

Academic Paper

Reuniting the divine and the ordinary: reaping the ‘whole life’ benefits of coaching

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Abstract

This paper presents the benefits of coaching for clergy in the Church of England; using Constructivist Grounded Theory, underpinned by a critical realist ontology. What emerged from the research was a *Benefit Matrix Theory*, incorporating 21 distinct benefits of coaching. Represented as a *Benefits Wheel*, the central proposition of the theory is that coaching benefits are experienced in conjunction with one another, in any combination, to meet the needs of the ‘whole person’. This article focuses on one of the four conceptual findings: *Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary* and explores what coaching can achieve by intersecting spiritual, personal and professional aspects of clergy life. The research produced findings of practical use for clergy, coaches, and the wider church, and contributes to coaching theory and practice.

Keywords

coaching theory, benefits, clergy, church, grounded theory

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Introduction

The influence of clergy in their local communities is often much wider than just the congregation, parish, and neighbourhoods they serve; ‘clergy life’ encompasses a clear mandate for Christian spiritual leadership and pastoral care, as well as support and service to the community (The Church of England, 2017). Moreover, clergy working practices are distinctively entwined with their physical home, friendships, and networks; not just for them, but also their spouse and children. Requirements of the role, in addition to spiritual discernment and teaching, include strategic and visionary leadership, organisational, budgetary, staff and volunteer management (The Church of England, 2022b, 2023). It seems obvious, therefore, that a person with such broad and challenging obligations might benefit from the support provided by coaching. The academic literature sets out multiple benefits of coaching for commercial sectors (for example, Knowles, 2022), but fails to adequately offer anything in the context of clergy or ‘the church’; it is in this space that I sought to contribute.

The Church of England is a decentralised organisation, with leadership shared between 106 bishops and two archbishops (The Church of England, 2022a). As 'office holders', not employees, clergy are not subject to many of the boundaries seen in secular organisations. Without centralised support structures, clergy determine their own development, which can pose risks in terms of isolation, a lack of self-management and no clear feedback mechanisms (Joynt, 2017). The very nature of the clergy role is 'spiritual' and yet little in academic literature supports or seeks to understand how spiritual, personal and professional areas of life blend together.

What emerged from my research was a *Benefit Matrix Theory*, incorporating 21 distinct benefits of coaching. Represented as a *Benefits Wheel*, the central proposition of the theory is that coaching benefits are experienced in conjunction with one another, in any combination, to meet the needs of the 'whole person'.

In the next section, following a brief overview of the relevant literature and research methods, I provide a high-level description of my overall theory with a specific focus on *reuniting the divine and the ordinary*: a core concept which gets to the heart of a 'whole life' coaching approach. The paper concludes with an analysis of the study's implications for research and practice in coaching, an acknowledgement of its limitations, and concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Coaching benefits

The broadest coaching literature acknowledges that coaching contributes to enhancing the effectiveness of leaders, fostering professional and personal growth, and benefiting organisations (Bond & Naughton, 2011; Jackson & Cox, 2018; Tschannen-Moran, 2018; Lai & Palmer, 2019). Research indicates that coaching offers crucial features such as protected time, mental space, support, and guidance (Bozer & Jones, 2018, p. 342), whilst recent reviews emphasise additional advantages, such as increased self-awareness and self-esteem, improved relationships, and time management (Taconis, 2018; Lai & Palmer, 2019; Knowles, 2022). Although workplace coaching is primarily aimed at leadership development, with a focus on leadership behaviours (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Lai & Palmer, 2019), emerging research also highlights the potential of coaching in promoting leadership resilience (Smith, 2017; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).

Despite the limited coaching literature relating to Christian leadership, there is growing evidence which reveals a significant lack of support for Christian leaders in their overall development, and in guidance on how to operate effectively within their social contexts (Tilstra, Freed, & Baumgartner, 2011; Blackie, 2014; Elkington & Meekins, 2015; Joynt, 2017). The wellbeing outcomes of coaching are similarly diverse, ranging from general well-being to enhanced confidence, assertiveness, and in reduced stress and anxiety (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014; Blackman, Moscardo, & Gray, 2016; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Cartwright, 2022).

Although some research was conducted in the 1970s, little academic interest in clergy well-being emerged until the last decade (Blackie, 2014; Edwards, Bretherton, Gresswell & Sabin-Farrell, 2020). In response to growing concerns, the General Synod of the Church of England voted for a new covenant on clergy care and well-being in July 2020, promoting coaching and mentoring as preventative measures to avoid stress and manage transitions (The Church of England, 2019, 2020). Despite this focus, recent research indicates that during the pandemic, less than half of clergy felt supported by their bishops and less than a quarter by the national church (Village & Francis, 2021).

