

Peter Madsen Gubi and Jan Korris describe their research



Supporting Church of England clergy through the provision of reflective practice groups

Introduction

The poor psychological wellbeing of clergy has been highlighted in research¹ and has elicited concerned response in some Church of England (CofE) dioceses and St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy. Hudson² states that clergy often offer a 24-hour service to those in need. Their homes are a point of contact for the homeless and those with mental health issues and addictions. Clergy families are often in the community spotlight in a way that other families are not. Clergy tend to be introvert, so the more social expectations of the work can be challenging. Often they are faced with unrealistic projections/expectations from others, which can create significant difficulties if they go unrecognised and, even in the self-aware, the painful experience of sometimes disappointing those they feel called to serve, can take its toll. Many clergy struggle to hold appropriate boundaries and stretch themselves unreasonably; the practical and managerial aspects of the role can limit the space to nurture their own faith. Clergy hold a sense of vocation (call) and mostly are highly motivated,¹ but the pressures can create a lack of congruence between the person and the role. The complexity of establishing boundaries is also present in the tension of forming close social relationships while holding a public role. Even with their fellow clergy, competitiveness can detract from supportive colleague relationships. This can lead to profound loneliness and isolation.

In order to attempt to create a supportive environment for clergy who are living with these stresses, several dioceses in the CofE have set up some form of reflective practice groups (RPGs) (sometimes known as support groups, Balint-type groups or work-based learning groups) with slightly different structures and ways of facilitation. Travis' research³ is the only known published evaluation of the usefulness of such groups. This research, by Gubi and Korris, seeks to address the deficit in the literature by evaluating the beneficial nature of four RPGs that were set up in the Salisbury diocese as part of the Wellbeing programme instigated by the Venerable Paul Taylor.

Method

Four RPGs (then called work-based learning groups) were set up as a two-year pilot scheme. Each group consisted of four to five members of the clergy and was facilitated by a counsellor/psychotherapist with training and experience in group facilitation, and who was independent of the diocese. Each group met monthly, and for a duration of two-and-a-half hours per session, over two years. Participation was voluntary. Care was taken in the make-up of each group

to ensure that members would not be from the same Deanery/Chapter (which is part of the management structure within a CofE diocese) in order to reduce the likelihood of dual boundaries, and to create an atmosphere of confidentiality, safety and trust where participants could simply be themselves, rather than be influenced by other external (political) dynamics. Participants agreed to commit to regular attendance; to share of themselves (including being vulnerable); to build an environment of safety and confidentiality so that trust could develop; to respect each other; and to pay a minimal fee (to encourage commitment and ownership of the process). The facilitators were paid by the Diocese of Salisbury.

After nine months, the experiences of the participants were anonymously evaluated by inviting the participants to individually reflect on how well the group fulfilled the hopes they had expressed for the group in the first session of meeting, and using the following semi-structured questions:

- In what way has the group been of value?
- What have been its least useful aspects?
- In what ways have you learned?

The reflections were written voluntarily by each participant and submitted to one of the researchers. The researchers

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were keen to hear the participants' existential phenomenology as they reflected on the questions, and for their voices to be heard and represented in the rich data. 'Rich data' are data in which participants tell their stories, speak freely, develop their ideas, and express their experience and their concerns. The data are presented in the participants' own words as direct quotations. Therefore, the data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis⁴ and the rich data are included to enable the participants' voices to be heard in their own words. Verbal consent was given by participants for the evaluation to inform future practice, and not all group participants contributed an evaluation.

Findings

In the thematic analysis, three master themes emerged, based on the three categories of the questions asked: value, limitation and learning; along with 13 subthemes (see Table 1):

Master theme 1: value

The participants expressed the value of the groups in the following ways:

Subtheme 1.1: Change: One participant spoke of the experience of the group as having been a place to enact change: 'To support me and raise the barriers on what is possible in my ministry'. Another participant felt that the: '...parameters for discussion are wide and each of us has the possibility of finding new ways of thinking about a problem and acting on it'.

