

Towards an Intentional Learning Community

All Saints aspires to be an intentional learning community, rooted in worship, whose primary purpose is to form men and women for ministry and mission as licensed or ordained ministers in the Church of England. It is an inclusive community which welcomes diversity in all aspects of its life, grounded in the wide-lived experience of the working life of both students and staff.

All Saints recognises that pluriform factors influence a community of learning, some encouraging and others limiting, therefore as a community we strive to maintain an openness to God revealed in Jesus Christ, working towards the kingdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. In claiming our communal ethos not only to be intentional, but also aspirational, and something to work towards, we constantly lift our eyes to new horizons, dissatisfied with our *status quo*.

Our community places the responsibility for learning firmly with each individual adult learner. This educational position ensures that it is both our claim to be and intention to become, better reflective practitioners. This approach to individual learning appreciates the necessity of a wide range of teaching and learning styles; no one teaching method is universally adopted or rejected, but when learning together, an environment in which dialogue and conversation are normative is preferred.

This learning is enhanced by several distinct yet overlapping features of life in the *All Saints* community: work; biblical study; prayer and worship; ministerial placements; preaching; a concern for those who are vulnerable, marginalised or oppressed; and individual learning plans mapped against university accredited programmes. These different elements are enveloped by an environment which affirms good practice in IT, a mixed economy of ministerial practice birthing practical theologians skilled in reflective practice - a distinctive feature of *All Saints*.

The context of work

In offering predominantly part-time courses of study and formation, *All Saints* creates a community of learners with a diverse background of employment. For the majority of its members this employment is the biggest demand on their time and shapes a community which is primarily outward focused in its daily ministry rather than inwardly ecclesiastical.

Biblical study

All Saints encourages both an individual and corporate rule of life, one of whose key components is regular and structured engagement with scripture. New students are expected to read the whole of the Bible during their first two years of study, and where possible all students undertake a biblical studies module in each year of their training.

Prayer and worship

The *Common Worship Lectionary* is used to underpin corporate worship. All teaching at *All Saints* is in the context of worship, predominantly student led and designed (both individually and in groups), with appreciative and critical feedback from staff and peers. Worship at *All Saints* is for the glory of God yet at the same time every opportunity is taken to reflect upon this experience together. The richness and opportunities offered by *Common Worship Daily Prayer* are explored and a rule of life encouraged which places personal prayer at its heart.

Placements

Everyone at *All Saints* has an ongoing ministerial context; all the tutors are experienced practitioners, ordained or licensed in a particular ministerial context, and every student is continually on placement with a Supervising Minister responsible to *All Saints* either in their home parish, a specific placement parish, or chaplaincy context. During term time these placements make up at least five hours a week of each student's time allocated programme of study and formation.

Preaching

Preaching is a major component of *All Saints* life. It is integral to both Biblical and practical modules with assessed opportunities for development in some, and skills such as voice in others. In both home and external placements students are expected to preach regularly. In community worship a range of preachers and styles is included.

Concern for those who are vulnerable

The Trustees of *All Saints*, as its governing body, ensures that we have in place safeguarding arrangements that reflect the importance of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and venerable adults in accordance with statutory requirements. All Ordinands, and any independent learners or Readers, who study beyond the basic six module programme, develop this understanding theologically by exploring issues of justice among all those who are marginalised in society.

Individual learning plans

For a community called to form men and women for mission as licensed and ordained ministers the curricula offered by a variety of accredited university programmes allows *All Saints* to design pathways which are best suited for each individual. In this way the needs of the national Church complement the challenges present by individual vocations.

Virtual learning

All Saints understands both the importance of, and our dependence on, a high quality virtual learning environment which facilitates learning with *All Saints* over a large geographical area, the bulk of which includes the founding Dioceses of Chester, Liverpool and Manchester, but also able to serve many other areas, currently including Blackburn, Derby, Sodor and Man, and Southwell and Nottingham. At the heart of the formational experience of *All Saints* are residential events, weekend teaching and placements. Whilst acknowledging the value of the celebrity practitioner and the opportunities offered by video links and conferencing, *All Saints* values more highly the learning environment created by actual engagement of learners in the same room. To this end *All Saints*

normally preferences local practitioners with significant experience and strong academic qualification.

Mixed economy

As part of the intentional practice of forming those for licensed and ordained ministry together, those training to be Readers spend two-thirds of their time in mixed groups with Ordinands, while Ordinands spend on average 50% of their time in groups with trainee Readers. *All Saints* is committed to both reflective and collaborative approaches to mission and ministry. This collaborative approach extends beyond *All Saints*, since the use of local clergy and ministers for both teaching and placements, ensures that all students and staff are continually developing their ministerial network for future practice in their own region including preparation for engagement in Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer ministry.

Distinctiveness

All Saints seeks to be a community of practical theologians who, to borrow phrases from the work of Bonnie Miller-McLemore, sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday analysing of their theology and practice as leaders, teachers and students in their communities, supported by the resources of the academy. We believe that learning happens through the connection between classroom and work / ministerial experience.

One process that encourages these connections is theological reflection. In order to provide both a homogenous experience and common language, one particular approach is preferred, the four source model. This model is being developed by staff and students of *All Saints* through our own research and experience together. Recognising the struggles that others have had and reflecting on our own research, *All Saints* intentionally threads the experience and practice of theological reflection through the Course. Using this model enables people to be honest with and take seriously their own experience, embrace the whole of Christian tradition as valuable, engage critically with the culture in which we live and be confident about their own theological position. We encourage each other to invite different theological positions into dialogue.

With John Hull we affirm that theological reflection has to be more than being able to write well and therefore we place an emphasis with Ordinands on being able to lead a group of people consisting of peers and staff in theological reflection towards implications for action. We find this practical assessment to be both revealing about people's skills and understanding, as well as giving confidence to use theological reflection in the wider world rather than just the classroom.

We affirm that significant life-changing learning is not sequential. The staff and student experiences of 'light bulb' moments of insight into the process of theological reflection, paves the way for further research at *All Saints*, and our foundation as a centre of excellence in ministerial formation with theological reflection. All of the core academic staff have diverse research interests which support and enrich the learning environment.

Summary

All Saints exists to change people for the benefit of the Church and the kingdom.

Students come and go but the body of staff remains. It is our responsibility to carry the vision of *All Saints* from one cohort of students to the next. In working towards an intentional learning community the data we gather from one year to the next and our reflection on that experience, creates a community which is ultimately reflexive.

Sources

For more on sustaining a life of reflective faith in the everyday see page 5 of:

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, (Ed.). (2012). *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

For more on the four source model of theological reflection see:

Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer. (1994). *The art of theological reflection*. New York: Crossroad.

For a conversation about struggling with theological reflection in the curriculum see page 31 of:

Graeme Smith. (2008). Something That Can be Learnt but Not Taught: Teaching Theological Reflection through Enquiry-based Learning. *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 5.1, 20-32.

For more on John Hull see:

Hull, John M. (2014). *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission*: SCM Press.