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From Action Learning to bonding social capital?   
The potential of action learning sets among isolated rural clergy.

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**Abstract**

Clergy often struggle with the sense of isolation associated with the unique demands of parish ministry. This sense can be heightened when serving in rural communities, where the burden of isolation may include working with small numbers, experiencing social isolation, and lacking colleagues for daily prayers and sharing ideas. A mechanism that can address structural issues and promote peer support could go some way to managing isolation. This article examines recognized theory and practice of one potential solution: action learning (AL). Reflecting New Testament leadership dynamics, AL sets are utilized increasingly within Church leadership development programmes. It is argued that the potential benefits of a stand-alone AL intervention for isolated rural clergy are two-fold: this pedagogical approach enables set members to engage with and reflect on real-life problems in collaboration with colleagues, and can also generate enduring social capital through the valuable networks set members build in the process.

**Keywords**: action learning, clergy, isolation, professional development, rural ministry, social capital.

**Introduction**

This article explores recognized theory and practice in action learning (focusing on the ‘gold standard’ principles) and also reviews a range of recent studies illustrating the type of settings where it has been employed and the impact it can make on the sponsoring organization and participants. The aim is to shed light on whether this pedagogical approach has the potential to help isolated rural clergy manage the burden of isolation that they can experience.

Seventy years ago, the starting point of action learning founder Reg Revans was that organizations must adapt in a period of rapid change and that adaptation is achieved through learning (Revans, 2011). The Church of England is an organization facing a period of rapid change, with decreasing numbers of affiliates (NatCen Social Research, 2015) and worshippers (Archbishops’ Council Research & Statistics, 2014). An article in *The Spectator* (Thompson, 2015) caused some alarm by suggesting that ‘Anglicanism will disappear from Britain in 2033’, if it continues to decline at the current rate. The decade to 2012 brought a 15% decline in the number of full-time parochial clergy and an increase of over 50% in the number of self-supporting clergy (Archbishops’ Council Research & Statistics, 2013) and changes in working patterns. In line with Revans’ original prescription, action learning (henceforward AL) is being employed by the changing Church of England to develop current and future leaders.

**The stresses of isolated rural ministry**

Clergy often struggle with the sense of isolation associated with the unique demands of parish ministry (Staley, McMinn, Gathercoal, & Free, 2013). This sense may be heightened in rural ministry (see, for example, Rolph, ap Siôn, Francis, & Rolph, 2014; Rolph & Rolph, 2008; Rolph, Rolph, & Cole, 2009) and can lead to burnout (Rutledge, 2006). Numerical decline in the Church has tended to over-extend rural ministers as multi-parish benefices erode the main theological rationale underpinning Anglican parochial ministry (Francis & Brewster, 2012).

Reflecting on rural models of church, Greenslade (2009) highlighted Brewster’s study (2008) of the happiness of rural Anglican clergy and pointed to the issue of isolation that rural clergy face: ‘the next incumbent might be several miles away and the priest lacks colleagues’ (Greenslade, 2009, p. 18). More recently, Brewster reported with colleagues on the results of factor analysis to distinguish between the main sources of stress experienced by 613 rural Anglican clergy (151 women and 462 men) serving at least three churches in English multi-parish benefices (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015). The analysis generated five distinct factors characterized as the burdens of: administration, presence (e.g. managing multiple roles in several communities), distance, visibility (e.g. insufficient privacy) and isolation. Personality and age were found to be stronger predictors of the levels of stress caused by the five burdens than were sex, contextual factors or theological factors. Of the five burdens, the most damaging to the overall work-related psychological health was the burden of isolation. Among the several component parts of the burden of isolation identified by the study were: experiencing the lack of opportunity for mental stimulation; the dispiriting consequences of working with small numbers; experiencing social isolation; and lacking colleagues for daily prayers and sharing ideas. Component parts of the burden of isolation ‘may be structural issues that could be addressed, at least to some extent’ (p. 233).

Staley, McMinn, Gathercoal and Free (2013) reported on barriers to isolated clergy developing and maintaining close relationships and the strategies they develop to combat interpersonal isolation. The 40 clergy in the U.S. whom the researchers interviewed emphasized six main themes when asked about barriers to fostering supportive relationships in their professional roles. Among those barriers were: time demands; the difficulty of being open and honest with others, as well as the tendency of others to be guarded around them; the difficulty of establishing close relationships with non-clergy; and struggles with issues of trust and confidentiality. To combat isolation, the interviewees’ strategies for developing and maintaining close relationships included: being intentional about making time for meeting others, and participation in groups. Another of their strategies was being able to communicate openly and allow for vulnerability. As the authors observed, it is necessary to be open and reveal oneself in order to develop intimate relationships; although this can challenge most people to some extent, ‘it may be particularly difficult for clergy because of the high expectations and demands often imposed upon them to be exemplary’ (p. 852). The findings of Staley and colleagues provide some clues to how structural issues of the type identified by Francis, Laycock and Brewster (2015) might be addressed.

