

# *are we there yet?*

## *building church teams that work*

**Verene Nicolas** has been working with Church of Scotland teams for the last nine years. She tells Susan Mansfield about the challenges facing our church family and how to overcome them.

### THE LONG READ

**A meeting with six participants is guaranteed to generate at least seven opinions. Where two or three are gathered, there will be an impassioned argument about the colour of the new church carpet. What we say in jest is often a wry reflection of the truth. There are many advantages in working together, but no one ever said it was easy.**

Verene Nicolas has worked as a trainer in teamwork and nonviolent communication for more than 20 years, and has worked with teams in the Church of Scotland since 2011. While there are challenges along the way, she believes that learning to work with others is a journey which takes us to the heart of who we are and one which, at its best, presents us with a new understanding of what it means to be the people of God.

Teamwork is a daily experience for increasing numbers of people in the Church of Scotland. Vacant parishes and a shortage of ministers, an emphasis on equipping lay people and new structures such as hub ministries all require more and more staff and volunteers in churches to work as part of teams.

Verene says it's important to acknowledge that this is a major cultural shift. The transition from the traditional parish minister towards a team-based model requires a significant shift in thinking and competencies. Moreover the training of ministers has not tended to include management or teamwork skills, and offering any such skills development for those in ministry, presbyteries or kirk sessions is a very recent phenomenon.

It would be a mistake to think that the skills needed to work well in a team are instinctive, or a matter of common sense, Verene says. When we rub up against other people, we discover the rough edges within ourselves. "We don't learn by osmosis how to become a team. It's an art. It requires a lot of attention to details and learning new skills and habits."

Teamwork is challenging because it takes us to the heart of who we are. Our reactions to other people are

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formed by a lifetime of experience and learned behaviour. Unlike our ancestors, for whom collaboration was a matter of life and death, we now live in a culture which favours individualism.

Verene says: "We might ask why we so often end up in situations where there is tension and conflict in the church family. In my understanding, the main reason is because we have developed what I call unhelpful habits of the heart and of the mind. There's a default mode of reacting in situations of stress and conflict that gets in the way of working well together. We judge, we self-blame, we project our own judgements on to other people and our hearts are constrained by defence mechanisms.

"Very few of us have grown up in families and in a society where we have 100 per cent trust that we matter as individuals. Family dynamics are often compounded with difficulties at school and we all end up with a fair amount of inner fragility. And so when we are in a church community, and there isn't a culture where it's safe to be yourself, to express yourself honestly and not be criticised, it is very difficult. We have been trained either to shut up, to silence what really matters to us, or to say it in a way that's very aggressive and will be difficult to receive. It's a fight or flight response."

Of course, the journey of self-awareness and of working through one's past experiences, is lifelong. But there are approaches we can learn, individually and collectively, which can help us work together more effectively. Verene says: "We can't change a culture by changing individuals. That takes too long. We can only change cultures by working on the collective, by making new agreements, and experimenting with new ways of working together."

## **A CLEAR VISION**

Verene believes good teamwork begins with a strong shared vision and sense of purpose, as well as clearly articulated shared values, but has found this to be less common in the Church than we might expect. "I find that, for many teams, that question is very unclear and difficult to resolve, and for a congregation even more so. It's a question that tends not to be asked. There is a lack of clarity about what the team—or the congregation—is called to be, what God's calling is for us now, in these times, in this parish. Without a purpose, without a clear mission, how do we orientate our decisions, how do we orientate our sense of where we are travelling together?"

"For me that question is even more critical when the Church is facing difficult times. How are we still relevant? Why are we here? What is God's calling for the Church in these times? It's a completely different answer from when the Presbyterian Church first began."

Until we can grasp our profound calling as the people of God, we will simply be like any other organisation. Verene says: "We are very good at engaging, making teas and welcoming refugees, engaging in nonviolent direct action against Trident

and gathering money for Christian Aid, and I'm absolutely not criticising any of that. However, for me, this is the easy part of being Church. The hard part of being Church is to create a community that is hospitable to the soul."

## **MAKING DECISIONS**

The Presbyterian tradition is often praised for its flat, non-hierarchical structure and democratic approach to decision-making. But Verene has doubts about how well this plays out in parish life. "I think that's a story distinct from the reality," she says. "I think there are still a lot of authority-based structures within the Church. In some of the parishes in which I've worked, it's very clear that people know they do not have decision-making power in a number of areas. If people don't feel that they have full ownership of how they are going to make their church thrive, then we have a model where there is some kind of authority higher up deciding for people below."