Table 1. Master themes and subthemes

Master themes	1: Value	2: Limitation	3: Learning
Sub-themes	1.1: Change	2.1: Giving answers	
	1.2: Support	2.2: Not listening	
	1.3: Structure for searching		
	1.4: Times of quiet		
	1.5: Feeling less alone		
	1.6: Handling conflict		
	1.7: Establishing boundaries for self-care		
	1.8: Health-giving		
	1.9: Boundaries		
	1.10: Empowerment		
	1.11: Listening		

Subtheme 1.2: Support: One participant described his/her feeling of support: 'It has been a time of change for me in respect of work. We have been able to fully air the things that are happening to us and find support from each other on how to manage the change.' One participant valued the group for offering space, fellowship, time away, a chance to be heard and to express concerns in a supportive environment. Another participant felt that: 'I know that my capacity to share deeply will be supported and affected long term if I feel all members of the group are prepared to do the same.'

Subtheme 1.3: Structure for searching: One participant stated that the group provided: 'A structure within which we can bring the search [for answers] out into the open and bounce thoughts and ideas off of each other..'

Subtheme 1.4: Times of quiet: One participant valued the times of quiet in the group: 'The times of quiet were really useful... allowing the quiet sometimes to answer the question.'

Subtheme 1.5: Feeling less alone: The group was experienced as an antidote to the loneliness of ministry: 'Ministry can be very lonely and there are very few people we can compare notes with. Most of the meetings we go to have agendas attached to them. The group experience is very important. It allows us to have others to identify with, helps us to feel less alone and to recognise that our problems are not unique... This is one of the biggest rewards of belonging to this group.' And yet another expressed the support that he/she experienced, as: 'The group has been a lifeline and I feel as if I met people who were on the same planet as me! I feel less isolated, more seen, respected for having a different opinion, empathised with and affirmed in my way (wanting to stay in a compassionate place) of managing the difficulty.'

Subtheme 1.6: Handling conflict: For several participants, the group acted as an exemplar of how to handle conflict: 'It is becoming possible to see patterns in the way we handle conflict and to offer encouragement and alternative approaches.'

Subtheme 1.7: Establishing boundaries for self-care: The inability to establish boundaries to manage expectations was evident in the data: 'How much work is enough in ministry? What about the rest of life? Where does that fit in? Again, the perspective and encouragement offered by the group – that was helpful. When we hear our own stories being reflected back at us, we can see how the expectations we have of ourselves are sometimes too high. We can give each other permission to take a break, live with more ease, and laugh more. We can allow each other to be people as well as priests – or at least to see how the priest is first and foremost a person... We are beginning to find a different list of priorities to the old ones.'

Subtheme 1.8: Health-giving: One participant spoke the permission that the group gave to let go of concerns, which was health-giving: 'We are gradually giving each other permission to say how we really feel, how let down we

sometimes are – to name our complaints, understand where they are coming from and give permission for righteous or unrighteous anger. That feels health-giving.'

Subtheme 1.9: Boundaries: One participant valued the way that the group enabled the setting of appropriate boundaries to be modelled: 'Boundaries are constantly being laid and relaid in the group. The whole experience feels like one of feeling for healthy and permissible boundaries.'

Subtheme 1.10: Empowerment: One participant felt that the group empowered him/her in several ways: 'I have been empowered by the group to make more decisions – to realise that I have choices.' Another participant valued the group as being a place which consists of: '...essentially in finding an outlet for feelings and receiving practical suggestions as to how to address specific issues as they arise.'

Subtheme 1.11: Listening: One participant felt that the group enabled him/her to listen more: 'I have learned how to listen more carefully to what people are saying, to enable others, and to honour each contribution and idea.' Another participant stated that: 'What helps is listening to how other people act and think in situations that are familiar to you, and the encouragement and advice received from other group members. Being heard and affirmed.'

Master theme 2: limitation

The participants expressed the limiting factors as:

Subtheme 2.1: Giving answers: At times, the propensity of group members to attempt to provide answers was an unhelpful experience for some participants. One participant described it like this: 'Sometimes the answers or advice we are given though are not so good, because it is difficult for others to really hear what we are saying when they have an agenda of their own.'

Subtheme 2.2: Not listening: Not fully listening to, or hearing, each other was stated as a hindrance: 'We need to encourage more careful listening within the group without judgment. That is no way saying that the group is judgmental...'

This was elaborated on by another participant: 'What doesn't always help is when people don't listen carefully to what you have said, and are too ready to sum up your position without really understanding it – when the perspectives are negative, small or limited.'