**Research question**

If clergy isolation can be managed, for example, by being intentional about setting aside time for meeting others and participating in groups where there can be open communication yet vulnerability, is there a conspicuous process that can meet such criteria? AL may offer a potential solution. The research question addressed here, on the basis of an examination of relevant theory and practice, is whether AL sets have the potential (a) to enable rural clergy to address some of the structural issues associated with isolation, and at the same time (b) to establish a peer support network which in itself would also contribute towards the alleviation of the burden of isolation that these ministers can experience.

**Social capital**

In addressing the research question, attention will be paid to social capital theory. The term ‘social capital’ is way of describing ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Life is deemed to be easier ‘in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital’ (p. 66). The resource makes possible ‘the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible’ (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). In particular, social capital constitutes an important asset ‘that can be called upon in a crisis’ (Woolcock, 2001, p. 67); and ‘the more extensively persons call on one another for aid, the greater will be the quantity of social capital generated (Coleman, 1990, p. 321). Theory predicts that social capital which is ‘bonding’ in nature is found in groups of like-minded people. Bonding social capital acts as a kind of sociological ‘superglue’ and is good for ‘getting by’ (Putnam, 2000). By contrast, social capital which is ‘bridging’ in nature is an inclusive resource that brings together people who are unlike one another; it is a kind of sociological lubricant and is good for ‘getting ahead’ (Putnam, 2000).

The academic literature on rural ministry yields studies of social capital generation in rural churches (Ineson & Burton, 2005) and rural cathedrals (Francis & Williams, 2010, 2015), of the interchange of social capital between parish church and village community (Olney & Burton, 2011) and of how social capital is at work through a rural ministry of hospitality (Peddle & Peters, 2013), yet no accounts of the generation of potent social capital among rural clergy themselves.

**A Biblical paradigm for action learning**

Recognized theory and practice in AL will be outlined in some detail below. In the meantime, the basics of the process may be summarized in the following way. Action learners develop over time through engagement with and open reflection on real-life problems; and this challenging and potentially risky process is carried out in collaboration with a group of colleagues, without ‘expert’ input.

Reflecting theologically for a moment, a paradigm for this mode of learning might be the apostolic era; and the apostles’ method of learning can be instructive for the present purposes. In an analysis of the merits of clustering learners in small groups over a protracted period, McNeal (2001) narrated Jesus’ creation of a learning community of apostles, thus:

He called a group together to share a journey and to learn from him the most incredible truths ever revealed to humanity. The apostles watched and listened as Jesus worked and taught. They debriefed together the experiences they shared. Jesus sent them out on mission, then unpacked their experiences when they returned. All along, he challenged their notions about who God is and what he is up to in the world. (pp. 64-5)

McNeal proceeded to describe the manner in which the apostles maintained their learning community after Jesus departed, thus:

The ability of the group to shift operational and missional paradigms can be directly related to their new knowledge construction process. They kept learning. New experiences and challenges pushed their unlearning and learning curves. They had no books or experts. They did not have the New Testament record. They had each other, their experiences, the Great Commission, the Holy Spirit as coach, and a commitment to take results seriously. Their learning path sharpened their vision, shaped their values, and changed the world. (p. 65)

Key elements of this suggested learning paradigm will be covered in the paragraphs below. The sections that follow look at the AL approach in general, including how this style of learning is organized; and at the impact of AL in a range of spheres, and what can be learned from failed AL initiatives. Reviewing the pedagogical approach is relevant not least because ‘action learning that does not reflect on and learn from the experience of its application is a self-contradiction’ (Bourner, Beaty, Lawson, & O’Hara, 1996, p. 34). Discussion then turns to how AL sets generate social capital among members. The subsequent sections consider the AL component of clergy leadership development programmes, and discuss the potential benefits of a stand-alone AL intervention with isolated rural clergy. Finally, four conclusions are drawn on the basis of the discussion.

