

Flourishing Together: Students, Supervisors, and Sites in Field Education

Susan MacAlpine-Gillis

What leads to the mutual flourishing of student, supervisor, and site in an experience of supervised field education? For seminary coordinators of field education who are responsible for matching students with supervisors and sites, is there a recipe that might be helpful? As an experienced supervisor who served a congregation that took seriously the formation of ministers and flourished in the process, I felt that understanding the ingredients that facilitate flourishing for all was worthy of investigation.

Matt Bloom, researcher with the Flourishing in Ministry project, writes, “Flourishing happens when ministry is a life-enriching rather than life-depleting experience.”¹

He outlines four dimensions of flourishing in ministry:

- daily well-being—the quality of our daily lives;
- resilience—our capacity to adapt, change, and respond to life’s challenges and also our capacity to grow, learn, and develop new capabilities and capacities;
- authenticity—our sense of self-integrity and dignity; and

Susan MacAlpine-Gillis is assistant professor of pastoral theology, coordinator of the summer distance M.Div. program, and recruitment and vocations coordinator at the Atlantic School of Theology. Email: smacalpinegillis@astheology.ns.ca.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

* © Copyright 2022 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
All Rights Reserved

- thriving—the meaning and significance we experience in our lives; our sense of having values and beliefs that inspire us, create purpose, and provide moral guidance to our lives; experiencing deep and positive connections with others.²

How are these dimensions of flourishing experienced in the context of field education?

Understanding the conditions that lead to mutual flourishing could result in better matches on the part of seminaries and the wider church. It is in the best interest of all to have everyone thrive in supervised ministry: students, supervisors, and sites.

To explore this question, I conducted a survey that invited participants to think about the ways in which they as student or supervisor and the site flourished, or did not, during an experience of field education. Invitations to participate went to twenty-four individuals, twelve students, and twelve supervisors. All connected to Atlantic School of Theology. Nine supervisors and five students participated, representing Anglican, United Church of Canada, and Presbyterian congregations. The majority of the supervisors were well experienced; 66% had been involved in the ministry of supervision for more than ten years, and all but one had more than five years' experience.

When asked why supervisors chose to become a supervisor-mentor, the responses were varied. Although a few identified a sense of "duty" and wanting to support students in developing their skills in pastoral ministry, most identified a concrete benefit to themselves and their sites. One supervisor said, "It forces me to keep abreast of theological thought and is a 'continuing education' situation." Others, who also identified their delight in learning new things and staying fresh, echoed this. Drawing on the imagery of Isaiah 43, one supervisor wrote, "The willingness of both students and congregations with a student to try new things is something that renews me, sometimes like water in the desert." There was a strong sense in the responses that sharing in theological discussions, planning worship together, and the mutual learning that occurs in field education brought a level of daily happiness, or well-being, to the supervisor.

Thinking about those supervisory experiences where all flourished, supervisors and students were asked three parallel questions. Each was asked to identify the qualities and commitments the supervisor, student,

and site brought to the relationship Independent of each other, supervisors and students identified remarkably similar characteristics for each other.

SUPERVISOR QUALITIES AND COMMITMENTS

In thinking about the qualities and commitments that the supervisor brought to the relationship, one dominant theme was the commitment to authenticity, both by the supervisor and by the student. It is easy for a student to model themselves after a favourite pastor or a family member if they come from a clergy family. Some students have an idealized version of what a minister should look like or how they should preach. Being told that “the best” ministers preach without notes, some aspire to that style when it might not be right for them. Becoming comfortable in their own skin and finding their own path is a critical step in ministerial formation. One student identified the importance of the supervisor’s “encouragement to let my gifts for ministry shine in my work.”

There is a wonderful story that comes from the Jewish tradition about a man named Simon. Simon wanted always to be more like Moses. That was his constant worry. And he kept going to the rabbi and saying, “Rabbi, I must lead my life so that I live more like Moses did.” The rabbi told him once, “Simon, God will not ask you why you were not more like Moses. God will ask you why you were not more like Simon.”³

Helping students be their authentic selves is an essential commitment for supervisors if students are to flourish. As one supervisor noted, “I believe I brought a love for authenticity to the relationships I had with students. I encouraged them to find their own voice in preaching, to be themselves in their pastoral encounters, and to discover and share their passions in their teaching projects.” Another supervisor expressed similar sentiments, emphasizing the need to understand that “the student is not like me, and I need to support him/her/them to be the best him/her/them they can be.” To do that, students need a sense of freedom and a relationship of trust to risk failure. As one student noted, their supervisor demonstrated a “willingness to allow me to make mistakes and learn.” Another student said, “The supervisor trusted me and was able to draw out my learning edges.”