Master theme 3: learning

Learning from the groups was personal to each participant, so rather than divide them into subthemes, we have collated them. The specific insights gained were expressed as: 'I took too much responsibility for the working relationship'; 'I was frightened of losing my temper... getting angry might actually have been beneficial...'; 'I have wondered for many hours about my shadow side...'; 'I am more flexible and have had the opportunity to look again at what triggers my core issues.'

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Discussion

The data reflect many of the benefits of RPGs found in Travis' research.³ They also mirror many of the advantages that are found in similar groups that form part of counsellor training, for example, personal development groups (PDGs).^{5,6} While RPGs and PDGs are not the only methods of facilitating self-awareness and reflexivity,⁵⁻⁷ they enable core assumptions, beliefs, values and attitudes to be made visible to the person because of the group interaction. These colour our interactions and relationships with other people, and our perceptions and feelings about the world and the meaning of life.⁶ Groups can provide a space where assumptions, beliefs, values and attitudes can be fully revealed and tested in comparison with others' attitudes, through gaining responses and feedback from other people, and from seeing and feeling how behaviour, which is driven by our values, directly affects and is perceived by other members of our world.⁸⁻¹⁰ However, group participation only sometimes leads to positive outcomes¹¹ and can sometimes be destructive and dysfunctional.¹² Benson¹³ observes these 'negatives' as: feeling excluded or scapegoated; suffering the insensitivities, righteous, relevant or inappropriate anger and clumsiness of others; feeling unsafe and uncontained, overdependent on or hostile to peers or group leaders; and feeling bored, frustrated, impotent or critical of self and/or others –

all of which can occur for group participants at any time. Moon¹⁴ states that not all learners find reflexivity easy, and Robson and Robson¹⁵ argue that the need to feel 'safe' is important, and such groups don't always feel safe. These insights underpin the imperative of having a skilled facilitator. Along with the small size of the project, it is a limitation of this research that the voices of those for whom the group did not work are absent.

However, it is evident from this research that the RPGs provided a place of learning and support that can help to stop the cycle of feeling constantly drained, which leads to a drop in work standards that promote guilt and inadequacy, leading to a further drop in standards. They also provided a place for gaining a sense of wellbeing within the institutional relationships, within the parish community, and within family and self, which undoubtedly produces a healthier person and priest. They provided a space for gaining self-awareness, which is necessary in balancing a role that is called upon to model both authority and vulnerability. The RPGs gave opportunity for openness and honesty before others, and participants were required to work towards finding a way to both hold vulnerability and affirm the confidence and authority of the other. It was a chance to share their experience, and to feel less alone. The RPGs also provided an opportunity to give and receive support and encouragement in the situation that each incumbent found him/herself, which can be taken back into the life and ministry of each participant.

Conclusion

Following the Salisbury model of RPGs, St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy has offered funding and consultancy for CofE dioceses to set up groups as part of its commitment to psychologically supporting clergy and building their resilience. This initiative was developed in response to research commissioned by St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy, conducted by Christian Research,¹⁶ which highlighted the need for support to be offered to clergy. In exercising a choice of methods of support that clergy stated they would be prepared to access, 49.4 per cent (n=243) of clergy surveyed (n=492) stated that they would access a 'safe environment to offload and discuss issues (sometimes called reflective practice)'; 37.8 per cent (n=186) stated that they would access 'spiritual direction or something similar'; 47 per cent (n=231) stated that they would attend 'training on how to manage causes of stress, eg managing expectations, dealing with difficult people etc'; and 22.6 per cent (n=111) stated that they wouldn't access any support offered.

This research, and that of Christian Concern, was motivated by needing to provide support for, and maintain, clergy wellbeing. Given the evident value of the RPGs expressed by the participants, and given the stresses of ministry,² RPGs seem a worthwhile provision for CofE dioceses to organise and fund, to enable clergy to better deal with isolation and complexity, which characterises the nature of ministry that clergy face in a modern world.¹⁷

Biography

Reverend Professor Peter Madsen Gubi, PhD, MBACP (Reg Snr Accred), is Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment at the University of Chester, and Minister of Dukinfield Moravian Church.



Jan Korris is a psychotherapist and consultant on reflective practice groups to St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy, and former co-ordinator of reflective practice groups for the Diocese of Salisbury.



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