Although the existing literature on coaching offers a useful starting point for considering its advantages, it tends to focus more on identifying the circumstances that lead to coaching

effectiveness rather than gaining a thorough understanding of its benefits. Additionally, many of the themes in the literature are addressed in isolation from one another, and lack a holistic overview of benefits, which my research has sought to address.

Coaching discoveries beyond the self

Whilst exploring the relevant coaching literature I was drawn to existential coaching (Stelter, 2016; Spinelli, 2018) which helps individuals examine their own beliefs, values, and goals, to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. This led to consideration of the transpersonal approach to coaching which draws on the principles and practices of transpersonal psychology, emphasising the transcendent and spiritual dimensions of human experience as a holistic and integrative approach to personal development (Rowan, 2018). The literature suggests that both these approaches contribute positively to psychological and physical health and wellbeing (Stelter, 2016; Rowan, 2018). I have often been discouraged by the negative depictions and associations of religion and faith in academic texts (Arthur, Gearon & Sears, 2010; Marsden, 2015) and this literature offers a useful link between 'inner beliefs' and how they restrict or enable our 'outer lives'. The broader literature also presents coaching as a support mechanism that helps clients to grow and mature, both intellectually and emotionally, and provides a method to build strength, including in relation to internal needs (Berman & Bradt, 2006; Jackson & Cox, 2018; Bachkirova, 2022). Rowan (2018) critiques how underdeveloped this area of coaching research is, and I share his frustration regarding the lack of discussion about the tangible impacts of these forms of coaching.

Spirituality and coaching

Contrastingly, there is a growing interest within coaching research regarding spirituality and business leadership (Benefiel, 2005, 2014, Pandit, 2022). Within executive coaching it is acknowledged that bringing spiritual topics and some aspects of the inner life into coaching enhances leadership, specifically in relation to self-management and addressing the stresses that executives often face (Allen & Fry, 2019). Increasingly, the importance of spirituality within organisations, for generating ethical behaviours, employee commitment and job satisfaction, is also highlighted. These approaches have clear relevance to clergy, whose work is defined in spiritual terms, including leading worship, holding the 'cure of souls' and in administering sacraments. The broader coaching literature suggests that people generally have poor knowledge of themselves (Claxton, 1994; Claxton & Lucas, 2007) and that coaching can offer ways to bring about awareness and accountability in the client (Cox, 2013). However, maintaining clear boundaries is important when working with spiritual and religious issues (Iordanou, Hawley & Iordanou, 2017), and the desire for research to be broad and widely applicable could help to explain the lack of investigation in specific faiths and religious practices.

Coaching the 'whole life'

Literature from developmental coaching theory provides a framework for coaches to understand how to operate within 'whole life' complexities, as it seeks to work with the whole organism to bring about change (Passmore, Peterson & Freire, 2012; Jackson & Cox, 2018; Bachkirova, 2022). Bachkirova (2011, p. 4) explains that development is achieved when a client experiences a sustained and increased capacity to engage with, and influence, their environment and look after their internal needs and aspirations. Bachkirova's (2022, p. 158) 'ego states' takes a step back from the outcomes-driven emphasis of much of the coaching literature and includes a definition of 'ego with a soul', describing individuals who look to incorporate their spiritual needs and aspirations into the rest of their life. This is a useful framework for Christian spirituality; clergy life is not easily compartmentalised; geographic location, home, work, friendships, faith, and spirituality are all entwined. Overall, the coaching literature fails to address the 'whole life' nature of being clergy, or how spiritual aspects are intrinsically combined with the day-to-day responsibilities of being a

parish priest. For clergy therefore, exploring the relationship between their private and public lives through coaching may similarly lead to strengthened leadership and greater authenticity (Lawrence, 2004). Although restricted to the C of E, with little comparative evidence available in the literature, this research will have general significance to those interested in a holistic overview of the benefits of coaching as well as its relationship to faith and spirituality.

Methodology

I selected Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as a qualitative and inductive research strategy, based on its compatibility with a critical-constructivist philosophy and alignment with my research objectives. I was particularly drawn to CGT's acknowledgement of the researcher's role in the process, as this facilitated the inclusion of my own knowledge and experience in the interpretation of the findings.