**Action learning – the Revans’ approach**

As envisaged by Revans, AL is an approach to individual and organizational development (Pedler, 2008). Revans did not provide a simple definition, and asserted that there is no single version of AL. In his classic learning equation (L = P + Q), he privileged Q (‘questioning insight’ - the notion of action learning) above P (what he called ‘programmed knowledge’ – gained from standard information sources, including for example literature and teachers). AL was first recommended to the coal industry in Great Britain in 1945: staff colleges were suggested to bring together managers with problems, so they could learn with and from each other (without the need for specialist staff to deliver lectures or conduct seminars). AL deals with the resolution of particular problems (and the acceptance of opportunities) where ‘P’ does not justify a single course of action, and different managers might adopt different strategies (Revans, 2011, p. 4). An AL ‘problem’ is distinct from a puzzle, which Revans called a ‘right answer’ situation where a solution already exists (Pedler, 2008, p. 41). The sort of problems which AL can address ‘must carry significant risk of penalty for failure’. Revans argued against the utility of case study discussions, for example, because participants will be indifferent to the outcome (Revans, 2011, p. 6). Risk is inherent not only in the type of problem AL can tackle, but also in the very nature of the learning in the approach: ‘An action to promote progress on a problem carries a certain risk, and unless there is that certain risk then there is no profound learning, and action learning merely becomes a form of training’ (Trehan & Pedler, 2011, p. 185).

When Revans wrote the preface to the 1998 edition of his *ABC of Action Learning*, he observed that although many practitioners of the approach were in commerce AL had a growing appeal to managers in such settings as hospitals and schools (Revans, 2011, p. vii). A review of the academic literature now reveals a host of articles drawing on primary research involving AL in fields such as nurse education, GP training, end-of-life care, mental health, higher education, teaching, and the voluntary sector, as well as in business. AL has been used in concert with other techniques (for example, ICT) in a ‘blended action learning’ approach (Thornton, 2010); and its use has extended even to virtual worlds (computer-based simulated environments) with HE students (Wagner & Ip, 2009). Accounts of practice report for instance on the interpretation and application of the approach (whether following the classical model or a variation on that theme); on the merits of set facilitation; on the attitudes and experience of learners; and on the nature and degree of impact, which participants may assess through periods of critical reflection (Trehan & Pedler, 2011).

The paragraphs below explore how AL is organized and focus on: sets, the format of meetings, and facilitation. Attention then turns to what AL is not, and the ‘gold standard’ principles of AL.

*AL sets*

According to Revans, ‘sets’ (as they are commonly known) are central to AL. Typically, there would be between four and six participants in a set (Revans, 2011, p. 25). The small size enables members to build a rapport and to understand each others’ working situation and inherent challenges, and also to generate the trust fundamental to open and honest discussion and debate (Stephens & Margey, 2015). The openness which occurs in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality may lead to participants having a heightened self-awareness and a greater knowledge of each other (Ackroyd & Major, 1999, pp. 106-7).

Sets in a standard AL programme would normally be expected to meet for a full or half day every four to six weeks, over several months or a year (Pedler, 2008, p. 23). The companions in a set learn through a process of social exchange: ‘A gets nothing from the arguments of B unless B also gets something from the responses of A’ (Revans, 2011, p. 72).

*Format of AL meetings*

Handbooks on AL explain that a popular format for a set meeting involves the following rounds: catching-up; agenda setting (on the basis of the catch-up round, allocating the available time to give all an equal share in principle); progress reports (each in turn, with companions helping the person to learn from what has happened and explore options for action); and, finally, a review (for feedback and discussion of the process) (Pedler, 2008, p. 32).

*Facilitation of AL sets*

Expertise (the ‘P’ in Revans’ learning equation) tends to be available through fellow members, such that the ad hoc intervention of experts in sets is unnecessary (Revans, 2011, p. 8); but a supernumerary facilitator is needed to launch the set, to achieve a balance between support and challenge, and help members reflect on their learning (Pedler, 2008, p. 24). Although Revans (2011) expected the expert facilitator to contrive that the set achieves independence from him/her as soon as possible (p. 9), evidence from many accounts of practice indicates that long-term facilitation is now an accepted feature (Brook, Pedler, & Burgoyne, 2013, p. 731).

Why might facilitation be so crucial? Analysis of an AL journey shared at the University of Salford by set members from a variety of backgrounds in the public and private sectors (Holmes, 2008) revealed that the highly skilled facilitator enabled them to: understand the principles and processes of AL, by doing from the start; develop their skills of questioning and reflection; handle feelings of discomfort that often accompany learning about self; and create a positive learning environment (p. 250). In that instance, the facilitator withdrew after 18 months; and the set was clear thereafter about the practicalities, the process, and the review of learning, all of which it identified as key to ongoing success (p. 251). The message from that study was that the role of facilitator is valuable, acting as a catalyst for members to create a set that will enable the achievement of aims; but that over time ‘a set should move towards self-facilitation’ (p. 252).

Donovan (2011) was prompted to investigate conversational patterns in AL sets after wondering why sets of senior executives in a range of large and small organizations could not solve pressing problems in the absence of a facilitator. He concluded that certain conversational patterns (defensive and superficial) can prevent a set from achieving its goal. The practical questions which his findings posed for sets and their facilitators included: ‘How can I/we agree to bring more awareness to our conversations, and how those conversations may be signaling important unspoken concerns?’ and ‘How can we increase the level of permission within the set to discuss the way we are discussing our matters?’ (p. 113). Accordingly, Donovan’s study indicates how shrewd facilitation can heighten set participants’ awareness of their explicit and implicit discourse, and also make best use of the ‘review’ round.