One student commented on the various things that her supervisor did that helped her grow into and embody or “wear” her new role. By having the student wear a robe and sit on the platform to lead parts of worship and

by including her name in the bulletin, the supervisor affirmed for both the student and the congregation her “clergy status.” Another supervisor mirrored these actions and wrote of their “willingness to give the student loads of visibility, and commitment to publicly endorsing the student’s role as ‘student minister.’” The supervisor went on to say this was “part of giving them (the student) a taste of the weird ‘authority’ of pastoral identity.” These actions were formational and led to a flourishing experience.

Many supervisors identified a commitment to engage students in all aspects of congregational life and to share with them in collaborative and collegial ways. One supervisor wrote, “I believe deeply in partnerships in ministry and so, where appropriate, I allowed some of the work to be more of a partnership rather than merely a supervisory relationship.” Students were quick to note the value “in being treated like a colleague” even as they were aware of the inherent supervisor/student power dynamic that exists just by nature of the relationship.

A final common theme identified by supervisors and confirmed by students was the willingness to prioritize time for supervision, ask hard questions, give honest feedback, and engage in deep theological conversations.

STUDENT QUALITIES AND COMMITMENTS

All five students and all nine supervisors identified two overarching and interconnected qualities or commitments brought by students which led to mutual flourishing: the willingness and eagerness to learn and the desire to engage and get to know the site.

This deep desire to learn was usually accompanied by strong learning goals and the willingness to step outside of their comfort zone. As one supervisor said, “The students arrived with good learning goals, a lot of interest in getting solid experience, and willingness to give things a try.”

A student with multiple field education experiences identified an eagerness and determination to learn from each placement and each supervisor; a chance to identify and explore those areas where I lacked breadth and depth of experience. I particularly appreciated those placements where I was encouraged to test my own learning edges, and then received constructive feedback—both negative and positive, as the situation warranted.

Another student identified their own “recognition of how much I needed to learn.”

Although it seems obvious that a student engaged in a period of contextual education would want to dive into learning and be excited about the possibilities being offered, that is not always the case. One supervisor, comparing experiences, wrote, “Of the three students I supervised; only one was ‘unteachable’ in that he grudgingly came to the work, had authority issues with women and didn’t think there was anything I or the parishioners could teach him.”

In my own experience of supervising more than twenty students over thirty years, the students who came with an open and teachable spirit and were able to recognize that every moment was a learning opportunity flourished. As an on-site supervisor, able to easily observe the actions of a new student, it never took long to differentiate a student who was fully engaged in the process of learning and had a desire to engage the congregation and learn from the people from the student who was just “putting in time” or “jumping through hoops.” Supervisors in this survey who reported less than flourishing experiences identified two things, a lack of vocation and an attitude of already knowing everything. One supervisor contrasted their less than flourishing experience with a student who “knew everything” with two which flourished, saying, “The two other students were authentic, invited relationships without being overbearing or needy. They also recognized and respected the gifts and life experiences parishioners offered.” Authenticity and respect emerge as key to flourishing.

Students in this survey who flourished identified their own “willingness to dive into the life of the community” in addition to a “willingness to learn from the people in the church” and a “willingness to learn from my own mistakes” as key to their flourishing. This desire to engage the congregation and then the taking of actions to make it so is critical in forming a pastoral relationship. This is true for pastors when called or appointed to new congregations, and it is true for students in field education. Even if the relationship is for a limited amount of time, as many field education or internship experiences are, the desire to get to know the people and quickly engage members of the congregation is supremely important. These experiences contribute to the students’ development of their own pastoral identity.