My research approach was influenced by a desire to incorporate the social systems and institutional structures of the Church of England; I therefore drew upon critical realist literature, which contrasts fixed structures with subjectively constructed "multiple realities" (Oliver, 2012; Levers, 2013; Birks & Mills, 2015). My epistemological stance was constructivism, with a focus on the subjective knowledge of participants. The literature asserts that a critical-realist ontology is compatible with a constructivist epistemology (Charmaz, 2017; Levitt, 2021) and posits that "larger social structures, processes and expectations affect and shape people's lives and sense-making" (Willig, 2016, p. 35).

I collected data from a range of informed perspectives, encompassing not only the subjective experiences of the clergy themselves, but also the perspectives of professional coaches, as well as those within the Church of England who encourage, promote, or commission coaching. To secure a representative sample, I utilised snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016), reaching out through my existing networks and an online leadership newsletter to recruit a total of 12 volunteers. The sample included members of the clergy from six different dioceses, with an equal distribution of gender and a range of roles, including a bishop and a curate. Multiple perspectives were obtained from several participants holding more than one role, resulting in a total number of perspectives which exceeded the number of participants interviewed. The participant demographics and the organisation of the interviews into 4 rounds is presented in Table 1.

I used semi-structured interviewing techniques, as outlined by Charmaz (2014), to collect data via Zoom. This approach offered practical advantages, as well as enabling geographical reach with participants. Transcripts were compared with the recordings to ensure accuracy. The data analysis involved using Grounded Theory coding stages and category development, following Charmaz (2014). This process was iterative, involving continual backward and forward movements between data collection and analysis. The initial coding was completed using line-by-line coding and comparing incidents; I developed focused codes by going back to the transcripts and comparing them to larger pieces of data. This process led to the emergence of preliminary categories and the 21 interlinking benefits that formed the basis of the theory. The theoretical sampling approach informed the selection of additional participants, to achieve a wider breadth of views.

To develop the theory, I used abductive reasoning, which involves making inferences in the data to interpret how codes relate to the research question. The resulting four conceptual categories formed the basis of the *Benefits Matrix Theory*, which emerged through comparative analysis and reflecting on my own experiences and personal research records. I tested the emerging conceptual categories with two participants and their feedback helped to shape the final theory.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Table 1: Participant demographics		
Gender	Role(s)	Round
Female	Coach (internal) / Commissioner	1
Male	Clergy	1
Female	Coach (internal)	1
Male	Coach (external) / Clergy	1
Female	Coach (internal)	2
Male	Clergy / Coach (internal)	2 and 4
Female	Coach (external)	2
Male	Coach (internal) / Commissioner / Clergy	2
Female	Clergy / Commissioner	3
Male	Clergy / Coach (internal)	3
Male	Coach / Clergy / Commissioner (internal)	3 and 4
Female	Clergy	3

Memo-ing my thoughts, assumptions, and questions became a core part of my reflexive practice and sat alongside my research diary. Periodically I reviewed the memos to raise my self-awareness about how I was interpreting the data. I was aware of the implied bias in my research question, so I mitigated this by including a question in my interviews, asking how coaching failed to benefit clergy. I took deliberate moments of reflection, whilst doing monotonous tasks, to allow my mind to wander and make new connections. Finally, I made time to 'verbalise my thoughts' as my thinking evolved, to uncover new critical perspectives and question my assumptions and decisions.

Charmaz (2014, p. 213) argues that data is robust when "no new properties are emerging". I found that no new initial codes emerged from my data after the 7th interview. Critics of the principle of saturation have pointed to the term "theoretical sufficiency" (Dey, 1999, p. 257 cited in Charmaz, 2014) in discerning when enough data has been gathered and, with a limited number of participants, this seemed a more realistic end point.

The ethical considerations were addressed by removing all identifying information, using pseudonyms, and ensuring data anonymity and security. I acknowledge that my findings are only one possible outcome of the data, and that other researchers may have generated different theories.

