

MISSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A deeper look



Diocese of Canterbury
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Missional Learning Communities

MLCs enable us to find God's way forward as churches in mission in our changing contexts and changing world.

Their purpose is to help us to **learn together in mission** in a way which **changes the culture** of our churches.

The culture we wish to see is one of *following Jesus together in the world.*

Purpose: why engage with MLCs?

Culture is ‘the way things are around here’. It has famously been said that ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’. Unless the culture changes, significant change will not happen, no matter how good the strategy.

Theology: what is God doing?

As we leave Christendom, we face a new mission context. The Church must now *adapt* in order to ‘join in with what God is doing’.

MLCs rest on the fundamental assumption that God is working in the world in ways which are creative, reconciling, saving and life-giving. Father, Son and

Holy Spirit are at work in the *missio Dei* in the world that God loves.

Theory: how do MLCs actually work?

Culture change is necessarily *adaptive* and not technical in nature. This means we must change rather than seek existing ‘solutions’. Adaptive change requires sustained processes, rather than a programme or a set of tools, which imply technical approaches to change.

MLCs are based on a set of closely related theories of systemic culture change, especially Family Systems and Open Systems theory.

Family Systems

This is the basis for the idea of ‘the non-anxious leader’ as the prerequisite for systemic, cultural change. In our context non-anxious leadership derives from ‘God-centred self-definition’, which in turn comes from inhabiting spiritual practices (or a ‘rule of life’). Family Systems theory emphasises the *homeostasis* (equilibrium) of any system – systems are evolved to maintain things just the way they are. It follows that, unless change is achieved at a systemic level, the system will simply revert back to how it has been (e.g. when the Vicar leaves).

Open Systems

This stresses the critical idea that the resources any living system needs for its survival are *beyond and outside it*. In this theory the ‘primary task’ of the system is defined as ‘the task it must perform if it is to survive’. This is the system’s ‘mission’. Where the primary task is defined too narrowly, or in terms of members’ needs, the survival of the organization becomes precarious. This is precisely the position the Church is in now.

Theologically, the Church’s ‘primary task’ (in the Open Systems sense) is to engage in the *missio Dei*, the saving work of God the Holy Spirit in the world God loves. This insight underpins the MLC process.

Adaptive leadership

On the basis that any system is perfectly evolved and aligned to *achieve the results it presently produces*, leadership for change involves actions such as: creating enough disequilibrium for there to be the possibility of change; working with resulting conflict; encouraging experimentation; adopting a position on the boundary so that the system may be ‘open’, and so on.

Practices that become habits

Deep and lasting culture change can happen through the adoption of new practices which

become *habits*. The Six Spiritual Practices (which could be called ‘holy habits’) are both ‘faithfully disruptive’ (within a systemic understanding) and missional (world facing).

Summary

Together, such insights offer an account of how and why deep culture change towards ‘following Jesus together in the world’ can be achieved in Canterbury Diocese and its congregations.

Research and MLCs

Recent research across four English dioceses indicates the following correlations where churches have followed a similar process for 3 – 5 years

**UK, Partnership for Missional Church process – 82 participating churches and 109 respondents:
independent research published in June 2018**

71% of respondents: significant impact on lay discipleship

76% taken up new ministry roles

90% of churches formed new missional partnerships

72% claimed a positive impact on new partnerships where faith an explicit part

Stories, including changed clergy leadership styles as clergy take up their role of leaders in mission

Source: Partnership for Missional Church – an evaluation for Church Mission Society, the TI Group 2018

Longer term study in the USA over 15 years indicated further correlations.

USA, Partnership for Missional Church – a similar process to MLCs which uses the Six Practices

17% median increase in worship attendance

77% correlation to longevity of pastorate

64% correlation to increase in conversions

74% correlation to increase in lay leaders

73% correlation to increased participation young adults

62% correlation to new constituency base

Source: Church Innovations USA

Outcomes: what will happen?

The outcomes of MLCs will be

- we listen well to each other
- we have more conversations with those outside the church
- we notice what God is doing in the world – and are able to put this into words
- leadership in the church becomes more shared
- discipleship and mission are expressed in the world
- witness becomes natural, and public mission more focused, so we don't wear ourselves out
- we learn what it means for us to ‘follow Jesus together in the world’ today.
- God grows his Church in numbers, depth and vitality

Following Jesus together in the world.

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We are looking to grow the Church in numbers, depth and vitality. We want renewed ministry and life-giving community partnerships.

These are the changes in our culture that we want.

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