



Evaluating AMD in the Diocese of Truro

Occasional Paper 1 (January 2016): Action Learning

Based on detailed work carried out by the York St John University researchers evaluating the AMD programme, this short Occasional Paper focuses on action learning (AL) - a distinctive feature of the residential element of AMD. An overarching aim of AMD is to create effective learning communities within the five Clergy Colleges, where priests are not simply recipients of learning but are also tutors of each other, exchanging good practice. AL is an important vehicle to achieve that aim. This Paper looks at the theory and practice of AL, and also at the benefits of the process, especially its potential to build peer support networks in a rural diocese where clergy are often many miles from the nearest colleague.

Action Learning – an approach to individual and organizational development

As envisaged by Professor Reg Revans (founder of the process), AL is an approach to individual and organizational development. Seventy years ago, his starting point was that organizations must adapt in a period of rapid change and that adaptation is achieved through learning.

Revans didn't provide a simple definition of AL, and there is no single version. His classic learning equation sheds light on the process: $L = P + Q$. In the equation, Q is what he called 'questioning insight' (the notion of action learning) and P is what he called 'programmed knowledge' (which we gain from standard information sources, including books and teachers). AL was first recommended to the British coal industry in 1945: staff colleges brought 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' doesn't justify a single course of action, and different managers might adopt different strategies.

The Church of England is an organization facing a period of rapid change, with decreasing numbers of members and worshippers; so, it is not surprising that AL is already in use within leadership development programmes in several dioceses and also among deans, bishops and future leaders of the Church. There has been positive feedback on AL from participants on those Church programmes. AL is in use today in a wide range of other professional settings, notably in healthcare, education and the voluntary sector. A recent AL initiative in Cornwall County Council's Children's Social Work and Psychology Services has demonstrated that the approach has the capacity to support a learning community in the county and forge professional networks.

The apostolic era as a paradigm for this approach to learning

Reflecting theologically for a moment, the apostolic era might be said to offer a paradigm for this mode of learning; and the apostles' method can be instructive. In an analysis of the merits of clustering learners in small groups over a protracted period, the US scholar Reggie McNeal narrated Jesus' creation of a learning community of apostles: '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.' McNeal went on to describe the manner in which the apostles maintained their learning community after Jesus departed: '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.' (McNeal, 2001, pp. 64-5)

Action Learning in AMD

Each AMD Clergy College begins and ends with AL sessions, the AL groups comprising 6 priests + facilitator. The same groups also meet each morning at Clergy Colleges for a 30-minute un-facilitated Bible Study. AL and Bible Study, together with taught sessions, periods of reflection, and informal conversation, are intended to facilitate substantial peer reflection support, and learning. Systematic feedback on AMD prior to launch suggested AL groups would be crucial to the whole process, important for group cohesion and personal needs. The information sheet distributed to AL participants expresses the hope the groups will continue beyond the life of AMD and provide a model for future ways of working between clergy.

Action learning and social capital

In general, AL tends to be driven by goals, with measurable targets. However, the learning process can yield a secondary –almost incidental– reward, which comes about via the obligation to share experiences in conversation with colleagues. Typically small in size, the AL 'sets' (as they are usually known) enable learners to build a rapport and understand each others' working situation and challenges, and also to generate the sort of trust that is fundamental to open and honest discussion.

The value of these types of networks is captured by the notion of 'social capital' (a term that is so well-known it has been exported from the world of Sociology into everyday language). Sociologists reckon that life is easier in a community blessed with good stocks of social capital, which make the achievement of certain ends possible. It's also good to call upon social capital in a crisis. Social capital found in groups of like-minded people is known as 'bonding' social capital. Accordingly to Robert Putnam in the US (one of the foremost writers on social capital) it acts like 'sociological superglue' and is good for 'getting by'.

The potential of AL to ease isolation in rural ministry

Research in the UK and US has shown that clergy often struggle with the sense of isolation associated with the unique demands of parish ministry, and that this sense can be heightened in rural ministry. In such studies, aspects of rural ministry such as the following have been identified as isolating: the lack of opportunity for mental stimulation; the dispiriting consequences of working with small numbers; social isolation; and a lack of colleagues for daily prayers and sharing ideas. Unfortunately, isolation can sometimes lead to 'burnout'. In a theoretical article (to be published shortly in the journal *Rural Theology*), the York St John researchers suggest that social capital formed among set members, as a by-product of AL, could have an impact on the isolation experienced by rural clergy by creating enduring peer support networks, on which members can draw for help and advice as the need arises. This suggestion is based on the experience of AL practitioners in a variety of settings, reported in the academic literature on AL.

The many interviews which the York St John researchers conducted with AMD participants in 2015 indicate that this theory may hold true. Interviewees said that the chance to engage with peers in an AL set is 'incredibly valuable' and 'a huge positive'. The AL has been 'quite a highlight of the residential'. Even though AL set members are all very different (in terms of age, length of experience, church tradition, where they live etc), they have found a lot of common ground. The collegiality built up in an AL group which enables you 'to say things as they are' is 'brilliant'. Confidences 'are shared at a deep level'. The links that have been made across the diocese through AL mean that priests who did not know each other before AMD will be happy to ring each other up and/or visit for professional advice and support. For some priests, being geographically distant from other set members can make it difficult to maintain contact; but, interestingly, living many miles away from an AL colleague who can support you is not always seen as a disadvantage. Interviews revealed that clergy in the diocese who experience weekly deanery chapter meetings are less likely to look to AMD AL colleagues for support; priests in other deaneries are certainly looking forward to drawing on the 'social capital' they have formed in their AL sets.