Findings

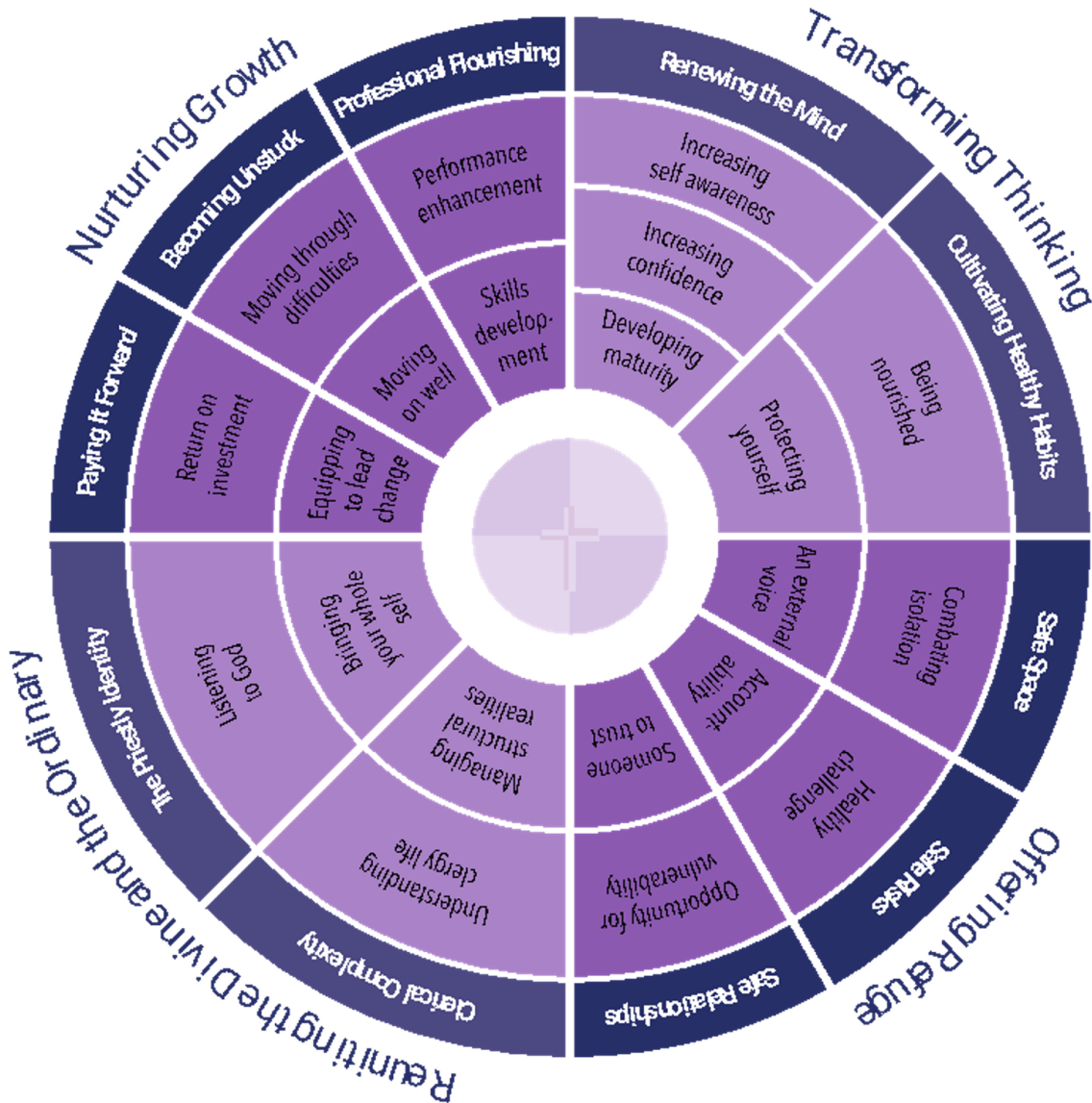
From the data, I identified 21 interlinking ways that clergy can benefit from coaching and grouped them into 10 themes; from the themes four concepts emerged:

- Offering Refuge
- Nurturing Growth
- Transforming Thinking
- Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary

The central proposition of the *Benefits Matrix Theory* is that coaching benefits are experienced in conjunction with one another, within any combination, to meet the needs of the ‘whole person’. Representing the theory as a *Benefits Wheel* (Figure 1) removes any suggestion of hierarchy or linear progression between benefits, recognising the co-creation process that takes place between the coach and clergy member, in the context of their multiple realities.

Whilst there is no suggestion that all benefits should or will be realised through a coaching relationship, the *Benefits Wheel* has potential to be used practically as a prompt to explore new areas of discovery. I will provide a brief overview of each concept before focusing in more detail on *Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary*. Where discussed, individual benefits are highlighted in bold.