*What AL is not*

Revans was keen to emphasize what AL is not. The key is that AL is less structured than other approaches and makes little use of teachers. For this reason, ‘it is available to all persons and may be all things to all people’ (Revans, 2011, p. 92). Therein lays the danger. Revans’ list of exclusions, grouped under seven headings, included a number of business-orientated activities (that need not detain us here) and also project work, case studies and simple commonsense (pp. 77-93). Revisiting the Revans list, Simpson and Bourner (2007) added seven more phenomena ‘outside the spirit of action learning’: self-directed teams, coaching, focus groups, action research, seminars, problem-based learning and experiential learning (p. 176).

*The ‘gold standard’*

AL practice has developed over time to such an extent that it is now recognized to be extremely variable or ‘protean’ (Brook, Pedler and Burgoyne, 2013), and best described as ‘an ethos informing a family of approaches rather than a single method’ (p. 728). Simpson and Bourner (2007) exhort AL practitioners to be ‘as open and explicit’ as they can about what they understood by the term action learning (p. 184).

Revans’ work is deemed to lay down the classical principles. It is wise to follow these or ‘to have a very good reason not to’ (Simpson & Bourner, 2007, p. 184). Willis (2004) termed these principles the ‘gold standard’, which Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005) have summarized (pp. 58-9). In brief, these principles are:

* problems being sponsored and aimed at organizational as well as personal development;
* action learners working in sets of peers;
* the requirement for action as the basis for learning;
* working with problems not puzzles;
* the search for fresh questions, with ‘Q’ taking primacy over ‘P’; and
* profound personal development resulting from reflection on action.

**The impact of action learning**

*AL in other spheres*

The profound impact of AL on the development of caring professionals and in the voluntary sector may be illustrated by three studies conducted in the UK. Each of the three initiatives cited below had clear goals; and the case studies demonstrate how the AL approach could (i) generate worthwhile outcomes for participants (in terms of their personal development) and/or (ii) enhance the operation of the organization or association. A fourth case study shows how even relatively informal AL can achieve positive outcomes.

First, an article by Vick and Whyatt (2004) presents a case study of AL in the South Manchester University NHS Trust, which wanted to address work-related stress experienced by hospital staff. The trust was responding to a National Health and Safety Executive report stating that the issue of work related stress in the health service was neither trivial, nor an inevitable consequence of working life, and that it was possible to identify likely stressors and take appropriate action. Whyatt (a senior NHS manager and professional practitioner) established an AL set (comprising a counsellor, two hospital clerical staff, a research coordinator and herself), facilitated by Vick (an academic from the University of Salford). The set met on eight occasions (each for three hours). The authors’ personal accounts of the process show how ideas developed in the set led to a therapy ‘taster session’ event and the establishment of a centre offering alternative therapies for hospital personnel. Vick reflected that Whyatt’s disclosure to the set of some personal dilemmas was an important step in the development of trust among set members, and encouraged others to share confidential concerns (p. 105).

Second, an article by Walia and Marks-Maran (2014) evaluates a nursing leadership development module in a UK university (‘Leadership through Action Learning’), delivered through a 2-day introductory workshop followed by six half-day AL set meetings (with six to eight participants each). A survey method was adopted for the study, with the questionnaire including demographic, Likert-style, and open-ended questions. Limitations were the small sample size and small amount of qualitative data obtained from the small number of open-ended questions. Of the 47 students who had taken the module over a one-year period, 39 returned completed questionnaires. Analysis revealed very high engagement in the AL sets, with all respondents agreeing or somewhat agreeing that the sets made them feel supported, and that they both valued the contribution made by colleagues and that colleagues valued their contribution (p. 615). Moreover, all respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that the most valuable part of the module was their AL set (p. 616), and that they would recommend AL to colleagues (p. 617). All but two respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that they would consider taking another module that used this approach (p. 617). According to the qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, these sets highlighted the potential pain in the AL process leading to greater self-awareness (p. 617).