Just as authenticity was cited as an important quality for supervisors, authenticity was also clearly at the heart of one supervisor’s reflection about

a student: "The student brought honesty and openness to the relationship, being themselves without trying to project a false front of what they thought a minister should be. They told me their stories and let the lessons of their life stories become gifts for ministry." The ability of this student to integrate their life stories with an emerging pastoral identity and to flourish meshes with the research that Matt Bloom highlights around how self-identity is formed. "Our identities form as life stories, and our brains write them into an autobiography of our lives, what researchers call a life narrative."⁴

SITE QUALITIES AND COMMITMENTS

The third component of mutual flourishing is the location in which the student offers leadership. The congregation I served for twenty-six years saw itself as an educational site and took great joy in helping students learn and grow. The congregation flourished because of the many students it supported. They welcomed the unique gifts and passions each student brought and the ministry ideas that the students initiated. Some student-led programs only lasted while the student was present to lead, but others took on a life of their own and became part of the fabric of the congregation. The ability of members of the site to challenge and support were two key characteristics that students and supervisors identified as critical. Equally important was a genuine interest in the gifts the student brought to the site, affirmed by the active participation of members in student-led events. "They showed up for the services and the programs the student was doing, and readily gave critical feedback, not just cheerleading."

As one student noted about the two churches where she was placed, "They saw themselves as teachers and held within them the larger mission of 'hatching a good minister.' They wanted students to do well and offered good feedback that was helpful in terms of learning, the people were welcoming and always good to offer hospitality and feedback." This same student was also placed in a long-term care facility where her daily interactions were with seniors, many at the end of their lives. She wrote,

My time at the nursing home brought a different kind of quality in that the seniors who were struggling were the teachers and they usually did not know it. Death and health struggles were always touchable on some level, as was depression, sorrow, and joy. Every one of them had some wisdom to share on the meaning of life and death (spoken and unspoken) for me as a student to gaze through with a theological lens.

This identity as teachers with wisdom to share on the part of the site is important and contributes to a flourishing reciprocal relationship between student and site. Each has something to give and something to receive. As one supervisor noted, "The most important quality, that I observed, is a willingness to be teachers/guides/mentors. One congregation did not realize this at first, but as we worked together to prepare for the coming of the ministry student, they began to take on that identity and role and were excited about helping a student learn and grow."

The opportunity to have a student can contribute to a congregation's sense of worth. As one supervisor wrote, "The congregation was pleased to imagine they'd be useful and was ready to support the students by valuing their contribution and also participating in achieving the learning goals." Another supervisor identified that having a student "raised the confidence of the two sites as a whole. Both were small congregations with a mostly elderly population. Being asked to be a learning site for ministry students was a huge boost."

Not every congregation is suited to be a learning site, so it is imperative that those with the responsibility of placing students are methodical in their choice. One off-site supervisor noted that the student she was supervising, who was in a team ministry, was in a very difficult situation because the student and the incumbent minister were not in a flourishing relationship. The supervisor wrote, "From the student's perspective, the church council was dismissive of her ministry in favour of supporting the lead minister in his mistreatment of her." It is unclear from the survey data what role, if any, the lay supervision team played in this situation or how much training the site had received as they embarked on this relationship. What is clear from the data is that a well-trained lay supervision team contributes to a flourishing experience.⁵

The survey used the name "lay supervision team" to refer to the small group of lay people, usually three to five, mandated with the responsibility to work closely with the student. This group is designed to be a microcosm of the congregation and is usually expected to meet with the student monthly. This is the term we use in our field education program. Over the years, and in other denominations, this group has also been called a lay support team and a lay resource team. The name of the group is important as it identifies the major focus of the team. There are distinct differences in the actions which accompany support, resources, and supervision. One of

the reasons for the shift from “support” to “supervision” was to capture the importance of offering constructive feedback on all aspects of the student’s work, in addition to support, even if that meant naming things that were not going well. One student captured this dual role by saying, “They were my cheerleaders; they engaged me in constructive criticism.” Being a resource to the student by sharing personal expertise congruent with the student’s learning goals is certainly something to keep in mind when a lay supervision team is formed. A student who has a learning goal around outreach will benefit greatly from a member of the lay supervision team involved in that ministry.

How a lay supervision team is formed and who serves is important. As one student wrote, “With the help of the supervisor, the right people were chosen for the job and covered a broad swath of the church demographics in terms of age. They took their role seriously. It was helpful to have a couple of younger people on my team as well as older folks who knew the traditions of the church family well.”

