustration and little progress made on addressing the real and critical challenges that the Church and Methodism as a movement faces.

I'm not really sure where to start with it, to be honest with you. I think it's a great idea. I think having conversations between big practitioners who are doing similar pieces of work is really fruitful....And so on a micro level, the aspiration is great. The practicality is complex. On a Network level, therefore, we are gathering together as a community and arguably, as a big community of practice because we were structured for that, that means that the practicalities are good.But the real problem with it, I don't know if it's a problem, but I'm going to say it's a problem because that's how it feels, is that we can be a fantastic community of practice. We can come up with hundreds of fantastic innovative revolutionary ideas that are going to save the church, the world, the universe and everything. And if the Church holistically and Connexionally doesn't want that and doesn't buy into that, we don't stand a cat in hell's chance of making any difference. And there's a real disconnect between what the community of practice might, having listened to one another think this is where God is taking us, this is where the church needed to go. And then the rest of the church not agreeing with that. And so it's like a complete waste of breath because ultimately, we're accountable to the conference and we just do what they say. (Rhoda)

The final theme identified the key challenge in working with notions of transformational change and communities of practice. This challenge relates to how the DMLN is situated within, and relates to, the broader Church, and its capacity both to influence and operate in a systemic manner with other bodies and personnel that impact upon the governance, organisation and operation of the Church as a community.

Implications and Questions from the exploration to date

This section of the report reviews some of the implications from the findings reported above and the knowledge generated through the action learning project and proposes several key questions for the leadership team of the DMLN to consider. In this sense it is intended to promote further discussion among members of the team and offer a framework for insight and action that is grounded in the report's findings and the knowledge generated through the action learning project but is owned by the Network itself. Questions range from the strategic to the philosophical and from roles, functions and structures within the system to relationships with the larger system of which the DMLN is a part. In this view, larger systems are constellations of interrelated communities of practice.

The questions posed seek to respond to key themes that have emerged through analysis of the research interviews and which were revealed through the action learning project. They aim to stimulate further debate among DMLN Leadership team and offer a focus that helps to inform the on-going discussions in the Network about working with the concept of communities of practice as a vehicle for supporting transformational change within the wider Church.

1. Where is strategic leadership enacted within the DMLN?

This question encourages discussion among the leadership team on how they perceive their role in articulating a shared and clear understanding of the key purpose, vision and core values of the DMLN. The question invites the Directors and Coordinators to consider to what extent there is a shared vision and sense of purpose throughout the Network, and what core values and assumptions underpin the work and activity of the Network. The question also invites the leadership team to review and reflect on how they see their role in supporting and sustaining the wider Network in its work. There is a potential role for thought leadership – as a means of bringing the theological foundations of the work of the DMLN to the fore and of opening up conversation across the Network.

2. What is the role, function and interface between regional activity and specialist pathway work and how are these best supported and delivered within the Network and Church?

This question encourages members of the DMLN to review and reflect on how the current structure of the Network supports the activity that it is involved in. The question invites a review of how regions and specialisms interface and how these structures impact on the work of the Network at a local level. It reflects the perceptions expressed by many interviewee participants that there can be a tension between fulfilling, and reconciling, the demands of their roles in a

regional context and those of the specialist pathways. It also links to views expressed by some that work is often not identifiably connected to a particular specialism and is sometimes delivered in a manner which integrates the different foci of the specialisms. It recognizes that issues relating to staffing and geography also impact on the way in which specialist pathway work is delivered in regional contexts.

3. What specific support might regional and specialist teams need in order to embrace and use communities of practice as an approach and way of working with their key client/stakeholder groups?

This question invites the Network to look outwards at the same time as continually reviewing and reflecting upon its own practice. It prompts discussion of what might be considered practice in the context of the roles performed by those in the DMLN and how the work that is being undertaken on developing communities of practice within the Network can be used as a systemic approach to the work in which the members of the Network are engaged. It also encourages the leadership team to consider how groups and individuals working in the Network can best be supported in using an approach based on the principles of communities of practice in order to facilitate transformational change.

4. How can the Network manage and work with expectations and perceptions of the DMLN from key stakeholders?

This questions arises from many of the comments and observations offered by interviewee participants on external perceptions of the Network within the wider Church. It links to discussions that have been taking place within the Network on enhanced visibility and participation. In particular, it raises questions about DMLN's perceived role in the Methodist Church and how it is received within the wider Church.

5. In order to use communities of practice for promoting and supporting change what would facilitate such an approach and what might inhibit the flourishing of communities of practice?

This question relates to the wider structures of governance and organization within the Church. It acknowledges the tension expressed by a number of interviewees about enacting the directives of conference rather than initiating strategic action. It invites a consideration of the mechanisms for determining what is appropriate and legitimate work for the DMLN. It also promotes a discussion of how governance structures within the Church can ensure that the considerable expertise contained within the Network and the insight gained

from working at a local level can inform decisions made at a national level. It prompts an exploration of how far the role of the DMLN is akin to that of the Civil Service of the Methodist Church - a perception shared by a number of interviewees.

6. How can the DMLN build a desire and capacity within the wider Church to embed the principles underpinning communities of practice as a means of working on the challenges it faces?

This question encourages a recognition of the systemic nature of working with communities of practice. It aims to promote further discussion about how the work that the Network is undertaking on communities of practice as an approach to working can be used and promoted within the wider Church.

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