Third, an article by Hewison, Badger and Swani (2011) evaluates AL to improve end-of-life care, which was offered to the 22 nursing home managers in a single healthcare area in the UK. This was against a background of leadership in the delivery of effective end-of-life care being an issue of concern. Eventually, just one set was formed comprising eight participants (five managers, four deputy managers and a senior nurse), facilitated by a hospice chief executive and a senior lecturer in nursing; the set met four times (two hours each, followed by lunch) over an eight-month period. The evaluation was based on analysis of a brief background participant questionnaire, notes taken during the meetings, and participants’ written records of changes and improvements made as a result of their involvement in the set. Set members were reported to have had some ‘very heated discussions… resulting in assumptions being challenged and a genuine sharing of experience’ (p. 140). One participant wrote: ‘to listen to others’ ways of dealing with issues was of great benefit’ (p. 139). Members developed trust and supported each other; and the authors remarked that ‘this group-building element… enabled personal and professional growth based on openness in the group’ (p. 140). At the final meeting, members agreed that the set would continue independently after the intervention, in a format at their discretion. The continuous process of learning and reflection that characterized the set was shown to bring about a number of improvements in end-of-life care in the respective homes. However, set attendance was problematic and only two members attended all four meetings (even though ‘backfill’ staff costs and travel expenses were covered by the project budget). Furthermore, the plan to continue with the set beyond the life of the project was not realized: the report does not explain why, but it is reasonable to assume that lack of time jeopardized the participants’ plan.

Fourth, a short article by Chivers (2011) presents a case study based principally on one local group of the University of the Third Age (U3A) for retired people (in Worthing on the south coast of England). This was a group that Chivers founded in the early 1990s, in which he had led study groups, and where he carried out a year-long study using the interview method. He characterized the AL employed in the group as ‘informal’ and appropriate to everyday usage (p. 66), with no formally constituted set. AL’s pragmatic approach to problem diagnosis and solution was found to empower and invigorate committee members; and actions increased U3A membership, extended the range of study groups on offer and enhanced the newsletter.

*Learning from unsuccessful AL initiatives*

In studies such as those reported above, the natural tendency is to focus on successes rather than to discuss failures of the AL approach (De Loo, 2008); however, some practitioners have recognized that to discuss failure with a sense of maturity and honesty and reflect on its reasons can be helpful for the wider AL community. After all, learning from past mistakes enables us to adapt, and thus provides a catalyst for future success (Hillson, 2011). As Donnenberg and De Loo (2004) put it: ‘failure may create more productive learning events than successes’ (p. 175). Two more studies illustrate the type of circumstances that can lead to a poor outcome.

First, an article by an academic at Bournemouth University (Oliver, 2008) presents a case study of a failed AL intervention in a UK television company, where the purpose was to gain insight into why viewing figures for factual programmes were in decline and develop a new strategy. The author (who coached the four-member set) reflected on reasons for the closure of the project after a single set meeting and then on his role as an academic engaging in industry practice. He reckoned that the set perceived him as a threat to the credibility of its experienced practitioners. Moreover, the participants did not have sufficient time to reflect on their practice. Ultimately, he concluded that he would now recommend AL only in situations where there is sufficient time in the schedule to allow for the iterative and reflective process that AL involves.

Second, an article by De Loo (2008) describes the experience of AL in local government in a town in the Netherlands. AL principles were employed there within the first phase of a project to integrate elderly foreigners into commercial firms: these were individuals who hardly spoke Dutch and had been unemployed for more than a year.

De Loo conducted six interviews with the five individuals involved in the AL (one being interviewed twice owing to a dual role). Again, this is a single case study, from which it would be hard to generalize; nonetheless, the reflections (from a relatively unusual context) are offered as insightful (p. 177). The article reveals that the goal of organizational development was not met, time was lost and some employees were damaged professionally. De Loo attributed the failure to town officials not being ready for AL. Furthermore, the AL principles were not explicit; the development was executed too rapidly because of looming financial problems; interpersonal trust was low among the officials; and there was a feeling among some participants that regular work processes were disrupted because of an already heavy workload.

*AL as generator of bonding social capital*

In the four successful enterprises cited above, and indeed in the two unsuccessful initiatives, the AL was inherently goal-driven, that is, driven by tangible targets that could be verified in some way. The successes enhanced knowledge, solved problems and heralded improvements for patients, staff and associational members. The literature also demonstrates that AL can make an impact through the pedagogical process, which can yield rewards (albeit somewhat esoteric in nature and less tangible than goal-driven targets). These rewards come about because bonds are likely to develop between set members (Ackroyd & Major, 1999, p. 107); and the obligation to share experiences through collegial conversation and interaction builds networks (Raelin & Coghlan, 2006). Curiously, the building of such networks tends to be regarded as incidental: it seems to be a secondary objective, rather than the primary goal of AL (Raelin & Coghlan, 2006, p. 684). This is consistent with Coleman’s (1990) assertion that most forms of social capital are created ‘as a by-product of other activities’ (p. 317).

