

Extending Discipleship Exploring Vocation: A Developing Model

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1. Roots

The Methodist Conference of 2006 received a report entitled 'Extending Discipleship Exploring Vocation', which set out a new model for resourcing people in developing their sense of God's call. It identified four strands as key to this model: vocational exploration, theological reflection, developing a sense of Methodist identity and engagement with the learning church. It offered various suggestions as to how this model might be delivered and its possible content, and, crucially, emphasised several times that this was intended as a route to ministry of many different kinds, not merely ordination.

This outline has many strengths. It ties together discipleship and vocation, suggesting that vocation is an integral part of all Christian discipleship rather than an optional add-on for the chosen few. It offers a holistic picture of how to achieve vocational discernment, combining resources relating to personality and gifts, the church's tradition and current scholarship, and Methodist identity with opportunities for practical engagement. In particular, in terms of the aims of this conference, it encourages all participants to see theology as a natural, normal activity which every Christian can and should engage in. In defining outcomes in terms of greater engagement with the *missio Dei*, the nature and activity of God which embraces both church and world (Bosch 1991:10), it has a clear mission focus.

However, the outline has an implicit but strong focus on the church as the primary context where vocation may be explored. This is in my view problematic because it suggests an unexamined assumption that the church is also the primary location of God's action; the process demands a stronger awareness of the interface between God's presence in the world and in the church. This correlates with a more practical difficulty. Although the report emphasises in principle that EDEV is intended to lead into a range of ministry, lay and ordained, its detailed proposals seem primarily to be concerned with resourcing those who wish to candidate for ordained ministry.

2. Developing a process

When I was asked to develop EDEV as a resource for the Methodist Church in the West Midlands, I sought a process that would build on the strengths of the outline offered in the initial report while

moving away from its implicit ordination-centred focus. I also found that the report set relatively high academic demands, which excluded those who lacked the academic background or the time to undertake formal study of the kind suggested in the report. The process that is emerging seems to capture the enthusiasm of lay people and empower them to engage with God's presence in a diverse range of contexts. Participants are invited to join an EDEV group, normally with the guidance of two facilitators. They meet monthly for about eighteen months. This period splits into three sections of roughly six months each. In the first section, group members are invited to reflect together on where each of them has been with God. They then use a range of worksheets and materials looking at topics such as journaling, methods of theological reflection, ways of integrating their understanding of culture and faith, social location, resources for vocational discernment and so on. These resources are designed to enable participants to try out the different approaches for themselves, and are drawn from a gradually expanding bank of material available to facilitators on our local EDEV website.

Towards the end of this section, participants are asked to begin considering the location in which they would like to undertake the observational encounter. This opportunity for immersion in a particular context is the central plank of the second section, and perhaps of the whole process, because it enables them to use the more theoretical input of the first section to resource their own reflection on the place they choose to observe and what they find there. The group continues to meet, but the focus changes to offer each participant the space to present what they are discovering through their observational encounter and to reflect together on it. It's a model which acknowledges the significance of the individual's journey while enabling each participant to share his or her own experience with others engaged in a similar process.

The third section invites participants to engage, at whatever academic level is appropriate, with the thinking of others about the area they have already explored for themselves. This might mean attending a course or doing some formal on-line learning, or it might mean having a series of conversations with someone experienced in the field, or doing some guided reading around the topic, ideally from faith-based and secular perspectives. Once again, they are encouraged to share their research with the group. This, the final part of the process, provides participants with the space to discern whether this is the right direction for their service at the moment, and to find a suitable long-term opportunity for engagement in their chosen field of work.

Underlying all three sections is the question about what it means to do all this as Methodists. (Thus far, no-one from another denomination has undertaken the process; it will be interesting to add other

perspectives to this question as and when it occurs). This strand of the report reflects a renewed sense that Methodism has distinctive ideas to contribute to the life of the wider church, which I hear in other statements coming from our central offices too. The problem of describing Methodist identity has been with us for some time (see Beck 2000:22f.) and the EDEV process offers a formal approach to the question, through means such as study days, and an informal invitation to visit churches of other denominations and see what the differences are.

3. Analysis of selected aspects of the process

3.1 The structure of the process.

I have tried to discourage description of EDEV as 'a course'. A course, in my view, has a definite structure and a particular, pre-defined outcome. Those who follow our 'Faith and Worship' course, for example, will work through its 17 units and, on completion, will become fully-accredited local preachers. I find the notion of being a fully-accredited vocational explorer an odd one. Thus the outcome of EDEV is described very loosely: by the end of the process, participants are expected to have developed sufficient understanding of themselves as God's people to be able to discern where God is calling them to serve, and to follow that call with confidence, whether it takes them inside or outside the church. This approach depends on an understanding of God's universal presence, and of God's calling to participate in God's work as open-ended and diverse. Within the process, I have described the three main sections and given an overview of key themes, but as far as possible, the content from month to month is decided by the participants and facilitators themselves, so that they take responsibility for learning what they need to know, as mature disciples.