Decisions which are imposed from above will alienate people, but so will decisions based on a majority vote (as the current political situation demonstrates all too well). "In a vote, there are winners and there are losers. It takes a lot of energy to win. It takes a huge amount of energy to have lost. It creates resentment, it leaks trust, and it leads to a loss of diversity; it leaves too many people behind. It's a loss for the decision not to be enriched by the views of the minority, and it creates schism and disengagement. We can't afford to lose the wisdom that is contained in every single person's soul."

She says an alternative model of decision-making, which takes time to listen and understand all the viewpoints being expressed, can transform the way a decision is received. "We need to train ourselves and profoundly change our way of apprehending one another's views—to slow down, to listen, to have our ears tuned to hear the reasons why people think in a particular way. If we have the capacity to ask 'what is really mattering to them that I may have commonality with?' we can look at possible third options. 'You want this, I want that. Here is what matters to both of us. What can we do?'"

"It's a model where people feel much more a part of it, where they can trust that their views are taken into consideration. Their view might not be the one adopted: there's a difference between trusting that my view matters and that it's been heard, and my favourite option being the one that wins at the end of the day.


"But if people feel, at an intuitive level, that their voice is heard, they often relax in trying out something new, or stretch into something they really wouldn't like to see happen. They know, consciously or unconsciously, that their views have impacted the decision."

## **FEEDBACK**

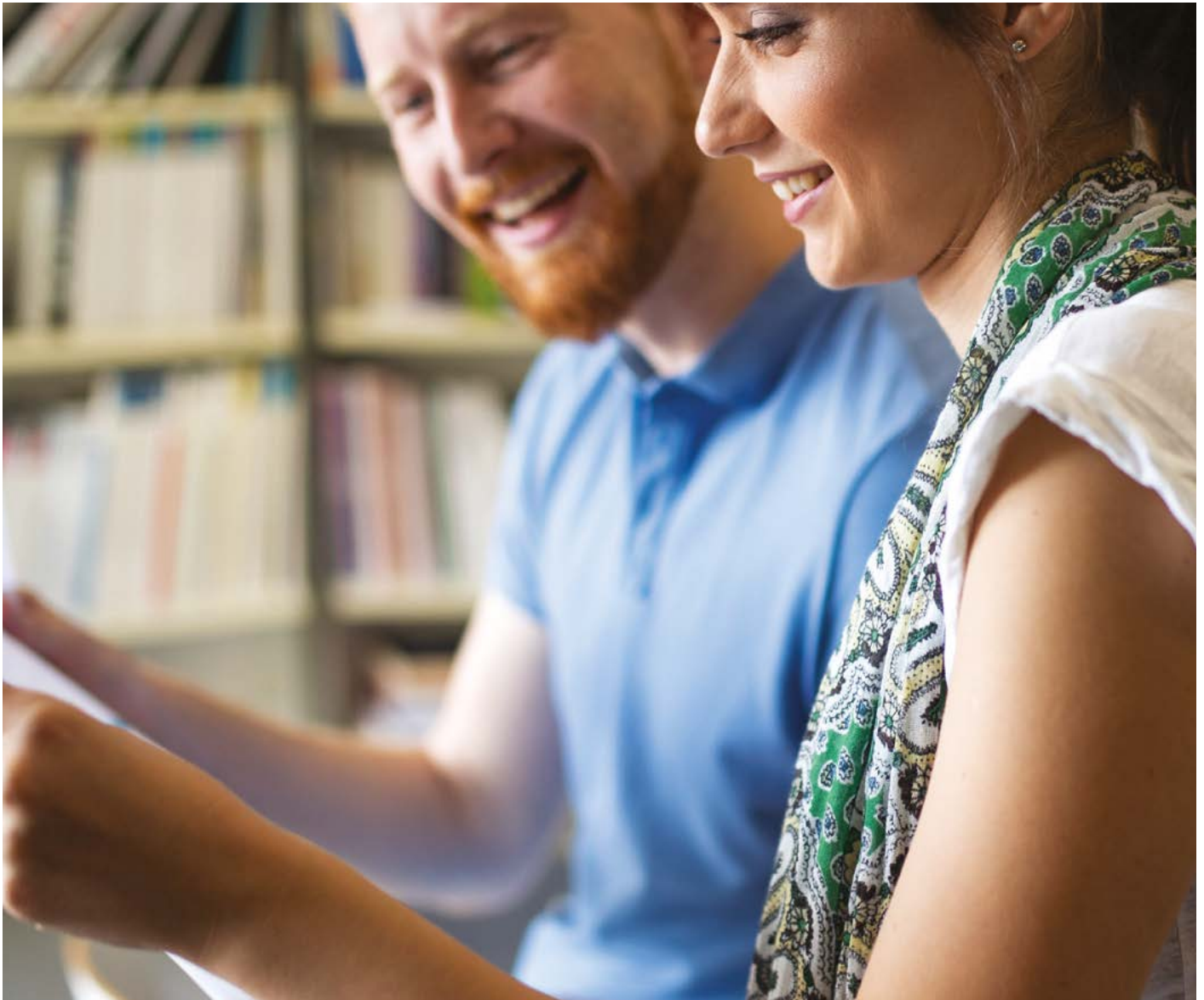
Verene believes that understanding the power dynamics in Church is crucial to enabling teamwork. "How we use power is really critical to understand in promoting collaboration," she says. "And there is very little reflection in the Church as