The rewards will be felt initially by participants; but there are likely to be subsidiary benefits for the organizations, as their staff comprising the sets feel more supported and less isolated. This view would be supported by findings of the Church of England ‘Experiences of Ministry Survey’ that the effectiveness of professional development is interpreted by clergy as a powerful indication of their diocese’s attitude towards them and the treatment of clergy in their diocese more generally (Clinton, 2014a, 2014b).

A prime example of the process of network building within AL sets is found in a study of the operation of AL in a global drinks manufacturing company, for which empowering its diverse and geographically dispersed workforce was a major challenge. Feedback on the AL indicated that the sets had ‘a glue effect’ linking managers together; and that each set was ‘an effective tool not only for learning, but also for facilitating networking’ (Antell & Heywood, 2015, p. 91). Antell and Heywood (2015) utilized the discourse of social capital in reporting their findings, even though they did not mention social capital theory explicitly. By way of contrast, Roberts and Roper (2011) argued that the collaborative nature of AL helps to develop social capital through the enhancement of connections and creation of shared understanding; and that networks forged through AL continue even after the relevant programme has finished (p. 140). They claimed that such social capital ultimately enhances the capacity for change within the sponsoring organization.

Broadly similar findings emerged from a study of the UK NHS Pathology Services (Pedler & Attwood, 2011). Employing telephone interview data gathered in 2009, 18 months after the close of a formal action learning programme, the study looked at what lives on as a result of action learning relationships. Of 16 sets contacted, two had finished their business and stopped working; six were continuing to meet because members found it productive to work together and there was still work to tackle; four had been integrated into wider systems; and four were in abeyance awaiting decisions or further funding. It was found that acquiring new insights about the service was often associated with learning new ways of working together. The authors observed that ‘the peer relationship of the action learning set seems to have been novel for many participants, contrasting with their experiences of working in the NHS’ (p. 33). One interviewee said that his/her set had become ‘family – people you can trust and work with’. Several participants in the study made explicit connections between AL and networking, both within the set and outside it. Another interviewee said ‘The set has also become a network: they ring each other between meetings’; and yet another said ‘The set has now become a subgroup of the cancer network and meets every 3 to 4 months in the Trust. They catch up on and monitor projects, share information and plan new projects. Before the action learning project they had no contact with each other but have now become a mini-network and are also in regular e-mail contact’ (p. 34). The authors concluded that AL can create the conditions for individuals to act and learn across departmental and professional boundaries. Understanding the importance of and practising networking skills was particularly significant in the service where pathologists usually work alone or in small teams (p. 34).

**Action learning in clergy development**

*Studies of AL in ministry training and development*

No case studies (successful or otherwise) of AL with theology or ministry students, clergy or other ministers of religion, or indeed within adult Christian education more generally in the UK, have been located in the thrice-yearly journal *Action Learning: Research and Practice* (first issued in 2004) or in a wider search of academic literature[[1]](#footnote-1). The lack of studies may be surprising. Ackroyd and Major’s well-known Theology study skills handbook (1999) in the series entitled *Exploring Faith: Theology for Life* introduces the reader to AL, which suggests that this approach is not unknown in theological education. Ackroyd and Major laid emphasis on the collaborative and empowering nature of AL, and they argued that what is relevant is the process of AL, because ‘it creates an atmosphere where openness and trust within the group are of paramount importance, and where members commit themselves to supporting one another in challenging but constructive ways’ (p. 105).

The sole reference to clergy in relation to AL was found in an investigation involving postgraduate-level professionals across the boundaries of health and education (Joyce and Kinnarney, 2014), where the authors recommended the broadening of a successful AL initiative and encouraged other researchers to explore different synergies, for example, between the clergy and nurses (p. 176).

*The merits of learning in groups*

Although this literature search uncovered no evaluations of AL with clergy or Christian laity, various studies do point to the more general merits of small group learning and communities of practice within Christian education (for example, Davidson, 2011; Elias, 2006; Horder, 2010; McCollum, 2005; Otero & Cottrell, 2013) and to the benefits of group facilitation for ministry (Whitehead, 2014). Hull (1985) argued that ‘the best learning, especially in the case of adults, is almost always in groups’ (p. 17); and for his part Higton (2006) claimed that ‘there is no solo route’ to learning, because knowledge emerges out of an interactive process (p. 21). At the heart of Higton’s (2006) discussion of what he termed ‘vulnerable learning’ is the notion that genuine learning occurs only when ways of thinking and acting are exposed to others’ critique. Such critique will bring to the learner’s attention counter-examples, gaps in his/her argument, alternative ways of seeing things, or potentially disastrous consequences of a suggested strategy (p. 11). Horder’s (2010) analysis of theological students’ feedback on group-work against an analytical framework offered by Higton’s reflections on vulnerable learning revealed that it was actually ‘the experience of grace’ from others in their groups that most influenced the students and their learning (p. 76). Yet, despite all its virtues, learning in groups carries a danger of ‘defaulting to an inward-looking, mutual support model’ (Walton, 2011, p. 112) and therefore of hindering the development of bridging social capital vital to make connections beyond the group of learners (Inskip, 2013; Rooms, 2011).

