

Supervision in ministry

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Introduction

The term *supervision* is used in counselling and therapy professions where practitioners may consult their supervisor about a particular case and provide oversight or teaching.¹ In ministry, however, the dynamic of supervision can also include a focused on the experience of minister in relationship with God. The supervision relationship seeks to prayerfully enable a minister to develop conscious reflective capacities with which to observe their experience of ministry with greater clarity of vision and better serve their community.

... supervision is the processing of the inner experiences of [the minister] that are evoked in [ministry] in order to help them grow in awareness of their reactions and responses, to allow them to respond in a God-centred and interiorly free manner, and to maintain a contemplative focus.²

Where ministers seek to be led by the Holy Spirit in service of their community, supervisors are ‘the servants of the servants’.³ In this sense, supervision of ministers ‘...is a conversation between peers that ultimately fosters the wellbeing of an absent other, [the ministry context].’⁴

Models of supervision

Supervision models can vary along a spectrum where, at one end, the focus is on the ministry context and circumstances of a case presented. Here the goal is to help the minister de-brief and develop greater clarity about how to manage a particular case in ministry. At the other end of the spectrum, supervision can focus on the inner life of the minister. Here the focus is on the internal dynamics of the minister, which emerge as a consequence of the case presented.

Room	Dual Focus	Case
- just what is happening now	- both case and now	- just focus on case
- Process centred here and now	- here and now - then and there	- case centred back there then

¹ Barry, William A., 1988, “Supervision Improves Ministry”, in *Human Development*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 1988.

² Maureen Conroy RSM, *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995), 13.

³ Maureen Conroy, RSM, “The Ministry of Supervision: Call, Competency, Commitment”, *Presence* (September 1995), 13.

⁴ Mary Rose Brumpus, *Supervision of Spiritual Directors*. (London: Morehouse, 2005), 5.

Supervision focus

Research suggests that there is benefit in a shifting focus in supervision. Supervision does well to look in a variety of places in support of the minister presenting a case:

1. Narrative of the ministry context
2. The minister's activity in the context
3. The process of the ministry context
4. The inner state of the minister emerging from context
5. The supervision process
6. The supervisor's experience

[Supervision] strives to assist directors to notice blind spots, areas of resistance, vulnerability and brokenness that prevent them from staying with ... [their ministry context]. Also, supervision intends to help spiritual directors be in touch with and move with their attraction to God ... [in ministry] so that they, in turn, can help ... [communities] linger with and respond to God's vibrant presence.⁵

Supervision in ministry attends to both the inner life of the minister and the relationship dynamics in the ministry context. Edtadt's framework for supervision suggests that alongside the focus on the minister's inner life, supervisor's capacity to offer empathy and encouragement to the director in the supervision relationship will aid the director in fostering their ministry. Ministers are encouraged to develop clarity and freedom in their identity as a ministers.

Peer group Supervision

When supervision occurs in peer groups there is a spectrum of peer group models according to the degree of authority given to a supervisor role.

individual supervision
in group

participative
group supervision

cooperative
group

It can be helpful for peer groups to covenant to develop a process for the supervision session. Aware of the invitation to freedom in supervision, the supervision session follows a pattern which will aid the group process and maintain the focus on the person presenting the case. People in the group take a specific role for each session. The presenter brings a case from ministry experience which holds a question, concern or uncertainty they would like help to explore. The observer holds the group in a contemplative stance throughout the session and seeks to observe movements of the Spirit in the supervision experience. The supervisor assists the presenter explore their case. The time keeper helps the group keep to agreed process and monitors the time, moving the group process along as needed. They also hold an observer role. Some more experienced groups may choose to share the supervision role so that the

⁵ Maureen Conroy, RSM, 1995, 13.

1. Establish roles – Presenter, Observer/s, Supervisor, Time-keeper.
2. Contemplative prayer – led by observer.
3. Presenter shares case – ‘I need help with...’
4. Questioning period for clarification of need and presenter’s key question.
5. Supervisor invites presenter to explore case with focus on the presenter’s stated need.
6. Pause
7. Presenter responds
8. Observer responds
9. Discussion period
10. Conclusion – people name personal learning from group experience.

Supervision skills

The supervision process begins as the supervisor attends to the presenter and their experience of the case they bring to supervision. This phase will call on the supervisor’s skills in listening and building an alliance with the presenter. As the session unfolds, the supervisor seeks to foster an awareness of the issues and theme around which the Spirit invites growth and learning. The supervisor can aid the presenter’s exploration of issues and themes such as: places of unfreedom; the experience of interior movements; psychological dynamics of case; the relationship between characters in the case; or the sense of God in the case.

