



An evaluation of a complexities approach to consultancy and the management of change with Methodist churches and circuits

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In this paper, I seek to draw out the experiences that have led to my increasing use of a complexities approach in consultancy as a Mission Enabler in the Methodist Church. Some of this will be by way of personal experience and reflection and some by reflection on academic literature, especially that studied recently as part of an MA course in Consultancy for Mission and Ministry' at York St. John University.

1. The early influences on my approach

All of my initial academic training, through my first degree in Chemistry, initial ministerial formation at Wesley College, Bristol, and training with ADMINISTRY, Luton Industrial College and others had taught me to think logically and to solve problems in a particular way - using a very linear form of logic.

Training in pastoral studies, preaching etc., were seen as every bit as logical and linear as the science that I had been taught and was teaching for the first six years of my working life. Yet, all of that time, I was conscious that many of the great scientific discoveries¹ came about by people who were able to think outside that box.

After five years of circuit ministry I began to realise that the church is a community of people who don't usually think and work in that linear way. Relationships are much more complex than that. The work of Charles Handy (Handy, *The Age of Unreason*, 1989) (Handy, *The Empty Raincoat*, 1994)

¹ Such as Alexander Fleming's serendipitous discovery of penicillin and Einstein's theories of relativity

helped me to recognise that there were other, less linear forms of thinking that were being used in the philosophical treatment of business organisations, (Handy thinks much more in terms of network than hierarchy) but it wasn't really for another ten years that these more networked ways of thinking began to coalesce for me in terms of the way in which I facilitate change within Churches and circuits.

2. More recent experiences

a. Experiences as Superintendent Minister and District Property Secretary in Sheffield

In 2002 I began to work in a new role, as Superintendent of a Methodist circuit in Sheffield. As part of my working into the role, I read a number of files left by predecessors that included, amongst many other things, various reports on churches and the circuit, by external consultants. All of them set SMART targets, but over a period of some twenty years, they were setting very similar targets. I began to wonder why it was that these very good reports, prepared by a variety of different consultants had still not resulted in significant change.

The circuit leadership team recognised that change needed to happen but could not find a way to energise the people in the churches of the circuit actually to move from a basic pattern that was about maintaining the status quo. It appeared unlikely that the approach of a SWOT analysis or setting SMART targets was likely to work and we therefore embarked on a different approach, an approach that was built around giving space for churches to tell their story – of where God had been at work and was at work, and to dream dreams for the future.

Yet the church nationally continued throughout the last decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty first century to produce models that were based on a linear, management model of change, such as Pilgrims Way'² 'Know and grow'³, 'Building Confidence'⁴ and Ian Johnson's 'Shaping the future'⁵ All of these set out a very linear path to follow, although Johnson's approach is more about process than pathway.

b. Doubts about the approaches that I had grown up with.

All of this experience, over some twenty years of circuit ministry, had led me to the point of recognising that approaches to change and development in the life of Church or Circuit did not seem likely to happen by using

² (The Methodist Church Resourcing Mission Office, Pilgrims Way, 2001)

³ (The Methodist Church Communication Office, Know and Grow – a 6 week programme to help your Church, 2004)

⁴ (The Methodist Church Resourcing Mission Office, Building confidence, 2006)

⁵ (Johnson, Shaping the future, 2004)

conventional business or strategic approaches to change. Indeed, with the exception of certain very specific projects within the life of a Church (such as a building project, employment of a new member of staff etc.) my conclusion was, and is, that such approaches do not and cannot work in churches for at least two reasons.

- (i) They are founded on an organisational model that is essentially linear and hierarchical, whereas churches are better seen as voluntary associations of people.
- (ii) They are founded on an approach that is based on finding out 'The facts' and pursuing them to a logical conclusion; but people in churches don't behave first and foremost in ways that are based on logic of that sort, but on emotion, feeling and spiritual or other experience.

My reading in Science and Religion, (authors such as Polkinghorne and Peacock⁶ of earlier generations; and Poole and McGrath⁷ more recently;) and in the popular philosophy of science, (Hawking and Gribbin etc.⁸) had also led to a deep questioning of linear approaches, at a time when there was increasing recognition in the sciences of an approach that was much less linear than the old Newtonian ways of thinking, with the emergence of chaos theories, the science of surprises.⁹

So it was, with all of these doubts and questions about conventional wisdom in terms of church development and change, that in 2008, I started to study at York St. John University for an MA in consultancy for mission and ministry, in the hope that it would better equip me for my new role as Development enabler for the Liverpool district.

3. Consultancy for Mission and Ministry and I explore how that academic work,

a. Reading in missiology

The Anglican report 'Breaking New Ground'¹⁰ led me into deeper thinking about missiology. I began to recognise that mission was about much more than Church Growth, that it was about God's mission, not the mission of the church and my Zambian experience of 20 years previously helped me to recognise the value of mission being God's work through the local people (see also Donovan, 1978).)

