



# Christian coaching and mentoring

The journey towards ACC coaching and mentoring membership

By Sue Iqbal

There is cause for celebration as ACC welcomes coaches and mentors into a new stream of membership this autumn. For the past ten months I, along with my colleagues, have had the privilege in advising on the shape of that offer. Why is this so significant? For the past 30 years there has been a growing number of Christian coach and mentor practitioners in the UK. The profession has developed out of the sport and business world, and it is now commonplace to have a coach or mentor in workplaces because a coaching style of leadership is recognised as one of the most effective in building capacity within an organisation. Outside of the workplace, there has been a demand for more holistic approaches to coaching and mentoring and health, wellbeing and life coaching have grown in popularity.

For the Christian seeking to find a suitable coach or mentor who will integrate and recognise the significance of their faith in the coaching practice, it has been a perplexing landscape to navigate. A search on the internet may direct to a coach based outside the UK who is unfamiliar with the cultural context. It is quite hit and miss to find someone based in the UK.

For a Christian coach or mentor, it is also a frustrating landscape, as how do you market your services? Where do you find others working in the field and how does the profession grow

and develop? These have been some of the challenges we have hoped to address, so it is indeed a significant step that ACC is taking, which is warmly welcomed by the Christian coaching and mentoring community in the UK. We also recognise the foundational work that was undertaken by the Christian Coach and Mentor Network, which is no longer operating. Colleagues from that network have been generous in sharing their learning and wisdom to inform our work.

## My journey into coaching

In the early 1990s I was working for the education service in Birmingham as a health education consultant, initially responsible for supporting special schools and subsequently leading the department's work on sex and relationships. During this period, our service went from being fully funded and free to schools to a traded service. At the time, our team needed to make the transition into this new reality. We were fortunate in having a facilitated team residential, and our facilitator was a Christian business coach.

I remember vividly the moment I sat there mesmerised by the impact of his work and the power of the truth he had crafted into the activities. He was not overt, but had skilfully woven his faith into his approach. It was my lightbulb moment; I wanted to do what he did.



Some years later, I was approached by a lady from my church who asked if I could have a conversation with her, as she wanted to explore returning to work after a career break. Realising this was not just a simple coffee conversation, I needed to prepare for it. I went into a bookshop and came out with my first coaching book. As I read it, I realised I already did much of what was being described. The lady had recognised something in me that I had not really articulated, as I was naturally operating as a coach. That conversation was the beginning of my coaching journey.

## Learning my craft

**Working with models** Like many other coaches I began by using a single model, which for me was John Whitmore's GROW. This is a simple structure for conversations that move through 'Goal', 'Reality', 'Options' and 'Way Forward'.

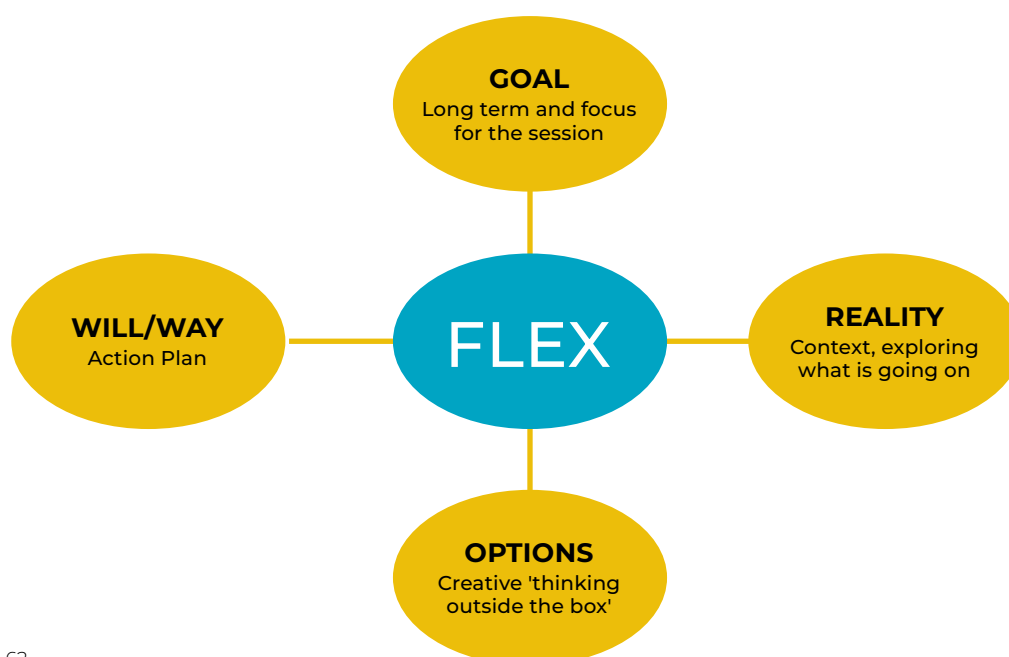
As I undertook more training and contributed to training others, I was exposed to numerous other models and required to reflect and critique them. I also practised new tools and techniques. I had begun to develop a more flexible approach and, as my confidence grew, I would 'flex' in response to my client's needs. As I matured as a coach, I realised that very few coaching sessions followed any one model sequence, but the process is more like a dance, with the steps moving between the different elements. Instead of moving round the stages in sequence, the conversations would pivot from the

