

Forming collaborative learning communities for discipleship and mission: a theological action research project in contemporary Methodist Church practices and understanding

The over-arching theme for this two-year project is communal learning and pedagogy in contemporary Christian community. The project, running from September 2016 until autumn 2018 and led by Clare Watkins, is using theological action research methods and engaging in participative research with practitioners in various different strands and contexts of the Methodist Church in Britain. The project explores the possibilities for collaborative, community learning, and trials and reflects on different approaches, in order to discern ways in which Christian communities might effectively refashion themselves as true communities of disciples – that is, communities of learners – for the sake of authentic ministry and mission. The participative research involves church practitioners, lay people and academics in shared reflection and analysis of data.

The precise focus for each community is to be determined by the participants, who will identify a question which they see as central to their own community. Reflecting on this question will take each community on a journey of learning from where they are, how they now understand themselves, towards where they discern they are called to be. The resultant ‘learnings’, for both church groups and academics, will form the basis for education, training and practice, including the development of practice and theological resources for use in groups beyond the life of the research. In addition, it is anticipated that the research will bear fruit in academic papers, speaking into the current lively discourse around mission, training and formation in Christian communities, an area with which the Susanna Wesley Foundation has already engaged through its practice-based formation and communities of practice projects. In particular, the potential of theological action research as itself a pedagogical tool will be explored and developed.

The project involves a number of events and workshops, including an opening workshop for both ‘academic researchers’ and reflectors on how to have conversations and how to read data, as well as sessions on a relevant aspect of theology in order to provide a shared language for discourse as the project develops. A colloquium with a range of stakeholders is built into the final stage of the project.

One of the strands of the Foundation’s work is learning for ministry and this project falls within this theme but it also has resonances for other aspects of SWF’s work, with relevance for questions around identity and diversity as different groups in local contexts share their perceptions and articulate their self-understandings.

It is significant that the 2016 Methodist Conference was reminded by Gareth Powell of the need 'to discover how to articulate the Gospel' (Reflections from the Secretary of the Conference to the 2016 Conference) and was urged to rediscover the report Time to Talk of God. This project is very much about talking of God – and finding ways of helping the people called Methodists to do so.