Figure 1: Benefits Wheel

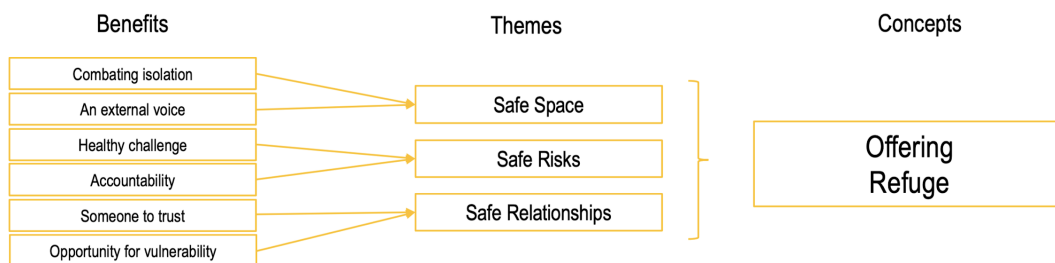


Concept 1: Offering Refuge

Offering Refuge captures both the nature of the coaching conversation and the urgency needed to address the specific gaps in support for C of E clergy. The benefits within this concept were raised across all interviews and resonated with my own experiences both as a coach and coachee. Although my research objective was not to ‘grade’ benefits for impact, it is relevant to note that this concept stands out as foundational in underpinning the other three concepts and was seen by all participants as a central part of the coaching engagement. Within this concept, **‘Someone to Trust’** was the stand-out benefit. There was a consensus in the data that without the sense of ‘refuge’ created within the coaching relationship, that other benefits may not be attained.

Figure 2 illustrates which focused codes emerged as specific benefits of coaching for clergy and how they evolved into themes, and ultimately the final concept,

Figure 2: Offering Refuge concept development

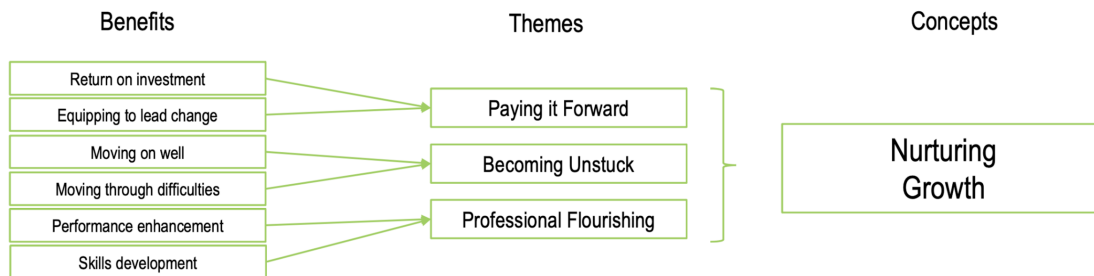


Concept 2: Nurturing Growth

Nurturing Growth is a concept which brings together the most visible and outward-facing impacts, and perhaps the most widely expected, benefits of coaching. Although it encompasses six separate benefits, two were most prominent in the data: the **‘Return on Investment’** offered by coaching and how coaching can help clergy when they are **‘Moving Through Difficulties’**. It is worth noting that **‘Equipping to lead change’** relates to the way that coaching helps clergy to influence, challenge and address specific systemic problems, rather than simply how to manage issues of change.

Figure 3 illustrates which focused codes emerged as specific benefits of coaching for clergy and how they evolved into themes, and ultimately the final concept.

Figure 3: Nurturing Growth concept development

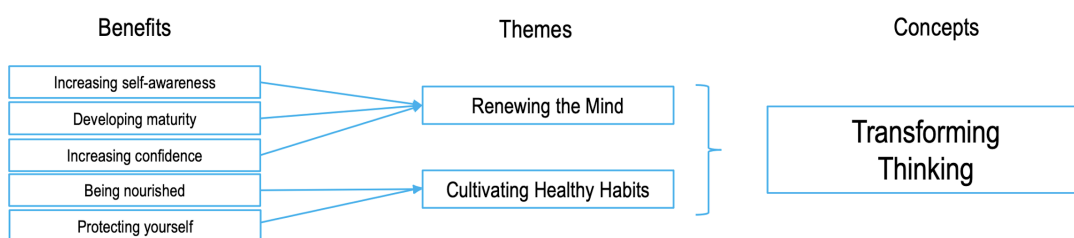


Concept 3: Transforming Thinking

Transforming Thinking is a concept which captures the impact that coaching can have on patterns of thought, particularly when experienced over multiple conversations. **‘Increasing Self-Awareness’** and **‘Increasing Confidence’** were the two stand-out benefits within this concept. An important product of transformed thinking described by coaches who had worked with multiple clergy, was the resilience that it gave them to create boundaries, overcome considerable challenges and “to not give up” (Matthew, coach/ clergy). This concept has its roots in Transformative Learning Theory which reassesses “the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based” (Mezirow’s, 1990, p. 18).

Figure 4 illustrates which focused codes emerged as specific benefits of coaching for clergy and how they evolved into themes, and ultimately the final concept.