midpoint in any direction, back and forth. I have illustrated this in my adapted GROW Model below.

The work of Richard Boyatzis' Intentional Change Theory, 2006 was influential in shaping my practice. He set out a process required for adults or organisations to make a sustained change, describing them as five discoveries. For this to happen, there needs to be a dissatisfaction or dis-ease with the status quo. The first discovery is to define the 'Ideal self', the preferred future the person can imagine and begin to work towards. The second is to have a realistic view of the 'Real self', both strengths and weaknesses, often through feedback. This is similar to the reality in the GROW model, as it is what is currently going on. The third discovery is the 'Learning agenda', which is the gap between the real and ideal self and becomes the focus of the development and actions to be taken. The fourth discovery is 'Experimenting and practising new behaviours' and reflects the power of creating new neural pathways to embed new behaviours required for this preferred future. The fifth discovery is to identify key relationships to support the learning agenda.

All these approaches are helpful in giving a structure to the coaching process, but, as my confidence grew, I became less likely to use any one model but carried them all in my 'kit bag' and dipped into it in response to my client's needs.

## The GROW Model with FLEX



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## Boyatzis' Intentional Change Theory Model



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**The kit bag** The metaphorical kit bag is the most precious of my possessions. It comprises of numerous mental models, tools and techniques gained from my work as an educational leadership consultant and from the process of osmosis as I worked alongside other practitioners. In practice, it might look like sharing a particular process or tool to help my client make sense of a concept or challenge they face, or using diagnostic tools to identify key issues or to help with self-awareness. These tools, along with the ability to listen attentively and the skilful use of questions, are the foundations of practice.

### Working across the secular/faith divide

Alongside my professional work, which was predominantly in an education context, I offered leadership and life coaching to Christians in my private practice. I discovered that many of the tools, theories and models I was familiar with worked in both settings. I was naturally drawn to those which sat comfortably with my Christian faith, and I could see the value in the depth of thinking that has arisen from the research and development of positive psychology and neuroscience. In 2023 I published my book *Golden Threads*, in which I provide an exploration of

theories and models that I believe sit well with my beliefs and give Christian practitioners a rationale for using them in their leadership coaching and organisational development practice.

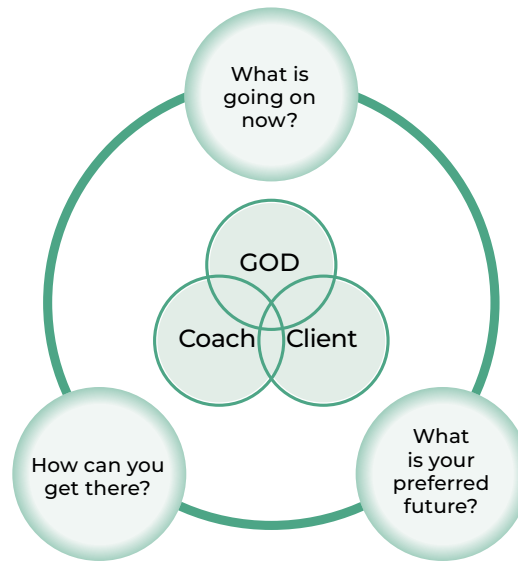
### The Space Between Model

Most Christian practitioners follow a similar process to those practising in a 'secular' context. What is different is the religious and spiritual literacy they possess and the willingness to openly articulate that God is in the process. They will intentionally include language and concepts that are familiar to the Christian client, and create a sacred space that can provide an openness to listen for promptings from the Holy Spirit and/or utilise a tool aimed to help the client draw closer to God.