Reading Robert Warren's Healthy Church Handbook¹¹ and the ground-breaking 'Mission shaped Church' report¹², together with much of Martyn

⁶ (Polkinghorne, One World, 1986), (Peacocke, Science and the Christian experiment, 1971)

⁷ (Poole, A guide to science and belief, 1990), (McGrath, Science and religion, 1999)

⁸ (Hawking, A brief history of time, 1988), (Gribbin, Almost everyone's guide to science, 1998)

⁹ (fractal foundation, what is chaos theory, 2011)

¹⁰ (Church of England, Breaking new ground, 1994)

¹¹ (Warren, the Healthy Churches' Handbook, 2004)

¹² (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, Mission Shaped Church, 2004)

Atkins' writing, helped me to see mission through people as central to my thinking, rather than growth through process. David Bosch's magnum opus on missiology¹³ shows how, throughout history there have been significant shifts in the paradigm of mission and I am beginning to feel that we may be in the midst of another such paradigm shift in British approaches to mission in the early part of the twenty first century, with Fresh Expressions of Church becoming ever more significant in my work. For me Bosch's most revealing insights are the recognition that mission is always shaped by its context and the challenge to protestant understandings of mission:

“with respect to their overly pragmatic mission structures, their tendency to portray mission almost exclusively in verbalist categories, and the absence of missionary spirituality in their churches, which often drastically impoverishes all their commendable efforts in the area of social justice.” (p. 212)

b. Learning from the new sciences and management

Writers exploring the developments in the social sciences of the more recent non-linear or non-Newtonian ways of thinking in science, such as Mitchell Waldrop¹⁴ helped me to recognise the changing ways of thinking in the scientific world, which were based more on Einstein than on Newton; theories that were much less linear. In turn, writers such as Meg Wheatley and Joshua Cooper Ramo¹⁵ in the social sciences began to pick up this thinking in terms of leadership and organisational change.

One particular image from this thinking that has helped me to see how changes, such as church closure, occur is the sand pile. We are all familiar with the idea that sand can seemingly continue to be added to a pile until, at some point that we cannot predict, just one little bit more sand causes the whole pile to collapse – self-organised criticality! In the context of church it illustrates how just one small event can cause the whole thing to change and collapse. The issue then is what to do with the sand. Do you rebuild the pile, or take it elsewhere to build a different pile? (Bak, 1996)

Patricia Shaw, Ralph Stacey and others pick up this complexity or 'edge of chaos' kind of approach in looking at changing organisations. Shaw is particularly insightful in her reflections on 'water cooler conversations'. It is here, in these informal conversations, she suggests, that mind-sets are changed and not in the formal meetings of an organisations.

¹³ Bosch *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991)

¹⁴ Waldrop, M. Mitchell. *Complexity: the emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*. New York: Touchstone, 1992.

Wheatley, Margaret. *Leadership and the new science 3rd edition*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers inc, 2006.; Ramo, Joshua Cooper. *The age of the unthinkable*. London: Little, Brown, 2009.

Complexity theory suggests that organisations and markets and ecologies and communities are:

Organic:

They have more in common with ecosystems, with evolving organisms than with machines; they are not in general predictable or controllable.

Self-organising and comprised of temporary patterns of relationships:

They often display patterns of relationships (such as ways of working in organisations or buying patterns in markets) which can be relatively stable but still display some variation and fluctuation and may indeed evolve, eventually, into new patterns.

Contingent on history and context:

The future depends on the detail of what happens, does not smoothly follow from the past.

Affected by multiple causes:

In general there are no simple cause-and-effect chains; outcomes are influenced by several factors acting together, together with the effects of chance, history and the wider environment.

Co-evolutionary:

Organisations are shaped by their environments and vice versa; there is interaction and reflexive change between scales, between actors.

Episodic, non-linear change:

Sometimes current patterns are resilient but flexible, sometimes locked-in and rigid, sometimes change can be fast and radical.

Emergent:

Change can lead to the emergence of features qualitatively different from the past.

Jean Boulton, Claremont Management Consultants Ltd (Boulton)

Complexity theory looks at the world in ways which break with simple cause-and-effect models, linear predictability, and a dissection approach to understanding phenomena, replacing them with organic, non-linear and holistic approaches in which relations within interconnected networks are the order of the day (M. Wheatley)

This forms the basis of a post-modern approach to change and to mission that lies at the heart of my consultancy model.

4. An approach to church and circuit development that is essentially non-linear and conversational

The kind of change that is needed in churches is usually not primarily about changing what we do, setting targets, developing plans, but about changing minds and hearts; changing culture. It is about changing the view of mission from being an added extra or that which we pay others to do increasingly towards being that which we do. Even more, it is about changing our thinking from just focusing on what we do to also thinking about what we are.