Figure 4: *Transforming Thinking* concept development



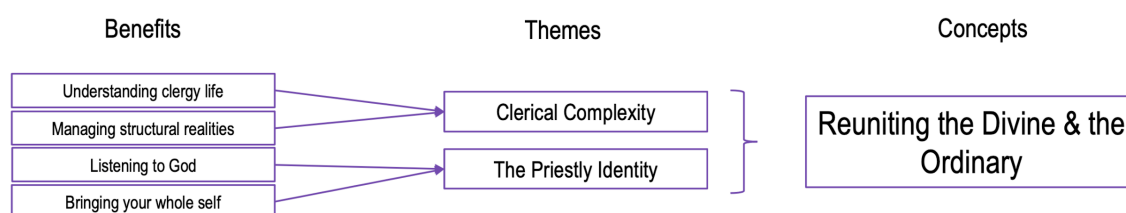
Concept 4: Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary

Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary was the most challenging concept to define from the data as it addresses the intersection between spirituality and faith, with the professional context and everyday life of clergy. As outlined, these issues are not generally addressed in the literature; however, my findings suggest that for Christian leaders, these considerations are essential to both their core identity and their working lives.

Figure 5 illustrates which focused codes emerged as specific benefits of coaching for clergy and how they evolved into themes, and ultimately the final concept. An important ‘accidental finding’ in

the data was the degree of concern felt by participants regarding systemic issues and structural challenges within the Church of England; how they impact clergy effectiveness and wellbeing and how coaching can specifically address them. I therefore identified the stand-out benefit of **‘Managing Structural Realities’** in response. The most difficult benefit to articulate was **‘Listening to God’** which initially developed as the *in vivo* code ‘God in the room’, however, my instinct was that it was not specific enough to describe the active behaviour that coaching can help clergy to undertake and therefore it eventually evolved into ‘Listening to God’.

Figure 5: Reuniting the Divine & the Ordinary concept development



Clerical Complexity

Whilst undoubtedly many of the challenges that clergy face are universal issues of leadership, something significant emerged in my analysis about the level of complexity in their lives. Several of the participants spoke frankly about how coaching had helped clergy in reconciling this challenge. As Matthew (coach/ clergy) explained: “most clergy don’t want to make peace with the church they have, they just want to have a fantasy about the church they dream of”, suggesting incongruence between their sense of ‘calling’ and the reality of clergy life. Several participants described how coaching helped in **‘Understanding Clergy Life’**; Fiona (clergy) articulated the complexity of the vocation: “it’s a calling, but it’s actually still a job and you have a calling to do that job”.

This complexity is increased by systemic challenges that clergy experience within the C of E and **‘Managing Structural Realities’**, as an essential benefit of coaching, evolved from this discovery. Henry (clergy, coach, commissioner) explained how he had seen clergy realise the influence they can have in leading change and in overcoming the “powerlessness that comes with [being] expected to live with things that are entirely beyond our capacity to deliver”. Other coaches talked about how coaching can prevent burnout and disillusionment by creating space to make sense of the systemic challenges. However, Henry also cautioned against coaching being used as “a way of making people responsible for their own wellbeing in a system that’s not good for them”.

Several participants spoke about the role of coaching to can “help them with the power” Michael (clergy/ coach), which he translated as relating to the hierarchical nature of the C of E. Nathan (coach) explained it as the pressure to “play the Church of England game”. He talked about systems which simultaneously encouraged and dissuaded clergy from being “dynamic, innovative and entrepreneurial”. I reflected in one memo that the person who spoke most positively about the complexity of clergy life, was Bishop A, who had been receiving coaching for more than 12 years, perhaps reinforcing the value of coaching over time.

The Priestly Identity

This theme relates directly to spirituality and the clergy role as priest; it comprises two closely linked, but distinct, benefits of **‘Listening to God’** and **‘Bringing Your Whole Self’**. ‘Listening to God’ is about creating space within the coaching conversation for listening and spiritual

discernment, often facilitated by the coach. The other is about personal intent and how coaching helps clergy to bring their life as a priest into their practical day-to day. I initially wondered whether the openness to discuss spiritual matters would be less relevant in coaching by comparison to spiritual direction. However, from the first interview and throughout, the data showed how coaches working with clergy create space within their sessions to welcome 'God in the room'. Henry explained: "experiencing coaching and being trained as a coach enables me to have a higher degree of trust in that third presence in the room". However, he went on to reflect that some clergy "operate in a way that [suggests] they've got to solve their own problems; they're not even looking for the presence and activity of God in what they're doing"; he had found that coaching "creates a space" for listening to God, which is welcomed by his clients and opens up the possibility of new perspectives about how disparate aspects of clergy life works together.