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to what we understand by power and how we use it. There is no critical understanding of the power that the minister has, for example, and whether or not there is accountability. That creates a lot of holes in the capacity of people to work well together because straight away there is an inequality of power.”

An important way in which to address this inequality, which doesn’t require a shift to a different leadership model, is to put in place a system of feedback by which members of a team can offer feedback to a leader, and the leader can hear and respond to their comments. A team agrees together on a framework for making and receiving feedback: how it’s done, how often, and how the person receiving the feedback will be supported.

“The problem is feedback can be very harsh to take,” Verene says. “The human heart and the human psyche are extremely vulnerable to feeling criticised, and to feeling that they don’t matter, and that makes it very, very hard for people to accept constructive feedback and to receive that as a gift for growth and learning. People need to be trained and equipped to give the feedback in a way that can be truly a gift—a gift to the

person themselves in their leadership capacity, but a gift for the group too.”

But there also needs to be an understanding of what feedback is, she says. “It isn’t necessarily a demand on a person to change or to do something. It’s a way of saying: ‘You’re doing something which is not working very well for me, I wanted to let you know it is having a particular impact on me and on the community, and maybe there is a particular request that you do something differently as a result.’ The person receiving that might need to weigh that up against other priorities. They might or might not choose to make a change.

“What’s critical is that people know you’ve heard them, you’ve heard the impact of your actions on them and taken that on board and you’ve made a decision as to what to do about it, and then you can continue to engage them in dialogue. It’s about trust. It’s about knowing my voice counts, that what lives within me has got a conduit for expression and that it is taken seriously. It’s safe to speak out without being punished.”

## **CONFLICT**



It's also important to revisit our understanding of conflict, which is something many fear and will try to avoid at all costs. "Conflict is inevitable," Verene says. "It's a fact of life because we are different, we have different opinions. In the Church we have little understanding about how we are going to engage with conflict, and people are not really trained in how to handle it.

