

## **Life together: reflections on SWMTC's corporate life**

### *Preamble*

SWMTC strives to be a community with a vibrant corporate life, in which each student is given the opportunity to grow more fully in the image of God.

As the body of Christ, we celebrate our unity through our diversity, drawing students and staff from all traditions within the Church. Our corporate life is rooted in prayer and worship, providing a place where all are continually formed as disciples of God, given space to respond to God's call upon them, and encouraged to take their place in the kingdom.

It is our hope to be a community characterised by mutuality, respect and a deep valuing of difference. We work hard to cultivate practices of hospitality in our worship, social life, and intellectual endeavours.

Through this rhythm of shared learning, of coming together to give thanks and praise to the risen Lord, and through our sacramental life, we provide students with a profound experience of community that forms all of us as both disciples and public ministers.

### *A lived community*

From the very start of our programmes, students participate in corporate worship, and undertake educational and formational exercises that help them to understand and appreciate each other's callings and gifts. These include lectures, seminars, group work, discussions and shared hospitality.

In addition, our ordinands meet six times a year in tutor groups. These establish a 'rule of life', involving regular prayer and worship together, as well as a commitment to nurturing one another's growth in Christ.

As well as forming community in small groups, students have a say in the shape of our wider corporate life as an institution. This is through, for example, student representation on our Board of Studies, and the constructive work of our Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC).

In these ways and more, we hope from the outset to supplant the individualistic and fragmentary assumptions that are so much a feature of contemporary society with a model of community that is compelling, welcoming and open. That way, our embodied practices tell a countercultural story about what it is to come together as a community bound by a common commitment to loving service.

### *Life together*

All of our students undertake group work at every residential, as well as engaging in a range of social activities and studying with a mix of people drawn from across the SWMTC community.

A key component of our work in building community among the ordinand cohort is our annual Easter School, where the rhythms of corporate life are shared for an entire week, on a single campus. This is a moment when students often grasp the significance of their 'place' in SWMTC, and we witness significant growth as a result of it.

Both Readers in Training and ordinands have regular weekend residentials, which provide a further opportunity to grow together. Readers in Training have six of these per year, two of which last for a whole weekend, while ordinands have six weekend-long periods in residence.

What's more, in order to foster a deeper connection between our various cohorts, one of these residential periods is shared between ordinands and Readers in Training. It involves a considerable number of joint teaching sessions, as well as socialising and worship as a gathered community.

This helps students to appreciate the value of different callings within the body of Christ, and to begin modelling collaborative approaches to ministry, in the relative security of the training context. In this way, we help them to foster habits and dispositions that are crucial to their own formation, and which will be essential to the flourishing of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Integration*

Reflective practice is a difficult notion to make sense of, theologically speaking. But it serves as helpful shorthand to describe the kind of ongoing reflection that characterises the work of our students in integrating their experience of SWMTC's corporate life with their growth as individual disciples and ministers.

The key locus of such integration is the student learning journal, which both ordinands and Readers in Training complete. This is an opportunity to reflect on experience, learn from one's mistakes, and identify, by articulation and further reflection, best practice for the future.

More than this, the learning journal is a place where students begin to see the various strands of training, education and formation that are the bases of their maturation as Christ's followers coalesce within the context of their shared experience of SWMTC's community. In this respect, the journal is the means by which we are able to evidence all that we have said about SWMTC's corporate life, and the importance we attach to that – because, in essence, this is something that must be experienced, seen and *felt* in order to be fully understood.

To put that another way, while the journal is important in so far as it *indicates and evidences* the significance of our corporate life as a community of formation, it is the communicative practices of that community itself that represent the core of formation. We are, that is to say, our corporate practices; in other words, they are constitutive of the community called SWMTC.

#### *Worship: the locus of community*

To make sense of this, it is perhaps helpful to return to the subject of worship. This, as Laurence Paul Hemming writes in *Worship as Revelation* (2008), is properly the place where the Church's common experience is lived, where it is made most real, because it is the moment in which such experience is brought into the presence of the risen Lord.

Thus, we might say that worship is at the very core of our corporate life, because it is from our shared worship within the Anglican tradition that all of our other corporate practices flow. It is in and through worship that we inculcate a disposition towards relationality in our students, so that their encounters with each other are characterised by respect and care, by inclusivity and a commitment to authenticity.

For this reason, we pay careful attention to helping students craft worship that sets the conditions for an appropriate coming-into God's presence as a gathered community. There are disappointments, of course, because that is the nature of a community of apprentices, of people who are growing in Christ. But the commitment to authenticity in worship stems from our commitment to the corporate nature of our institutional life, and indeed feeds such a commitment. Worship is, you might say, the beating heart of all that we do.

We are therefore proud of the rich diversity of worship led by our student population. This establishes an environment in which there is a genuine openness to the other, a deep mutuality, and a commitment to the corporate working-out of what God calls us to be, as a community and as individuals.

By way of an example: we hold a welcome service for both Readers in Training and ordinands at the first residential of each academic session. In this liturgy, they are prayed for, welcomed into the community and sign a book that has the names of all our staff and students, past and present. This helps new students establish their place within the institution-as-Christ's-body, and reminds existing students of our identity as such a body – something that is reinforced through the ongoing dialectic between our corporate worship and our life together. In addition, such *praxis* enables all of us to understand our formational journey as being inherently tied to the relationships established within SWMTC.

#### *Concluding remarks*

These reflections indicate the corporate nature of SWMTC's life, and name some of the practices that are at the heart of our life together. In essence, they remind us of

the deep valuing of every member of our community, given clearest expression in our corporate worship but seen across our common life.

This is the defining characteristic of SWMTC, therefore: that, as an institution, our every activity is predicated upon a thoroughgoing commitment to helping individual disciples find their way to God, within the context of a community that is committed to sharing in God's love and justice and making the kingdom here on earth.

**From an ex-student:**

*"One of the most remarkable aspects of SWMTC is its sense of community. Perhaps because of its very nature as a regional training course, time spent in community, either for single days or longer, is very precious, and never taken for granted. Relationships are built quickly and sustained at a deep level and over time, long after formal training has ended. SWMTC has a strong sense of family. Together, students, staff, families and friends of the course build strong communal bonds. All of this is sustained by the ethos of the course with its strong worshipping heart and very real sense of being part of the body of Christ. As an ex-student, I have learned much from this way of being community and have carried this with me into parish life."*