*AL in leadership development in the Church*

The absence of evidence-based evaluation of AL among UK clergy merely suggests that the publication of rigorous evaluation of AL to develop such learners would be novel, and in no way implies that use of this approach to learning is innovative in such a context. Indeed, two reports placed in the public domain in the last year or so document the use of AL in high-profile leadership development programmes within the Church of England.

First, a report by Cornies (2014) on one aspect of the ‘Experiences of Ministry Survey’ reveals that AL is used as a component part of initiatives within the five dioceses (Bristol, Chelmsford, Liverpool, Rochester and York) whose leadership development practices have been identified through the survey as ‘high performing’. In his qualitative analysis of the design of the programmes running in those five dioceses, Cornies wrote:

Action based learning is a common element throughout each programme… Each participant brings a live issue from their parish to their group, such as occurrences of conflict between members of their leadership team. Instead of making recommendations, members of the group coach each other through these issues, allowing each participant to generate a solution to their own issue. This form of learning emphasizes the importance of group work during the programmes. (p. 2)

Cornies’ section on programme feedback and evaluation observes that ‘the most positive feedback came from the Action Learning Sets’ (p. 4).

Second, the Report of Lord Green’s Steering Group (entitled *Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans*) (Church of England, 2014) revealed that AL was to be used with Bishops and Deans and future leaders of the Church. The AL approach was judged to be one of the ‘best parts’ of the pilot Leadership Development Programme for Bishops and Deans implemented in 2013, with the evaluation of that pilot concluding that the AL element ‘delivered value’ (p. 10). Accordingly, AL sets were to be an integral part of the new development programme in 2015-16, both during and between residential modules; in the latter instance, learners were to review their actions within a framework of theological reflection and prayer (pp. 11-13). The report stated that discussions were in progress with ‘recognised theologians who might advise on the detailed design and implementation of this framework’ (p. 13). The Green Report also revealed that facilitated AL sets are to underpin the structured learning for participants in the development programme for members of the ‘Talent Pool’ (now re-named the Learning Community), identified as potential future leaders within the Church (p. 20-1).

Cornies’ (2014) description of the AL in the five ‘high performing’ dioceses implies that their approach follows the ‘gold standard’ principles, as summarized by Pedler, Burgoyne and Brook (2005). The level of detail in the Green Report (Church of England, 2014) was such that it does not shed light on the precise nature of the AL used within the pilot leadership development programme for bishops and deans. There was a greater level of detail about the AL to be included in the programme from 2015-16 onwards; and this suggests that the design would follow classical principles rather than vary the approach.

**Discussion**

Against the various threads of the inquiry presented in the foregoing sections, it is possible to assess the potential of AL for use among clergy who minister in rural communities and thereby face the burden of isolation. We can now place the sort of structural challenges posed by the burden of isolation (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015), against the framework of classical AL theory and practice in order to discover whether in theory at least the pedagogical approach can measure up to the task. The AL framework, and indeed the studies pointing to the merits of small group learning more generally, amply demonstrate that an intervention constructed around this pragmatic pedagogical approach has the potential to meet the criteria set out by Staley and colleagues (2014), namely setting aside time to meet others, participating in groups, and being able to communicate openly yet allow for vulnerability. The process of social exchange in AL builds valuable networks, as members communicate openly and are obliged to share experiences and expose vulnerabilities. So, the special virtue of the AL process (as distinct from what are usually its tangible primary organizational goals) is that it has the capacity to foster bonding social capital among members. Although typically regarded as a secondary objective of AL, the generation of social capital in the suggested intervention would be an equal, if not paramount, goal of AL among isolated rural clergy. Establishing a peer support network that endures even after the sets have concluded their formal agenda would be a significant outcome.

But does this potential panacea have any drawbacks to which attention should be paid? The literature on small group learning in the Church warned that such a mode of learning can default to an introverted mutual support model and hinder the generation of bridging social capital. However, this possible drawback of learning in groups need not cause anxiety here, because the essential purpose of AL among isolated rural clergy would be to bond not to bridge. Although this particular drawback can be dismissed as irrelevant in the proposed context, it remains important to heed warnings included in analyses of failed AL initiatives. For AL to be used successfully among isolated rural clergy, set members would have to buy in to the process and commit their time (prioritizing the AL over competing demands); and steps would have to be taken by organizers and facilitators to guard against dangers such as AL being regarded as a time-wasting process and the facilitator being perceived as a threat, and against failure to make principles explicit and resistance from participants with a heavy workload.

