

Community of Practice: Supervisor-Mentors Supporting Supervisor-Mentors

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SUPERVISION AND MENTORING IN THEOLOGICAL FIELD EDUCATION MATTER

In the opening of his book *Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education*, Jay W. Roberts suggests that experiential education is like observing a river. It is one thing to have the experience of seeing the Colorado River from the heights of the rim of the Grand Canyon; it is quite another thing to go down into the canyon and experience the banks of the Colorado River—where you can see and experience the movement, the diversity of currents, and the sounds, the smells, allowing you to learn the river more vividly. Theological field education is education on the river. It immerses our full embodied self and calls forth our thoughtful reflections and our hope-filled imaginations, even as it teaches us how to live into our calling. As one student shares, In Divinity School I have been learning to write academically and think theologically. Through my field education internship, I’m learning to act theologically. This has been a place of significant formation.¹

During this significant on-river experience, there is arguably no more important role than that of supervisor-mentor. If we’re rafting the river, the supervisor-mentor is the guide who knows the river well from experience as well as how to equip those in the boat to stay afloat to empower them with vision for decisive action that carries real consequences for the journey. For the guide, the trip on the river is not about them; it is about the others in the boat and the joy of the river itself. As John Senior writes of theological field education:

Good mentors leverage their wisdom in order to further the mentee’s journey, not the mentor’s journey . . . good mentors neither attempt to make mentees over in their own image, nor do they abandon mentees to experience internship work all on their own.²

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In our own context of Duke Divinity School, students continue to rank their ministerial experiences through field education among the top two most important experiences in their theological education.³ When it comes to ministerial formation, there is no replacing being immersed in a ministerial context where students are invited and challenged to learn and serve as leaders. Importantly, just as students affirm the value of theological field education in their theological education, students specifically affirm the critical role of the supervisor-mentor. As one student shared in an evaluation of their experience:

My supervisor showed that he was sincerely interested in engaging with me as an intern and that my learning and development in ministry were important to him. He was kind, patient, dedicated, and encouraging in all areas of ministry. I grew spiritually and professionally this summer, and I can't thank him enough for his mentorship and support.

As the student above articulates, supervisor-mentors in theological field education are not simply providing an opportunity to practice; they are fostering an environment where a student can grow into who God is calling them to be. They are, in fact, welcoming them into a community of practice. Weaving together this thread of both doing and being, another student shares,

Pastor _____ is truly an amazing leader. She has a gift for helping others develop and take ownership for their spiritual walk with God. It takes phenomenal leaders to help ministers and individuals both heal and develop character. She did both.

The stakes are high in the work of supervision and mentoring. It is our responsibility as the community of practitioners in theological field education to foster an environment where supervisor-mentors can succeed. Since 2019, Duke Divinity School has been host to a longitudinal study called the Seminary to Early Ministry Study,⁴ sponsored by The Duke Endowment,⁵ which is tracking three classes of master of divinity, master of theological studies, and master of arts in Christian practice students through their degree program and for up to ten years after they graduate. This is the first study of its kind, and it promises to be a rich resource for years to come for those of us who are invested in the formation of Christian leaders in theological education. An early preview of some of the data reinforces the critical and consequential role of supervisor-mentors in theological field education. This data, couched within the wider context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cultural turbulence within North America that has shaped the experience of field education since 2020, made something clear to us: it is important to remember that supervisor-mentors don't exist in a field education vacuum. As they take on the role of mentoring seminarians, supervisor-mentors still hold many other roles – pastor, preacher, administrator, spouse, parent, caregiver, etc. When we ask individuals to take on this special responsibility, we are asking individuals who are carrying their own responsibilities, burdens, and even trauma. This does not mean they don't share great enthusiasm for this holy work of formation. Supervisor-mentors have regularly shared with our office how working with field education students has been the highlight

of their ministry. But it does invite us to consider how we are resourcing our supervisor-mentors for excellence in supervision.

Drawing from reorganizational work we did within our peer theological reflection groups among students, we ran a pilot program to facilitate a supervisor-mentor community of practice. In the same way that theological reflection groups are a space for peer support, theological reflection, and resourcing among seminarians, we envisioned the community of practice to be both a mode of peer support as well as an environment for supervisor-mentors to draw strength, guidance, and resources. We expected this community of practice to have positive effects for both the supervisor-mentor and the student.