'Bringing Your Whole Self' is a coaching benefit orientated towards self-leadership. The data suggests that coaches have a unique advantage in creating a safe and supportive environment to explore the tensions between the spiritual and practical aspects of clergy life. This allows for a seamless flow of conversation between both themes and facilitates meaningful action. Matthew (coach/clergy) describes it as "significant rummaging work...about the intersect between their priestly identity, their parish needs and wellbeing as humans". Alison (clergy/ commissioner) agreed that the coaching conversation holds space for "understanding self in role", which is more significant than "acquiring a checklist of competences". The data suggests that the coaching process enables clergy to integrate their complete selves into all their daily interactions.

Discussion

Coaching complexity

The data revealed how integrated every aspect of life can be for clergy and that, even with good boundary setting, the interface between the public/professional and personal lives of clergy is often indistinct. In literature, boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000) points towards the problems that a lack of work/life segmentation can generate, including exhaustion and a decreasing tendency to take part in recovery activities (Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny & Bauer, 2018). The interesting contradiction here is how prevalent the challenge of boundary setting is for clergy, despite the autonomy and self-directed nature of the role. Scripture calls Christians to be "ambassadors for Christ" (The Holy Bible: Corinthians. 5:20) and it may be that, for priests, as opposed to Christians in other professions, the sense of being always 'on duty for Christ' is even more profound.

My initial review of the literature revealed a broad consensus that 'the church' does not do enough to support its clergy (Blackie, 2014; Edwards *et al.*, 2020, Edwards, Sabin-Farrell, Bretherton, Gresswell & Tickle, 2022) and that, specifically in the Covid period, clergy have not felt supported by their bishops or by the national church (Village & Francis, 2021). The literature suggests that organisations are key in defining how employees should manage boundaries (Cartwright, 2022), however there is a distinct lack of understanding and consistency about where the responsibility for clergy development lies. To build on this, the data also revealed that despite their espoused autonomy, there is a hint of uneasiness, perhaps even fear, about 'the institution' of the Church of England. Combined with the gaps in professional skills and lack of appropriate language for the work of 'being clergy', the layers of complexity in clergy life become apparent.

Literature from developmental coaching theory provides a framework for coaches to understand how to operate within these complexities, as it seeks to work with the whole organism to bring about change (Passmore *et al.*, 2012; Jackson & Cox, 2018, Bachkirova, 2022). Development takes place as the client demonstrates a consistent and lasting ability to effectively interact with and have an impact on their surroundings, as well as attend to their personal needs and goals

Bachkirova (2011). Similarly, relational theory (Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018) emphasises the important role coaches play in acknowledging the tensions between individual needs, organisational contexts, and stakeholder expectations; asking questions that the coachee has not previously considered and helping them to generate key developmental insights (Berger & Fitzgerald, 2018). Whilst recognising that it is desirable to address underlying organisational problems to help resolve stressors in the workplace (LaMontagne, Keegel, Louie, Ostry & Landsbergis, 2007), there is little research to draw on in this field (Rodríguez, Kozusznik, Peiró & Tordera, 2019).

As a caution to coaches and coaching trainers, Bachkirova & Borrington (2020) emphasise the risks of applying coaching techniques and theories without also encouraging criticality and reflexivity for themselves and for the coachee. As I reviewed my findings, I was impressed that the coaches I interviewed were generally orientated towards 'doing themselves out of a job' to actively avoid creating dependency and to equip and resource clergy in practical ways.

Coaching 'the priestly identity'

This theme considers the centrality of God and faith in the lives of clergy. It examines how coaching can help to facilitate the way that clergy listen to God and integrate the sense of 'divine leading' into their working practices and lives. The initial literature review revealed a growing interest in understanding how bringing aspects of the 'inner life' into coaching can enhance leadership, address stressors and lead to greater authenticity (Benefiel, 2014; Stelter, 2016; Spinelli, 2018; Allen & Fry, 2019). Benefiel (2014) highlights the importance of spirituality within organisations for generating ethical behaviours, employee commitment and job satisfaction. Revisiting, Bachkirova's (2022, p. 351) "ego states" it is clear from the data that the concept of a "ego with a soul" is a helpful framework for Christian spirituality and, in my experience, the more developed the ego, the more instinctively a client weaves the spiritual aspects of their lives with their professional and personal experiences. In addition to moving the client towards a healthy ego, the coach helps them to move towards a greater level of comfort with ambiguity and a broader understanding of conflicting perspectives (Beck & Cowan, 2005; Wilber, 2006; Passmore *et al.*, 2012; Jackson & Cox, 2018; Bachkirova, 2022). Given the complexity of working as clergy within the Church of England, the fundamental benefit of helping clergy to integrate aspects of their inner and outer lives appears essential and has been illustrated throughout my findings.

