

## 5+ Rural Learning Network: Bath & Wells Diocese, School of Formation

Steve Annandale from the School of Formation facilitates the Learning Network, and explains how the sessions work.

The model I use for facilitating a session is based on the action learning principles of Reg Revans, which I experienced as a member of an action learning set when I worked for the NHS in South West England.

The process I use is as follows:

- About two weeks before a meeting I email the members reminding them of the date and asking them to arrive having considered the joys and tribulations of their ministry since we last met.
- We meet in Wells, agreed with the group as a convenient venue. There is tea/coffee on arrival. We sit in comfortable chairs around a low table. We have a flipchart and on it is written the process as a reminder.
- We begin at 11:00 with **checking in**. This involves everyone, bar the facilitator, talking about their joys and tribulations since we last met. Sometimes this involves updating us on a topic/issue from last time but this is not obligatory. Everyone has three or four minutes for this in turn. We listen and questions for clarification can be asked at the end.
- During this I both make notes and listen for potential topics/issues to focus on later in the morning. I ask myself *'What question is at the heart of what is being spoken about?'*
- Around 11:20 we agree, *'Who will have one of the up to three focus slots today?'* I invite members either to volunteer for a focus slot or to ask another member to be a focus because there is something in what they have heard from them which resonates with their own situation. (Sometimes I have had to encourage someone to be a focus by picking up something they said. In the early meetings I had to do this to get three focus slots, now I do not have to as people readily ask for a slot or ask someone else.)
- At about 11:30 we begin the first **focus slot**, which can have up to 30 minutes, so we can fit three in before 13:00.
- When each of the three slots has been completed we close with prayer.
- A sandwich lunch, cake, fruit and fruit juice/coffee/tea follows and we talk over lunch.
- Members are usually on their way again by 13:30/13:45.

Each focus slot involves:

- The person owning the issue speaks about it for up to ten minutes. Everyone listens with no interruptions, unless it is for clarification to help understand the issue.
- As they reach the end of the description of the issue the person says *'so the question I am asking is how do I ...'* Sometimes I have to remind them to do this, but this is now rare.
- Next is a **round of appreciations**. In turn we each say something which expresses our appreciation of what we have heard. People say what moves them. This has included, *'I really admire what you have tried so far and the prayerful way you are approaching it,'* or, *'That is complex; I appreciate how you have explained it.'* The facilitator joins in with this.
- Next it is **question time**. Everyone can now question the person in focus. These are to improve or challenge the person's thinking, and bring a fresh or different perspective to the issue. Questions should be open questions and not be solutions dressed up as problem. In the early meetings I had to ask the questioner to rephrase the question usually because it was a closed question. If I see a solution in disguise as a question I say so! Questions now just flow. We do not go around the room in turn; we just pose questions. The facilitator poses questions too. This has helped the group to learn the 'right' kind of questions to ask.
- During question time there is no discussion! The person in focus simply writes down the questions as they are asked, sometimes asking for us to slow down so they can write! Often we generate 20/30 questions in about 10 minutes. If there is silence I maintain it, as it often

means people are thinking. If someone tries to discuss a question I stop them. Eventually there is a natural silence so I say, *'I think we are done for now.'*

- We then have **reaction time**. I ask the person in focus to review the list of questions and to highlight those that particularly struck them as being either insightful or useful. They then may think aloud about what they have picked out.
- I ask the group if they have a final question or two to add to the list.
- I always close a focus slot by asking the person to say what they think they will do next. Sometimes it is enough to say for them to say, *'I'll take these questions away and work on them further.'*

#### About Steve Annandale:

Steve graduated in business studies and then qualified as an accountant but decided his working life lay in education and training. Following a variety of national and regional training roles in the water industry and the NHS, Steve has worked extensively in consultancy. His work has taken him around the globe and to all parts of UK. His clients have included World Health Organisation, Department of Health, Strategic Health Authorities, NHS Trusts and Primary Care Trusts.

Alongside this he began working with Bath and Wells Diocese in 1999 running parish away days, leading parish weekends and providing lay training courses. In 2005 he helped found the School of Formation, and joined as a member of staff in 2007. Within the School of Formation, Steve has a focus on whole church development, working locally with parishes, benefices and local ministry teams to discern ways forward, to develop relationships and to enhance collaborative ministry and team work.