I therefore use, as the basis of my consultancy, not the Newtonian models of Lovell et al. but a model that is based around notions of health and well-being, and built on conversation and listening rather than around notions of growth and planning. This model takes seriously not only the objective 'facts' but also the very real feelings that people have about their church and about mission. Taking account of recent insights in the new sciences and social sciences, I have begun to realise more and more fully the value of conversations rather than plans, of thinking in terms of developing Healthy Churches and Circuits rather than growing and target led Churches and Circuits.

My aim in consultancy is to unearth a passion to be more effective rather than to set targets and goals, which ultimately lead to a sense of failure and demoralisation. Does it work?

5. Case studies

Circuit A

A circuit of more than twenty churches, formed three years previously, felt that the time was right to initiate a strategic review. The circuit meeting formed a steering group for the review, and invited me to be a member of the steering group and to facilitate the review.

A team of ten people, several of whom were local preachers, were trained by me to facilitate a review in each church that would be conducted after a church lunch, following morning worship that would be on a missional theme, have a number of strands to it:

- We would ask people to describe in short phrases what they felt their community was like, leaving them to define what was meant by 'their community'
- We would then show some key statistics from the latest census material for the area around the church and invite them to reflect on anything that surprised them from the figures when compared with their own perceptions.
- Third, the group would be invited to describe what they felt about their own church, again using short phrase
- Finally, we would undertake a review based on the healthy Churches' handbook. The aim of this was to invite people to indicate how they felt their church measured up against the seven marks of a healthy church.

Following the review day, all of the written material was then returned to me so that I could present a summary of the responses back to the churches a few weeks later. Again, the response day was to be a conversation led by the facilitators, with the aim of discerning where there was a real passion for change and people who were willing to do something. Once the exercise was complete in all of the circuit churches, it was then possible to produce an overall summary for the circuit as a whole.

In addition to the church reviews the circuit meeting was invited to perform a similar exercise, but for the circuit rather than the churches and using the Healthy Circuits handbook as the basis. I facilitated this session. Finally, the circuit staff engaged in a healthy Circuit review, which I facilitated.

Outcomes

In almost every instance, the Church was clearly seeing the community through its own eyes. E.g., the Church population was usually significantly older than the population of the local community and tended to see a higher proportion of older people and a lower proportion of younger people than the reality is. Universally, churches described themselves as welcoming and friendly communities, usually with good facilities to serve the local community. In terms of the healthy church review, whilst there was some difference across the churches of the circuit the overall picture is shown below:

Circuit A Summary	Circuit Average
Energised by faith	4.1
Outward-looking focus	4.3
Seeks to find out what God wants	3.9
Faces the cost of change and growth	4.0
Operates as a community	4.3
Makes room for all	4.6
Does a few things and does them well	4.6
Overall average	4.3

All scores out of six, with six meaning most healthy.

The circuit is now saying, through its website, a number of things that suggest that the review has actually led to a significant re-focusing of the Circuit's resources, but has not been able significantly to withdraw resources from areas where there is a clear lack of vitality, as self-identified by the review.

Analysis

In several instances, there was a very large mismatch between the church and the community, in many socio-economic aspects.

In terms of the healthy church review, whilst there was significant difference

in some areas, over all churches judged themselves to be outward looking and inclusive, but weakest on the two most spiritual marks, with significant unwillingness to change. Although in a few places the review unearthed considerable energy to make changes and to refocus, in the majority of churches the review unearthed no energy or commitment to do anything other than to stay as they were. However, in a small number of churches very significant change did occur.

The healthy Circuit review seemed to be largely misunderstood by members of the circuit meeting, and it was clear that many members of the circuit meeting simply did not have the information to be able to express a view about the way in which the circuit was being led. However, the circuit staff was able to engage fully with it and it generated some very energised conversations and a real ambition to work differently in the circuit. There was a real desire to focus staff time and energy on those places where the review had unearthed energy for mission rather than to spread the resource more evenly across the circuit, but the circuit stewards did not feel able fully to facilitate this.

Reflections

There was clearly resistance from some in the circuit to an approach to review that was conversational rather than evidence based and target setting. The question was frequently asked 'How do we know that 4 in one church is the same as a 4 in another?' and an inability to grasp that the process was not about comparison or competition but about discernment in an individual context.

The circuit meeting is clearly not the right group to engage in a healthy Circuit review, but the staff was well able to engage with it and probably the circuit leadership team would have been. There was, at the time of the review, unwillingness by the circuit leadership team to focus the work of the staff on those areas where the review had unearthed a sense of vitality and missional purpose. Perhaps that would have been better if the circuit leadership team had engaged in the healthy circuit review rather than the circuit meeting and staff team. However, this seems to have been partially addressed subsequently.

