

Supervisory Practice in a Distance-Learning Program of Formation for Ministry

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In 2007, an unusual opportunity arose for the Episcopal seminary where I serve. A neighboring diocese needed a supervised course of academic and practical formation for priestly ministry for Christopher Wallace,¹ a man called to serve as a priest by the remote, rural congregation in which he worshipped. A full three-year Master of Divinity degree program was impossible for Christopher because of family responsibilities and inappropriate because of his age and financial situation.

Because Christopher was a long-time Episcopalian, unusually well-read and theologically informed, the diocese contracted with the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP) for an individualized learning plan. Such an individual local formation for ministry was a new departure for the diocese. I was the faculty member designated as Christopher's advisor and supervisor.

QUESTIONS RAISED

This opportunity challenged me to think about CDSP's educational and formational strategies and commitments, as well as my own supervisory practice. We stress the reflective integration of rigorous academic work with ministry practice. These norms are well-summarized in *Educating Clergy*,² an in-depth study of the ways residential seminary programs form the ministerial imagination that informs our teaching practice and curriculum.

The supervisory practices to effect this reflection and integration rely on regular, but informal, encounters between faculty and students in the classroom, through the advisory relationship and participation in the worship and community life. Would the use of email, the telephone, and occasional face-to-face contact provide the same quality of supervision? Would online courses and reflection on ministry done in a remote setting effect the same coherent program of formation?

The educational plan we decided on was a two-year combination of online courses, brief residential intensives at CDSP when the community was absent, reading courses, local apprenticeship, and online reflection on his expanding practice of ministry. Christopher had several supervisors: a retired priest with temporary charge of his congregation discussed practical issues arising from their shared ministry there; online courses allowing Christopher to discuss academic issues with instructors; practical training in pastoral min-

istry with a local chaplain provided another arena for reflection and supervision; and regular email exchanges with me which were intended to integrate his program of formation and study.

Several unusual elements in Christopher's situation—his high level of church experience, his strong motivation for self-directed study, and his superior writing skills—were advantages as we began. Additionally, the fact that he and I had been fellow-parishioners and friends for several years meant we already had a relationship. For these reasons, Christopher was a positive candidate to attempt a distance-supervision experiment with for the first time at CDSP and in the diocese.

INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE

During the two years, there were a surprising number of occasions for supervision: over 150 email exchanges occurred between Christopher and me. In addition, there were regular email exchanges with his local supervisors, three formal sermon critiques given by his congregation, sixteen reflection papers discussed with me via email, one major theological and one major scriptural paper for which he received faculty feedback, five or six phone conversations between the two of us, and three visits by me to his congregation—where I met with Christopher and his local discernment team to review his program.

As I review these largely electronic interactions, I am struck both by the amount and depth of reflection on academic work and ministerial practice that Christopher did, and by the relatively large amount of intentional and critically-reflective supervision he received from me compared to a residential student. The simple fact that using email requires writing, and that emails can be saved, gave our work a substance that the same work done informally with residential students does not share. Christopher's transformation over time was accessible to further reflection and this compensated for our relative lack of face-to-face contact.

In Christopher's formation process, many of the usual residential theological dynamics were reversed. Because residential students have easy access to academic study in the classroom, faculty may worry whether students get enough ministerial practice to reflect upon and integrate adequately with their academic study. Christopher was immersed in the practice of ministry in his congregation as a licensed preacher and liturgist. As he became the *de facto* pastoral leader, a more public presence in his community emerged. My worry was providing enough academic content and facilitating his integration of academics and ministerial practice from "the opposite direction." Our super-

visory exchanges usually began with issues arising from ministry practice, but Christopher's academic interests were always brought into the process of reflection in effective ways.

My supervisory task was to help Christopher make the transition from being a reflective participant in the life of his congregation to becoming a reflective professional ministry leader. He learned contextual interpretation by exploring his context to me and within himself. I observed his personal transformation as Christopher developed into a particular kind of person: a priest. Over time, his questions and concerns shifted significantly from issues of academic content to reflecting on the pastoral relationships he had initially viewed with trepidation. His confidence in his skill-set increased and nuanced spiritual awareness of his priestly-calling deepened.

We designed the program to make extensive use of Christopher's regular preaching as a primary vehicle for reflection and integration. He preached more than 20 sermons over the course of two years and we used those to reflect on his skills in scriptural exegesis, his theological depth and coherence, and his creative pastoral imagination. We did the same with the liturgies he planned and led. The reflection on pastoral and theological issues that arose more and more in Christopher's reflective emails was often manifested in his preaching preparation and in his liturgical design work.

Another key programmatic element was Christopher's reflection on creating and/or working with two ministry groups (responsible for liturgy and pastoral care) and his leadership of the Vestry (the governing board). This unusual combination of roles (congregational leader and clergy-in-formation), gave Christopher the chance to practice what he was learning in leadership courses, including affecting an intervention of some unhealthy group dynamics. Also, he used his learning in pastoral liturgy to develop an education process that invited the congregation into some new pastoral practices around death and dying. At all times, the emphasis on his reflective practice of ministry gave our supervisory work concrete foci and enabled a natural integration of academic material.

As Christopher looks back on his experience from the other side of his priestly ordination, he offers the following reflections:

- Most valuable to him was the flexibility of the program, its integration of academics and ministry practice, and focused supervision from several sources.
- The email format worked well for him because of his love of writing. He produced extra reflection papers because of the value he found in reflecting on specific issues.

- The combination of local mentoring and supervision (his hospital experience was especially empowering) with overall coordination and integration gave variety and coherence to his formation.
- His supervisory relationship with me emerged naturally out of our existing friendship while remaining distinct from it. Positive feedback was empowering and negotiating the process of receiving negative feedback from me strengthened his professional self-understanding and awareness of appropriate boundaries.
- He missed the collegial connection with other seminarians that he would have had as a residential student and wished for more opportunities to talk things through with peers. Our history as friends made it possible to be frank and open in our supervisory exchanges.
- Christopher regarded the weakest element of the program the formal online courses, which varied in quality of content and feedback depending on the instructor.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Supervising Christopher Wallace provided me with a focused opportunity to look closely at my own practices of advising and supervision. As a result of my experience with Christopher, I now require regular written reflections and the discipline of intentional meetings with residential students. Also, it provided an occasion to field-test a different approach to ministerial education and formation as we consider adding distance-learning options to our curriculum. As a result of Christopher's experience, we are adding regular online advising and supervision to student cohort groups, together with brief residential intensives that focus on formation in community as well as academics. A course in practical theological reflection will anchor students' initial experience of the residential intensive—and reflective practice in preaching, liturgics, and pastoral care will be integral to their on-site work.

NOTES

1. All proper names used in this article, except that of the seminary, are pseudonyms.
2. Charles Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, et al, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

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