The Mint House

Using restorative practice to nurture a healthy church culture: some thoughts on ways of getting started

A consistent question raised in early conversations within the churches restorative practice network has been 'how best to get started?' Wise advice from colleagues in Australia was to start by introducing restorative approaches in a small way as part of something uncontentious, from where their influence can percolate. The suggestions offered here aim to follow that advice.

We welcome your feedback on what's here. Are there some approaches that feel more or less helpful for your context; some that you've tried and would recommend (or not!); some that you'd be eager to find out more about; or some you'd like to add? Please email Joy (joy@minthouseoxford.co.uk) if you have anything to share with us.

Check-ins and check-outs

Check-ins and check-outs are common and powerful routines in restorative practice. Used at the start and end of sessions, they give everyone involved a chance to express how they are feeling or something that's going on for them before 'getting down to business' then (as the session closes) to share something they've taken from the session.

Check-in questions can be as simple as: 'use one word to describe how you feel today?' 'what's something you're looking forward to?' or (on a lighter note) 'what song or lyric matches your mood today?' Check-outs might ask 'what's one thing you're taking away from this session?'

Sharing is never compulsory: there should always be a chance to 'pass.' More often than not, however, people willingly take part, building trust and understanding of each other. Opportunities for use might include small groups, prayer circles, leadership meetings or young people's work.

Exploring the Bible using a restorative lens

Using this approach, participants are invited to take on roles. The group then uses the restorative questions as a framework for reflecting on the passage, exploring what happened for each participant; what they were thinking and feeling at the time and have been thinking and feeling since; who was affected by the incident and how; what they need to feel better; and what needs to happen to move forwards. Many Bible stories lend themselves to this approach, which can present a passage in a whole new light!

Use listening circles to explore specific topics, plan and reflect on events

Michael Wood, an Anglican Priest and restorative justice facilitator (author, coach and more!) in Melbourne has kindly shared examples of how talking circles can be used in different church settings. These include planning for and reflecting on events. Michael's

guidance on this can be found here: Talking circle examples from parishes (Michael Wood). See here for an example of a church using listening circles to help in the discernment process when calling a new minister. Listening Circle Brochure

Restorative teaching tools

Games can be a helpful way to introduce ideas, develop and consolidate skills and build connection. These might fit well into church youth work, all age worship or church time away. Lindsey Pointer, Kathleen McGoey and Haley Farrar's invaluable guide, *The Little Book of Restorative Teaching Tools* (2020), gives helpful examples plus advice on game design, with other examples and guidance available on their website: Browse Games | Restorative Teaching Tools

Strengthen storytelling in church life

Storytelling is at the heart of Biblical tradition and also core to restorative practice, speaking to our imaginations, inspiring empathy and more. As storyteller and restorative facilitator Hannah Moore writes: "*Stories can support us to live, grow, change and blossom together, especially when they are offered in facilitated spaces as part of a way of working together that unlocks our creativity and imagination".* Creating opportunities for people to share their own stories or reflect on stories told by others can help to strengthen the web of connections between us. This might form part of worship, small group meetings, youth work, church socials or church work in the community.

Working on a church inclusion policy

Developing a church inclusion policy might perhaps be a route for exploring restorative approaches. Such policies often focus on complying with the law but equally can be a place to tease out what the church will do to help people feel welcome and safe and manage differences where they arise.

Using appreciative enquiry

Honouring what has gone before can play an important part in inspiring openness to new ways of doing things. Appreciative enquiry can be a means to do that. This involves inviting participants to share a time or occasion when they feel the church has been at its best and what it was that made this time stand out that would be good to carry forward. Appreciative enquiry might for example have a role in church consultations or discussion of future plans.

Reflection aids for restorative leaders

Not so much an approach but we hope a helpful resource for church leaders looking to nurture healthy cultures. The reflections remind us, for example, that the changes we aspire to bring about need modelling and require 'patience not pace'. Reflection 8 reminds us that 'there are many different ways of introducing restorative practice and encouraging its spread, and that we can all start somewhere.' The reflection aids can be found here: https://www.minthouseoxford.co.uk/reflection-aids

Participants in two network sessions, held in September and October 2026, added their own rich insights on ways of getting started. Here are some further ideas that they shared.

Using an external course or publication

Using an external course or publication can be a useful discussion-opener without it feeling as though any one person is pushing for a particular approach. The six-week Bible Study series to be published shortly by the network, *Joining with God's Restorative Mission*, might be one such publication. The churches network website also lists many other resources that could be used for study and discussion. Churches Restorative Practice Network — The Mint House

Trusting the 5 restorative questions

Participants spoke of 'trusting the five restorative questions' to help work through situations:

- *What happened?*
- *What were you thinking and feeling at the time?*
- *What have you been thinking and feeling since?*
- *Who has been affected and how?*
- *What do you think is needed to make things right?*

Making the connection with safeguarding

Restorative practice has a close relationship with safeguarding. It has a valuable preventive role, creating safe spaces where everyone feels equally valued, respected and safe to voice concerns without fear of repercussions. Used appropriately, restorative approaches can help victims who disclose retain a sense of agency. Where a safeguarding issue has arisen, restorative practice can have a place in responding to the ripples of harm likely to be felt within the church community, and in supporting lesson learning. Beyond this, conflicts that are not about safeguarding can end up with the safeguarding lead because there is nowhere else for them to go. Given these connections, safeguarding, and safeguarding training, can be a good entry points for discussion and use of restorative principles and practices.

Setting expectations of how we'll be together: the role of covenant

Church covenants can be a helpful means of discussing, and agreeing, what it means to live at peace with one another. Several examples can be found of churches that commit to actively listening, remaining open to different perspectives, acknowledging harm, practising accountability, seeking repair and rebuilding trust when relationships break down.

Compassionate witnessing

Compassionate witnessing was commended as a helpful practice and discipline that has much in common with restorative practice and that is helpful to cultivate. Developed by US psychologist Dr Kaethe Weingarten and others for use in therapeutic settings, the approach

involves being fully present and listening to someone's story with kindness and without judgment and with no expectation of 'fixing' something. Through deep and empathetic listening, people are helped to feel heard and understood and to regain a sense of safety and community.

Using the restorative practice continuum

The restorative practices continuum featured here was welcomed as a helpful way of introducing restorative practice. This spans a range of practices from cultivating a restorative mindset to a formal conference or meeting.
About Restorative Practices — Practice Restorative

Building backwards

Most of the approaches in this note focus on preventive approaches on the left-hand side of the continuum. However, network participants recognised that restorative practice often first comes to attention in a crisis. Here the key is to 'build backwards,' not viewing the conflict as a 'one off' but instead using learning from the crisis to shape new ways of relating to each other.

And finally…

As well as highlighting possible 'start points,' participants shared some helpful principles, among these:

- *Learning a rhythm of constant encounter*: cultivating the practice of genuine, interested listening; striving to make restorative approaches a natural way of doing things, rather than sitting down and saying 'now we're going to do x, y or z.'
- Where an issue is likely to involve a challenging conversation, having the conversation *before* events make it necessary.
- Creating spaces where everyone has a voice and feels they can be themselves.
- Looking for shared values and things everyone can agree on.
- Treating people as people, not labels or positions. Being sensitive to, and addressing, power imbalances.
- Acknowledging that a conversation or process will involve pain and loss.

A final reflection was that restorative practice can be integrated into every part of church life, from worship and witness to governance to community work and relationships, to pastoral care, church engagement with public discourse, social justice and wider peacebuilding.