In responding to the question “What role did the lay supervision team play in supporting your learning?,” all five students affirmed the team members’ role in helping them flourish. One student, who out of five placements only had a lay supervision team in two, wrote, “The team was extremely helpful in giving more feedback, both from a congregational point of view and [as] a different ‘eyes’ on my development as a student minister.” Another student, reflecting on three terms of field education in the same site, wrote, “My LST was a large part of my experience. We seemed to click from the very start. They were open and participated willingly—brainstormed with me—gave me relevant feedback. The three terms at that congregation would have been sadly lessened if I had not had the assistance of the LST.”

The ability of members of the lay supervision team to simultaneously offer support and constructive feedback in order that the student can learn is imperative. This comment from yet another student offers a clue for how that might happen best: “Our meetings were full of prayer, excellent conversation, and mutual respect.” The naming of mutual respect as essential for flourishing is congruent with Bloom’s work in identifying the importance of respect in leading to dignity, which allows for authenticity.⁶

Although supervisors were not asked directly about the role of the lay supervision team, they were asked to identify structures that were in place to support flourishing. Some spoke of the framework provided by the

school around learning goals and the commitment to regular supervision, as well as opportunities to meet with other supervisors, but the most frequent response was the importance of the lay supervision team.

In the congregation I served for twenty-six years, members of the lay supervision team flourished as they experienced learning new things from the students and had the chance to reflect on their own faith development. More than one member of the lay supervision team experienced their own call to ministry through the process. Other supervisors have also noted the faith development that occurred in members of the lay supervision team. Specific research on the experience of members of a lay supervision team could be insightful.

Finally, supervisors were asked to recall a story that demonstrated or fostered mutual flourishing. Each story revolved around the student taking initiative to move forward on a specific learning goal even when that took courage on the part of the student or the supervisor had to “push” a little harder for the student to accomplish a task they were reluctant to undertake due to fear of failure. One story highlighted how risk and “failure” led to growth.

The student and myself attempted to offer a ‘dialogue style sermon.’ It seemed really good in our minds but did not come off well. While there were some criticisms, there were also some good critiques and suggestions to ‘make the next one better.’ It was not something that I, the student, or the community of faith had experience with before, yet the overall reaction demonstrated a level of trust and engagement by the community of faith that allowed for it to be a learning and growth experience for us all.

These opportunities for learning and growth in a supportive environment are crucial to the development of resilience, which is essential if students and supervisors are to thrive in ministry.

The survey data suggests that mutual flourishing of student, supervisor, and site happens regularly in field education. Daily well-being, resilience, authenticity, and thriving, which Bloom outlines in his work as essential for flourishing, are congruent with the experiences of the students and supervisors in this study. Of the four dimensions, authenticity was the one named most frequently. This commitment to authenticity allowed students and supervisors to enter a mutually beneficial relationship of exploration and learning in ways which allowed for mistakes and subsequent growth.

The deep desire on the part of the student, supervisor, and members of the lay supervision team to commit time and energy to the process was critical.

Based on the responses from students and supervisors, I would suggest the following recipe for mutual flourishing in supervised ministry:

1. Take one student who embodies an authentic sense of self and enters the process with an open and teachable heart.
2. Add an eagerness to learn and goals which facilitate that learning as well as a willingness to risk.
3. Place gently in a site which recognizes that part of their vocation is to help form and train students for ministry by providing a safe and supportive space for learning.
4. Add in opportunities for the student to share their unique gifts and receive honest and helpful feedback.
5. Mix regularly with a supervisor committed to authenticity and mutuality in the relationship.
6. Saturate the mixture with prayer.
7. Allow ample time for the Holy Spirit to infuse the process.
8. Enjoy together the fruits of your labour.

NOTES

- 1 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: Clergy, Ministry Life and Wellbeing: Research Insights from the Flourishing in Ministry Project*, unpublished paper, July 2017, 3.
- 2 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 2.
- 3 Francis H. Wade, "Gifts," Day1, July 27, 1997, <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200258d/gifts>.
- 4 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 37.
- 5 Support for this type of group is discussed further in Matthew Floding's "Fostering a Mentoring Environment," *Reflective Practice* 32 (2012): 272–81, <https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/77/76>.
- 6 Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 32.