There is no doubt that the conversation around the circuit changed for a short time, there was much more conversation around mission in the local community than had been the case in the recent past but, whilst that has persisted in some areas, in most it has returned to 'business as usual'.

Circuit B

In circuit B, a circuit of five churches, the circuit leadership took the view that it would be helpful to undertake a process of review in each of the churches in the circuit, but that this would be a coordinated series of church reviews and not a circuit review.

I was asked to work with each of the churches in the circuit at a time and pace of their own choosing. The method of engagement was the same as in the circuit A, with a meeting after worship looking at the local community, the church and a healthy churches review.

Again, a few weeks later I was to go back to the church to present a summary of the review outcomes. However, this would be followed up by an accompanied process of conversation facilitated by the local minister and supported by me in whatever way the church felt appropriate.

Outcomes

As in circuit A the reviews have all shown that the church sees the community through its own eyes but in one instance there was a recognition that the church congregation did not actually come from the community immediately around the church and in another instance the church building is located in such an isolated position that in reality there is no local community within walking distance.

In one Church, there was a real polarisation of views on some of the healthy church marks, with a significant body of opinion expressing the view that the church was weak in particular areas whilst others felt that it was strong.

Overall, the healthy church scores were similar to those in the circuit A, with the most spiritual marks being seen as weakest, unwillingness to change and an open and welcoming community.

Analysis

In both cases where the church recognised issues around the location of its building the church was challenged to explore what it meant to be church in that place and how they might see themselves as a gathered church rather than as a community church. In one instance, this was taken up with some enthusiasm.

In the church where views were polarised the leadership have recognised the need for a model that is able to embrace diversity whilst modelling unity: to live with the fellowship of controversy!

In every instance I have been invited back to the church to help to facilitate a number of very different conversations around an understanding of mission, possibilities of Fresh Expressions of church and how to engage with children in a church that has a small number of children in worship but much larger numbers in uniformed organisations.

Reflections

Careful groundwork by both the Superintendent and me has led to an atmosphere in which conversational approaches to review are much more acceptable than in circuit A. However, there is one Church that has refused

to engage in this approach but is instead engaged in a more 'conventional' approach to review facilitated by another member of the circuit staff.

Because these reviews have clearly, from the outset, been church reviews rather than circuit review, there has been very little conversation about comparing one church with another. However, the circuit as a whole has not really engaged with any conversation about a need for change or a more missional focus. Perhaps that will come further down the road.

Evaluation of the strengths and limitations of my approach

My approach to change and development seems to be effective in some contexts but not in others, particularly where there is professional experience of more linear approaches. Where there are a number of significant leaders who come from a business background and are familiar with more linear tools then they are often resistant to a quality based approach, using concepts such as health rather than numbers. They find it difficult to resist comparing one church with another on the basis of the numbers rather than using an approach that looks for energy and enthusiasm for change.

Those who are less familiar with business approaches often value an approach that allows them to talk and to express how they feel about their church and its mission. The conversational approach often allows issues to surface that are of immense significance but are not unearthed by a quantitative approach. For example, the approach often allows the church to articulate the feeling that they are in a spiritually very weak place. And surely spirituality lies at the heart of what it is to be church!

The approach seems to work best as church reviews coordinated by the circuit, rather than as a circuit review that takes place through the churches.

A leadership that is committed to the process more than to specific outputs is enormously helpful. The superintendent and others in leadership in the circuit seems to be really helpful in the production of good process.

The complexities approach enables the conversation and the atmosphere to change in the churches and in the circuit; it seems to facilitate a conversation that is more missional than hitherto. However, in most instances this change in the conversation seems to be short-lived. It is not long before the church returns to business as usual. But, in churches that are alive to missional thinking the change has been long lasting and has resulted in very significant changes in thinking and approach.

This kind of review enables a circuit to identify those places where there is a real missional vitality that is not about numbers or size. It enables the circuit to have a missional basis on which to focus the use of the key resources at its disposal and it enables churches to self-identify where they are only concerned with survival.

The key issue is whether the circuit meeting is prepared to respond to the issues in a creative and missional manner.

A new review tool

Over the past year I have been working closely with John Wareham, of TCC, (Transforming Churches and Communities). John comes from a background of work in the voluntary sector, and his approach is based very much around the development of plans and business models.

We have worked together to produce a tool that allows both of our approaches to be used together. We are, at the moment, using it with a church in Manchester to test it out. John will lead workshops that are based around the linear development of plans whilst, at the same time I will lead workshops that are around a conversational approach to the health and missional vitality of the Church. Once both sets of reviews have been completed we will work together with the Church to work out how change is going to be implemented.

This is very much at the pilot stage and we hope to have a published version by the end of the year, but at the moment we are very much open to critical review of the tool.

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