One other potential drawback to bear in mind is that rural clergy are necessarily geographically distant from one another, with perhaps many miles to travel to the next nearest colleague (Greenslade, 2009). In order for set members to deem opportunity costs of AL participation (such as journey time to venue) a sound investment, the process must be seen as energizing rather than draining; accordingly, careful facilitation would be required, at least at the outset. Interestingly, Francis, Laycock and Brewster (2015) demonstrated that, when considered as part of a dynamic system of stressors on rural clergy in multi-parish benefices, the burden of distance ameliorates work-related psychological health and in that sense counteracts certain detrimental effects of the burden of isolation. Nonetheless, if sustaining a peer support network post-AL becomes far too onerous for rural clergy owing to the time and distance involved in maintaining face-to-face contact, a peer support group could be sustained by electronic means (telephone, email, and social media). Although not the optimal outcome of an AL intervention, cyber-*konōnia* (to borrow a term from Moss, 2009, p. 348) could represent a marginal improvement and be preferable to continued struggles if no attempt were made to manage the burden of isolation and mitigate its effects.

**Conclusion**

Against the background of a new study revealing that the most damaging burden to overall work-related psychological health among clergy serving in rural multi-parish benefices is the burden of isolation, the present inquiry set out to shed light on the question of whether AL has the potential to enable rural clergy to address some of the structural issues associated with isolation, and at the same time to establish a peer support network which in itself would also contribute towards the alleviation of the burden of isolation that these ministers can experience. The investigation began by reflecting on a description of the learning community established by Jesus among his apostles and suggesting that this community serves as a useful paradigm for AL. Recognized theory and practice in AL were explored; case studies discussed; and structural challenges posed by the burden of isolation (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015) and possible solutions (Staley et al., 2013) tested against the framework of classical AL principles. Four conclusions can now be drawn.

The first conclusion is a broad one. On the basis of the groundwork here, it seems reasonable to advocate wide use of the learning paradigm that was successful for Jesus and the apostles and is being utilized to acclaim in high-profile programmes to develop current and future leaders of the Church of England. There appears to be sound evidence that Revans’ 70-year-old prescription of learning for the purposes of adaptation in a period of rapid change remains timely.

The second conclusion is that AL appears to offer a style of learning that would enable rural clergy to collaborate in facilitated sets to engage with and reflect on their real-life problems (provided steps are taken by organizers and facilitators to guard against possible pitfalls). Studies in analogous domains suggest that the method can achieve set goals in favourable situations, provided members commit their time. It is suggested that AL be employed as a freestanding activity (outside any broader programme to develop leadership skills), with an overarching goal merely to address problems of the burden of isolation. Clergy members would bring their problems related to the burden of isolation to a facilitated AL set, so they could learn from each other what different strategies might be adopted; over time, progress reports would be given and companions in the AL sets would help each other to learn from what happens and explore options for action.

While the second conclusion relates to the goal-driven aspect of AL, the third relates to the process-driven aspect of the approach. The third conclusion is that AL appears to have the capacity not only to help isolated rural clergy engage with and reflect on the problems associated with their burden of isolation but also, by the conspicuous process of so doing, to facilitate the generation of bonds between set members on the basis of their commitment to support one another, and the obligation to share their experiences, reveal vulnerability and trust each other. Such potent social capital has the capacity to sustain a peer support network for isolated rural clergy: one which may endure even after the sponsored AL process has concluded and also enhance the capacity of the organization within which they minister to adapt. If the burden of distance ultimately jeopardizes the continuation of a peer support network through face-to-face contact, such supportive bonds may be sustained as a type of cyber-*koinōnia*.

The novel approach outlined here to address the burden of isolation faced by rural clergy opens up the possibility of applying modes of analysis suitable to social capital also to membership of action learning sets. So, fourth, it is recommended that empirical work be undertaken to measure social capital among a sample of rural clergy and to determine with which factors (structural or otherwise) this powerful resource is associated. A longitudinal study of social capital among isolated rural clergy that captures the extent of the resource both before and after an AL intervention would have particular salience. In a study spanning several deaneries (or, indeed, several dioceses), a comparison of the different outcomes between, say, ‘gold standard’ and more protean AL sets, or, say, AL sets with long- and short-term facilitation, would offer the possibility to judge which pedagogical approach leads to the best gains in social capital. Such longitudinal studies would help to demonstrate whether the contention of this article – that AL sets have the potential to mitigate effects of isolation within rural clergy, not least through the incidental formation of bonding social capital – is grounded not only in theory but also in clergy experience.

**Note on contributor**

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1. The literature search was conducted using databases such as the Web of Science, ATLAReligion, and Academic OneFile, plus publishers’ websites of relevant journals (such as the *Journal of Adult Theological Education*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)