The literature review revealed that taking a transpersonal approach to coaching contributes to the psychological and physical health and wellbeing of the client (Stelter, 2016; Rowan, 2018). Transpersonal coaching empowers the coach to offer questions like "what does your soul say about that?" or "what is God saying?" (Rowan, 2018, p. 147), and opens the possibility for the client to acknowledge that answers may lie outside themselves. In combination with this, exploring core values, which are central to personal identity (Stelter, 2016, 2017; Spinelli, 2018), helps the coachee to bring together human desires and drivers with a sense of God's 'leading'.

My findings, along with my own personal experience, confirm the sense of conflict that arises from the tension between what a person perceives as 'God's will' verses their own human will. Whilst spiritual direction tends to be focused on spiritual practices and strengthening spiritual resources (Clarke, 2022), my data suggests that this type of Christian discernment also takes place within the coaching relationship and can be fundamental in providing "existential certainty" (Stelter 2016, p. 340). However, as Bachkirova (2022, p. 372) cautions: "coaching is not a spiritual practice" and therefore avoiding abuses of power that can come from working with an unformed ego must be paramount; appropriate awareness and training for coaches working with clergy is essential. The literature suggests that when consistent attention is given to something, over time, it will begin to shape the self (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018); and as development occurs, new learning is absorbed into the whole organism and its behaviours (Cox, 2013, Bachkirova, 2022). This makes a compelling argument that maximum benefit from coaching is received when it is experienced over time and integrates the whole self in seeking meaningful change.

Conclusion

In my research I set out to discover how coaching can benefit clergy in the Church of England, using Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. My data analysis led to the generation of a *Benefits Matrix Theory*, represented as a *Benefits Wheel*. This theory presents four concepts: *Offering Refuge*, *Transforming Thinking*, *Nurturing Growth* and *Reuniting the Divine and the Ordinary*. I focused on this final concept in this paper because it represents the most under-researched aspect in the academic coaching literature.

Underpinning the *Benefits Matrix Theory* are 21 individual benefits of coaching for clergy, represented as an interdependent matrix, organised into ten themes. The theory suggests that coaching is of considerable value to clergy and can support aspects of their 'whole life', including spiritual, professional, and practical realities. Benefits are usually received in multiple combinations and the theory equips both clergy and coaches to maximise those benefits in a personalised way.

This empirical study contributes to the growing base of coaching theory and research and provides insight into an un-researched topic for an under-researched sector. Although bespoke to clergy within the C of E, the *Benefit Matrix Theory* consolidates specific descriptions of coaching benefits, which are often vague and compartmentalised in the coaching literature, and often exclude 'whole life' or spiritual perspectives altogether; it crosses the boundaries of executive/ life/ developmental/ performance and transpersonal coaching. The research also offers a way to look at coaching benefits outside of the profit and performance-driven motivations, which often underpin work-based coaching initiatives (Knowles, 2022).

In the absence of relevant theoretical or evidence-based frameworks with which to address the question, I wanted to ensure that my theoretical findings had concrete value for coaching practice. The limited assessment I have completed so far suggests that the *Benefit Matrix Wheel* could be used as a practical tool for coaches, similar to the Wheel of Life coaching tool (Byrne, 2005), to gauge clergy satisfaction or fulfilment under each benefit, and prioritise areas for the coaching conversation to explore. Moreover, as an evidence-based framework, coaching trainers, both in and outside the C of E, can use it to enhance training materials and support the equipping of coaches and evaluation of coaching programmes.

As a novice CGT researcher, I am aware that the rigour of my study may have been limited by my inexperience. I am also pro-coaching and a committed member of the Church of England and, whilst I have sought to mitigate that in the reflexivity process, it can create bias. With more time I would have liked to have interviewed more participants, especially clergy from non-stipendiary ministry and more clergy who were not also coaches; I would also have liked more opportunity to 'step away' from the data before making decisions and that was not always possible. I anticipate the *Benefits Wheel* may continue to evolve as I test it further. Whilst not generalisable to the wider population, my research has transferability to other Christian denominations, broader Christian leadership in the charity and education sectors, and even within other faiths. I hope it inspires further research into the 'whole life' benefits of coaching.

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About the author

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