3.2 Resourcing vocational discernment

Work in this area is rooted in theological reflection on the breadth of God's grace in giving gifts of personality, character and skill to God's people. This seems to be the best starting-point for various reasons. Often people need to move beyond a traditional understanding of vocation as something that belongs only to church workers, doctors and teachers; the open nature of God's call comes as a revelation to some. Others find that an exploration of God's grace liberates them from a misplaced modesty which makes it difficult to accept that they could claim to be gifted at anything. On this basis, participants are offered a range of resources to help them begin to name their gifts. Many have never encountered the concept of social location, and are surprised to discover the links between their upbringing and background and the way they think and evaluate ideas. Most are attracted by Francis Dewar's notion that each of us has a special and unique calling which enables us to integrate who we are and what we do in order to enrich and release others (Dewar 1991:),

alongside the more general senses of vocation which Dewar identifies.

3.3 Integrating faith and culture

With a process such as EDEV where the aim is to enable participants to find ways of engaging with the community, it is important to have some sense of how to explore the interface between faith, culture and experience. The art of theological reflection is key here, and participants are able to explore a variety of methods to achieve this. Because my own background is in Biblical studies, some of the material prepared to resource this aspect of the process draws on methods which integrate the social context of the reader with a Biblical text. Much of the work that I find really convincing in this area comes from African scholars. For example, participants are offered an introduction to the contextual bible study method developed by Gerald West (West 2001:595), and to the inculturation hermeneutics of Justin Ukpong and other West African scholars (Ukpong 2001:11). This latter method depends on a holistic analysis of religious, economic, social and political aspects of a given situation, creating a lens through which to read Biblical texts. It enables an interface between academic reading of a text, for these purposes drawing on the EDEV notes, and the 'ordinary reading' which is so fruitful in contemporary African study. Ukpong's original intention is to establish the African context as the subject of interpretation, by which I take him to mean that this information is primary, brought to bear on the text, rather than the other way round; it seems to me quite possible to use a specific non-academic Western culture in the same way. The interface between cultural analysis and Biblical text is dynamic; Ukpong writes 'The goal of interpretation is the actualisation of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation' (Ukpong 2001:24). Thus the purpose of this method is to resource ordinary readers of the Bible to become familiar with an approach drawn from academic theology in order to support their own reading of the Bible with the aim of transformation.

3.4 Observational Encounter

The second stage of the process revolves round an observational encounter in a setting of the participant's choice. In many respects, this is the most important part of the whole process, enabling to test out their learning from the first stage and to evaluate whether their sense of God's direction is correct. The approach taken in this stage draws partly on insights from contemporary sociological research. The role of participant observer, developed as a tool in modern ethnography, is one that offers the opportunity to take part in a context while seeking to understand its characteristic culture; to analyse as well as to get involved. It asks observers to increase their awareness of the details of

their environment, which would normally go unnoticed, and to seek to be 'outsiders', assessing a situation, as well as 'insiders' playing their part (Spradley 1980:55f.). This set of skills is important for an EDEV participant exploring a new situation because it enables her/him to 'read' what is going on in greater detail, though the key difference is that her/his alert attention to the detail of the context will enable her/him to be sensitive to God's presence and the possibilities for her/him to take part in God's work there.

During this stage, people continue to use the EDEV group as a safe space for sharing their insights and evaluating them within a peer group who are working to the same goal. This goes beyond simple exploration of what has been done to a deeper analysis of call, with careful attention to the detail that reveals God's presence. This kind of evaluation is very much part of Methodist tradition in assessing the authenticity of someone's vocation; we expect to hear the story of their call, with a deep sense that they can do no differently if they are to maintain their integrity towards themselves and God. It is not an easy thing to do, as anyone will know who has ever publicly given an account of their call to ministry within our church; this is why the safe space of the group is a good context to explore a fledgling sense of vocation, among friends who can be trusted to be appropriately critical. Thus the participant observation leads to a profound analysis of one's own place within the context and within God's plan.

4. Conclusion

At the heart of early Methodist life were the class meetings, where Christians met regularly to explore their growth in faith together. An EDEV group in some ways recovers this model because it enables participants to explore and grow; and it's interesting that the only EDEV group to have finished the process thus far wishes to continue to meet on an occasional basis because of the depth of fellowship engendered. But EDEV is a process with an end in view; the hope is that people will emerge from the process with a renewed sense of call to engage with God's mission in a specific context, thus enriching both their own discipleship and the life of church and world.

Bibliography

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