Working with my colleague Alison Cansdale, we have articulated this sacred space set within a simple coaching process in our Space Between Model. The external structure for the conversation is fluid; the coach and client can start at any point and revisit in any direction. The internal space is the sacred place where listening and communicating is conducted throughout the process.



## The Space Between Model



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## The Christian coaching community and accreditation

As I moved into full-time private practice and made the decision that I would focus fully on developing my Christian coaching, I looked around for a community of practice to join. I discovered two groups, Options Coaching and the Christian Coaching and Mentoring Network. I met with fellow Christian coaches and was able to share in the developing community of Christian practitioners in the UK. We have collectively sought to establish a space for networking, developing professional Christian coaching and mentoring practice, and securing an accreditation route for practitioners wishing to train as Christian coaches and mentors.

Within this Christian network, the topic of professional accreditation kept reoccurring. Coaching and mentoring are not regulated professions; however they are self-regulated and there are a number of internationally respected accrediting professional bodies for practitioners to choose from. The European Mentoring Coaching Council, International Coaching Federation and Association for Coaching are the most well known in the UK, each providing membership and accreditation at differing levels depending on experience and training. An accredited coach or mentor works to recognised professional standards and adheres to a code of ethics. They are expected to have professional indemnity insurance, to undertake regular professional development and receive supervision. As the Christian coaching community has grown there are increasingly more practitioners becoming formally accredited. This is positive as the rigour of the accreditation process and the assurance it gives to clients is vital to the growth and value placed on coaching and mentoring within the wider Christian community.



### Reference

Sue Iqbal (2023) *Golden Threads: Wisdom for authentic leadership and thriving organisations*. Farnham: Waverley Abbey (the first two diagrams included in this article can be found on pp. 57 and 62).



### About the author

Sue Iqbal is an accredited senior practitioner coach mentor/coach with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). She specialises in leadership and life coaching. Sue has published a book on authentic leadership, *Golden Threads*. She is also a director of Forward Partnership ([www.forwardpartnership.org.uk](http://www.forwardpartnership.org.uk)) and is the course director for the forthcoming Christian Coaching and Mentoring EMCC accredited course, which will be running in October 2025.



## A case story

Meet Chris (name changed). He is a legal director in a law firm, is married and has three children and attends a local church. He has been qualified for nearly 12 years. Chris came for coaching late in 2024 and had four sessions over a five-month period. For this article, Chris and I met to talk about his coaching experience.

I asked what had brought him to coaching, and he concluded that it was the convergence of both his situation at work and a growing awareness of his personal values and the emerging difference between those and the company he was working for at the time. He wanted to explore: “Whether the role was the right one for me, and whether actually the direction of travel was one that really aligned with my values.” He also wanted to work through the following questions:

“What kind of organisation did I really want to work for, what was really important to me in terms of my working life? Was it just working for a large commercial law firm, and the financial reward that might bring. Or did I need to be motivated by my values more than by any kind of money or financial success?”

I asked him to recall what I had done as his coach to help him explore this. He reminded me that we first focused on what was going on for him and then moved to identifying his preferred future and possible options to explore. “I think you were great at helping me to work through what I was processing as I described my career and the values-based thinking that I was going through.”

In between his first and second sessions, Chris did some reflective work identifying all the ideas he had pondered as possibilities, and even those that might feel out of reach or unrealistic. He wrote these up in an email and in the second session we explored them from a values alignment perspective.



“It was a faith-based conversation, because I was coming at it from a values-based perspective. You could see how important that was to me, and you knew where I was coming from. That alignment really helped us to journey this together in terms of crystallising what the options were, and to what extent they aligned with where I was at in my thinking at the time.”

We talked about the importance for him in working with a Christian coach at this particular time:

“You didn’t just understand those values from an intellectual perspective, you understood them from a spiritual and emotional perspective as well, and you understood why those drivers were there.

“The fact that you were able to come alongside me in that space, and understood my faith perspective on the issues that I was facing in the workplace and the options that were open to me was really helpful for me.

“I suppose the simplest way I can put it is that you recognised how faith was playing a tangible role in how I was seeking to move forward.”

By the end of his third session he had identified some specific actions to take. In April, Chris moved to his new role and is now feeling that there is a good fit between his values and the new company.