The supervision session seeks to enable the presenter to develop new insights and the supervisor can encourage, support and strengthen these by providing space for articulation of new awareness. There are three layers of communication at which insights can emerge. Conscious communication uses verbal, visual, sound offered in a clear form, which is accompanied by easily named feelings and can be processed cognitively. Preconscious communication uses inter-subjective material where messages are implied and often sensed but not named. This level of communication can take the form of intuition and need time to interpret and understand. It calls for clarification to be accurately received. Supervisors can support new insights move from a preconscious to a conscious level by creating space for exploring and articulation. The third level of communication is the unconscious level. The messages here are enacted nonverbally, symbolically and/or ritually. This communication can be experienced as potentially confusing unrelated thoughts, fantasies, emotions, images and bodily sensations. Supervisors may sense some of what is being communicated at this level through listening to the symbols, themes and stories being shared. Care needs to be taken not to expose what is in the unconscious before a person is ready to receive it.⁶ As insights move into consciousness, the presenter can personalise their learning and integrate the discoveries gained in the supervision session into their ministry practice.⁷

⁶ Janet Ruffing “Layers of conscious and Unconscious Communication” ((handout given at the Introduction to Supervision of Spiritual Directors course, Melbourne, July 2009, drawn from Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom Use of the Self in Pastoral Counselling*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2004), 71).

⁷ Janet K. Ruffing, “An integrated Model of Supervision in Training Spiritual Directors”, *Presence*, (Vol 9., No. 1, February 2003): 25 -26.

[The supervision process] requires a respectful unknowing, a willingness to remain within God's Hidden Mystery... The guidance of the Spirit enables us to discern when a supervisee needs to be shown how to do something, when to wait patiently, when to be supportive, when to nudge in a different direction, when to tell stories and when to be appropriately self-disclosure.⁸

Contemplative stance in supervision

Ministry practice assumption that 'God continues to communicate the divine presence and life to human beings.'⁹ Ministry, therefore, that seeks to foster an awareness of God's presence and attend to the human desire to develop a conscious relationship with God. Supervisors need sufficient theoretical knowledge of the Christian mystical tradition as well breadth and depth in attending to their own lived experience in prayer to journey with the presenter.¹⁰ Indeed, the supervision session becomes a space of prayerfully attending to the indwelling Spirit in case presented.

Attending to the indwelling Spirit invites observation of inner movements and counter movements. The contemplative conversation evokes initial reactions and uncovers the attitudes and feelings that lie beneath them. The origins feelings and attitudes can lie in past experiences of brokenness, unfreedom or unresolved conflicts; and in joy, grounded truth, freedom or discovering giftedness. Articulating these experiences provide growth in self-awareness and leads to freedom. Presenters are encouraged to articulate their felt sense of God's presence or absence in the direction session. They seek to gain insights into the way God is beckoning to the directee into relationship of greater intimacy and living the gospel more generously. The quality of contemplation invites all in the supervision experience to linger with the presenter's experience of God's presence. In this way, the supervision session is prayer: our response to the felt sense of God already praying in us.¹¹ Supervisors facilitate the presenter's capacity to apply insights and learning they gain in supervision to their ministry practice.¹²

The contemplative stance supports supervisors in sensing God's desire for the presenter. The supervisor may become open to intuitive awareness of areas of freedom and unfreedom in the presenter and can test such awareness by asking questions that gently explore issues. When issues are present in the presenter's felt sense, or preconscious level of awareness, the supervisor can encourage the presenter to find language to articulate and strengthen emerging insights. Care and patience are needed to journey over time toward greater awareness and insights.¹³

⁸ Mary Anne Bumpus, p. 14

⁹ William Reiser, *Seeking God in All Things*. (Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Janet Ruffing and Kathryn King, "Attentiveness to Director's Support for the Directee's Spiritual Development" (handout given at the Introduction to Supervision of Spiritual Directors course, Melbourne, July 2009).

¹¹ Janet Ruffing and Kathryn King, "Attentiveness to Director's Support for the Directee's Spiritual Development". (Handout given at the Introduction to Supervision of Spiritual Directors course, Melbourne, July 2009), 3.

¹² Maureen Conroy, RSM, 1995, 41- 42.

¹³ Janet Ruffing "Shared Wisdom" Janet Ruffing "Layers of conscious and Unconscious Communication" ((handout given at the Introduction to Supervision of

The contemplative approach also listens for the differences between the operative theology and the espoused theology. What people say about God may not be in alignment with what people feel about God. Supervisors can encourage presenters to be curious about the language people use to speak about God by asking about the felt sense beneath the words to uncover the operative theology.

Conclusion

The ministry of supervision of ministers offers another layer of contemplative holding space around the ministry context. Emerging models of supervision encourage supervisors to join the minister in attending to God in the ministry environment. Freedom, however, is vital for supervisors to move with the Spirit as they one another through skill acquisition, attending to the experience, exploring issues, growing self-knowledge, discovering insights and developing an integrated identity as ministers.

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