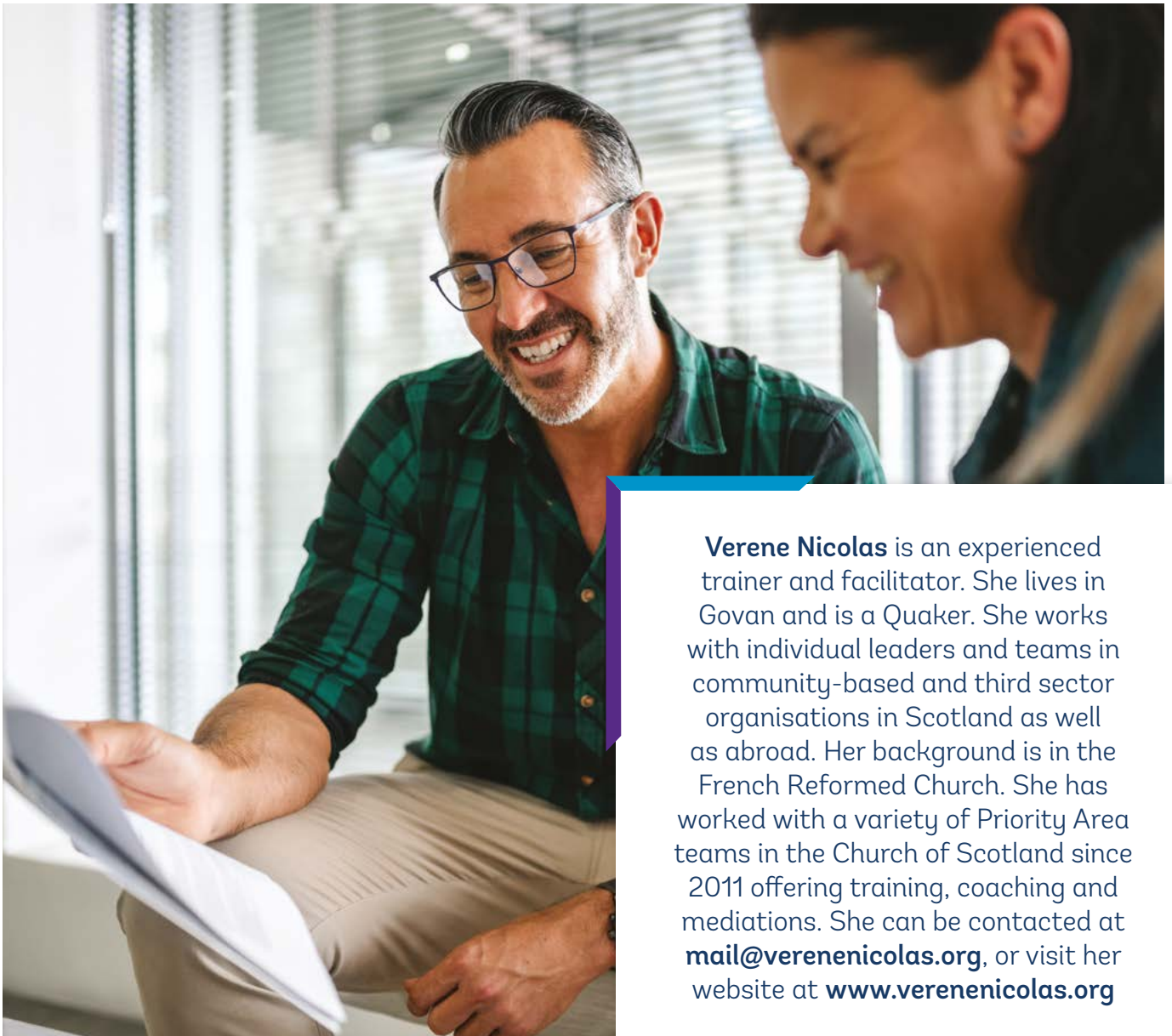
"Because we are traumatised to different degrees about our sense of mattering and belonging, the conflict re-ignites that early trauma and we get very scared, very guarded, very defensive. Most of us are not capable of embracing conflict, holding the emotional charge with compassion, and then moving into listening and dialogue and creatively thinking of new solutions."

It's important, she says, not to see conflict as something to be afraid of, or to suppress it when it arises. "Conflict is a gift to the people in conflict or to the community. It's just a piece of information, a piece of feedback that something's not working for somebody, or for the group as a whole. Therefore, if we shift our outlook from conflict being scary and something to avoid at all costs to conflict being a gift

which we need to embrace, everything changes. Why would we run away from a gift?

"It's through conflict that we reveal the richness of who we are, the differences in our personalities and ways of being. The diversity of our being is revealed through conflict, as well as through our gifts, our service, our actions. Actually, it's revealed in the biggest way through conflict, because that's where we express most vulnerably who we are inside—the masks fall down, we stop pretending or trying to be nice. We just need to learn what to do with it, how to build a structure in which it can be held and addressed."

A team that can work through conflict and come out the other side is one in which members can be real with one another, where people can feel safe, can allow themselves to be vulnerable, and can find space in which to grow into the best of themselves. And this, in turn, is a community which can open its doors and its heart to a hurting world. A pipe dream? Perhaps. Perhaps also a hopeful model for the family of God. ✍



**Verene Nicolas** is an experienced trainer and facilitator. She lives in Govan and is a Quaker. She works with individual leaders and teams in community-based and third sector organisations in Scotland as well as abroad. Her background is in the French Reformed Church. She has worked with a variety of Priority Area teams in the Church of Scotland since 2011 offering training, coaching and mediations. She can be contacted at [mail@verenicolas.org](mailto:mail@verenicolas.org), or visit her website at [www.verenicolas.org](http://www.verenicolas.org)