CRITICAL AND COMPLICATED ROLES

Those who have taken on this role of supervisor-mentor have an enormous task because the work of pastoral ministry is extremely complicated. One study identified sixty-four distinct knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics that are embodied by effective ministers in varying degrees.⁶

Add to this the fact that being both supervisor and mentor has its own complications. Supervisors negotiate learning goals, order the experience, provide accountability, make themselves accountable to the seminary or divinity school, and support and evaluate the experience. The quality of the internship depends on the supervisor investing in these aspects of field education. It is also important to consider that students are aware that the evaluations of their field education experiences may factor into their progress in the degree program. In some denominations, they may be part of the ordination process. Supervisors are clearly in a position of power.

Mentors lean into relationship and the power of the community of practice. Community of practice is a term coined by Étienne Wenger and colleagues to describe committed learning communities. Wenger defines it in this way:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.⁷

Wenger goes further, stating that this kind of formation “involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person.”⁸ Wenger has effectively described the outcome of an intentional mentoring relationship that exists in a formational field education placement that nurtures pastoral and professional identity. This is clearly a position of service and collegiality.

There is some inherent tension between the roles of supervisor and mentor, and the term “supervisor-mentor” is a reminder of that tension. It is helpful to acknowledge and to remain mindful of that tension for the sake of the student’s formation.

Community of practice theory undergirded our work of bringing supervisor-mentors together (in an online small group format)—valuing both their supervisor responsibilities and their mentoring opportunity—to encourage deeper engagement and reflection on their practice, find delight in their work, and experience a practical way of resourcing each other for this vital work.

STRUCTURE

To leverage the power of a community of practice in the regular gathering of supervisor-mentors, the structure of the meetings needed to be carefully conceived. We held ten meetings concurrent with the summer internship. Three values seemed particularly important: *care*, *community*, and *commitment*.

Care was an important dimension of the regular gatherings. Each participating pastor was serving amidst multiple pandemics. Each carried with them the trauma of events in their families, congregations, communities, country, and world. Among these were the Buffalo shooting just preceding the summer internship, the Uvalde shooting in the midst, and the war in Ukraine throughout. The structure of our gatherings needed space to acknowledge and attend to these experiences.⁹

The pastors in our group ranged across the age spectrum and years of service and were serving in different judicatories across North Carolina. Space for storytelling was important to build *community*. Agency regarding the direction of the group in choosing topics for reflection fostered conversation that also built *community*.

Commitment was encouraged by sharing personal goals as well as the general direction of their student's goals (preserving confidentiality) for the internship. Exercising leadership in the group in various ways—leading discussions, sharing a ministerial insight or skill, praying—nurtured *commitment* to each other and to the process.

The structure of our meeting designed to affirm these values had a five-part movement: *approach*, *attend*, *reflect*, *resource*, and *bless*.

Approach acknowledged the sacred nature of our work together. Lighting a candle, we affirmed aloud:

We light a light
in the name of the God who creates life,
in the name of the Savior who loves life,
in the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.¹⁰

Attend created space to name struggles and pain and to share concerns related to oneself, one's family, congregation, community, country, and world.

Reflect focused on thoughtful engagement with content. We chose to use the book *Empower: A Guide for Supervisor-Mentors in Theological Field Education* edited by John Senior and Matthew Floding for the core content discussed at each gathering.¹¹ Prior to

the first gathering, the participants were invited to read the book's introduction and afterword. Following the first meeting, the next two gatherings each had an assigned chapter, "Mentoring for Life-Giving Relationships" followed by "The Congregation as Mentor." Then, the group self-selected a chapter for each week based on interest and the learning-serving covenants of their students. They chose:

- Mentoring for Vocational Discernment
- Mentoring the Pastoral Caregiver
- Mentoring for Resilience
- Mentoring for Cultural Humility
- Mentoring for Leading in Systems
- Mentoring the Preacher

These readings were supplemented by a guest presenter, a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) doctor, on the topic of what was needed for a challenged infant to thrive in the NICU. This presented an opportunity for the group to creatively reflect on the kind of nurturing environment they and their congregations were creating. Another presentation was offered by one of the group participants (with spiritual direction training) and their student, who modeled first a helpful and second a not-so-helpful conversation. This highlighted the value of listening to one's student with the ear of a spiritual director.

Resource released the power of the learning community through the sharing of best practices, making observations, and asking questions. For example, after reflecting together on the content of the chapter "Mentoring the Pastoral Caregiver," the group *resourced* each other in response to the question "What is one pastoral care tip that you will share with your student and can share with your colleagues?" The following were some of the responses. Rich discussion accompanied many of these.

Attention to self-care empowers good pastoral care.

Be there. Show up.

Pastoral care is relational. Find joy in the encounters. It is not a check-the-box activity.

Your presence assures them that they are not alone. Remember that you represent the community of which they are a part. Reference them.

Don't be afraid to ask them to turn off the TV.

Keep appropriate time boundaries.

Remember, it's not about me.

Don't be afraid to use traditional prayers (Book of Common Prayer, Book of Worship, Upper Room Resources).

It's an appointment with the Divine. Every moment is holy.

Bless acknowledged our gratitude for one another, our mindfulness of the world's need for blessing, and our dependence on God for our work and therefore our need for God's blessing.

At the end of each gathering, extinguishing the candle, we petitioned aloud:

The blessings of heaven,

The blessings of earth,

The blessings of sea and of sky.

On those we love this day

and on every human family

the gifts of heaven,

the gifts of earth,

the gifts of sea and of sky.¹²

IMAGINE A COMMITMENT TO SUPERVISOR-MENTORS RESOURCING EACH OTHER

The survey results in the addendum make it clear that the supervisor-mentors in our group appreciated and benefited from the facilitated regular meetings focused on the skills of supervision and mentoring. The level of accountability to the field education program's expectations and structures was extremely high. The experiences and observations expressed in the open-ended questions about the resources and overall community experience were emphatic about the value of resourcing to improve and grow as a mentor.

Imagine an ongoing voluntary commitment by supervisor-mentors to care for each other, to reduce their sense of isolation by participating in a supportive community of peers, and to tangibly grow in skills and commitment for the benefit of student formation. The simple structure we have described here is easily replicable. Diverse locations no longer present a challenge given that everyone has experience participating in online gatherings. Facilitation of groups can be done by those who have already participated in a supervisor-mentor community of practice cohort (accompanied by training and support).

We in theological field education understand that the quality of the students' experience during their placement in great part depends on the quality of the supervision and mentoring. A recent document guiding formation for Roman Catholic seminaries affirms that "pastoral formation depends in great measure on the quality of supervision."¹³ Our experience, supported by the feedback of the participants in our community of practice, strongly suggests that augmenting a theological field education program with this support structure will positively impact students' personal and professional formation.

ADDENDUM: REFLECTION ON THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE EXPERIENCE

Following the ten-week experience, we surveyed the participants. The questions were structured to encourage reflection on both the supervisory role (accountability to program expectations) and on the opportunity to mentor a student (accountability to the community of practice). Seventy percent of the participants completed the survey. One interesting way to read the survey is to note the responses to those items that relate to supervision and accountability to the student, the institution and each other. Secondly, to note those items that relate to the community of practice, mentoring the student and each other.

- Q1. Our student was welcomed publicly (e.g., in worship, newsletter, website, etc.). Response: Yes – 100%
- Q2. I supported the depth and breadth of learning for our student and myself by doing the adult learning theory “blank page” exercise together.
Response: Yes – 75% No – 25%
- Q3. I formed a Lay Mentoring Team of 2–4 persons to pray for, meet with, and offer their gifts to our student.
Response: Yes – 85%; No – 15%
- Q4. We developed an appropriate and robust Learning Serving Covenant.
Response: Yes – 100%
- Q5. I welcomed my mentee into the local community of practice by introducing them to other clergy colleagues in the community.
Response: Yes – 100%
- Q6. I kept our commitment to our regular meeting to reflect on our ministry experience.
Response: Yes – 100%
- Q7. What resources did you feel participating in the supervisor-mentor cohort provided you?
- Support, experience, and transparency
 - Fellowship, encouragement, clearer sense of the benefits of field education
 - Knowledge, support, inspiration, encouragement, friendship . . . trust and dialogue
 - Shared wisdom and best practices, time to reflect on supervision student, and a chance to intentionally think about my role as supervisor-mentor
 - The book *Empower* was helpful, but the conversation among other mentors was the most beneficial.
- Q8. We (my student and I) had honest conversations about vocation to aid them in their discernment.
Response: Yes – 100%
- Q9a. I felt the chapters selected by the group in *Empower* aided me as a supervisor

and mentor.

Response: Yes – 100%

Q9b. How did you find the use of Empower helpful?

- Very relevant and relatable
- Each chapter was short and succinct and helped us focus on different aspects of the supervising-mentoring process.
- The book both taught and affirmed, a great resource. The discussions helped me to grow and expand the learning process.
- Short chapters that were rich in information and insights. Topics were relevant to our work.
- I found the chapters short and accessible but well done and with lots of diversity of thought.
- The chapters were relevant and thought-provoking, and some of the ideas I carried over into conversation with my student in our weekly reflections.
- Succinct chapters with helpful recommendations for conversation, contemplation, and action.

Q10. We completed the evaluation forms and used them as an opportunity for learning and celebrative review.

Response: Yes – 100%

Q11a. Did you find participating in a supervisor-mentor cohort valuable?

Response: Yes – 100%

Q11b. What are some of the ways that you experienced the supervisor-mentor cohort as valuable?

- Having community through this group helped me to be more discerning and innovative.
- Shared wisdom, commitment, and learning.
- We are very isolated here, more so with COVID. This was a welcomed support group and learning experience.
- Support for one another, learning from outstanding supervisor-mentors, and discussing common issue and topics we face with their interns.
- Again, connecting with peers, having intentional time to work on my skills as a supervisor-mentor, introduction to new resources.
 - I learned so much from hearing from colleagues about their experiences and ways they had helped their intern grow and learn.

Q12. I attended the majority of our supervisor-mentor cohort gatherings.

Response: Yes – 100%

Q12A. Why would you find it valuable to do this?

- Because it greatly augments the experience of serving as a supervisor-mentor.

- This expanded my knowledge of mentoring and helped me to learn new processes of mentoring.
- I want to be the best supervisor-mentor God wants me to be!
- Just to continue to grow as a supervisor-mentor.
- The conversations and connections are always fruitful.

¹ This quote and other student quotes are taken from students' post-internship evaluations. The students are not identified to preserve confidentiality.

² John Senior and Matthew Floding, *Empower: A Guide for Supervisor-Mentors in the Theological Field Education*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 3–4.

³ Association of Theological Schools, Commission on Accrediting, *Graduating Student Questionnaire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Divinity School, 2022), Table 17: Three Most Important Influences on Educational Experience. This report is based on 131 respondents as of July 25, 2022.

⁴ The Seminary to Early Ministry Study (SEM Study) is a part of the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, which was established in 2007 by a grant from the Duke Endowment to assess and improve the health of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. See <https://semstudy.org/>.

⁵ The Duke Endowment is a private foundation, separate from Duke University, founded in 1924 by James Buchanan Duke, which serves the people and communities of North and South Carolina through programs benefiting higher education, health care, child services, and rural church life. Since 1925, The Duke Endowment has awarded more than \$4 billion in total grants. See <https://www.dukeendowment.org/>.

⁶ Richard P. DeShon and Abigail Quinn, "Job Analysis Generalizability Study for the Position of United Methodist Local Pastor: Focus Group Results," study commissioned by the Advisory Committee on Psychological Assessment for the United Methodist Church, http://ministerscouncil.com/resources/effective/clergy_effectiveness_UMC.pdf.

⁷ Étienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 4.

⁸ Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53.

⁹ Eileen Campbell-Reed explores the impact of these traumatic experiences in "Pastoring Pandemic Report," available for download: https://cdn.eileencampbellreed.org/wp-content/uploads/PandemicPastoring-Report-FULL-9-1-2022.pdf?mc_cid=1c4a873d61&mc_eid=35e86b46ae.

¹⁰ J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Treasure, Daily Scriptures and Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 4.

¹¹ John Senior and Matthew Floding, eds., *Empower: A Guide for Supervisor-Mentors in Theological Field Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

¹² Newell, *Celtic Treasure*, 7.

¹³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference Publishing Services, 2022), 371.