ATFE Featured Essay

The Power of the Learning Community Model for the Development of Supervisor/mentor

Matthew Floding, Thomas Fuller, Lucinda Huffaker, Rhonda Parker, Jennie Lee Rodriguez, Allison St. Louis

The genesis of this project is grounded in an experience of participation in a community of practice, the Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE). According to Etienne Wenger, learning communities, or communities of practice, are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."[1] More specifically, theological field educators share three distinguishing characteristics of a community of practice: domain, community, and practice.[2]

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Theological field education's *domain* is formation for ministry through supervised ministry experiences, spaces for ministerial reflection, and supporting classroom experiences within the context of a theological school's curriculum. This sets the field apart in graduate theological education.

Community is fostered through professional development and networking facilitated by the ATFE Biennial Consultation. Deeper relationships

Matthew Floding is Director of Ministerial Formation and Field Education at Duke Divinity School.

Thomas Fuller is Director of Ministry Leadership Development, Placement, & Assessment at Beeson Divinity School.

Lucinda Huffaker is Director of Supervised Ministries at Yale Divinity School.

Rhonda Parker is Director of Field Education at Duke Divinity School.

Jennie Lee Rodriguez is Associate Director of Field Education at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Allison St. Louis is Director of Field Education and the Second Three Years Program at Virginia Theological Seminary.

develop by working with others on an ATFE committee, participation in a caucus or affinity group, or, as in this case, a research interest that is fittingly experiential in nature.

Practice revolves around variations of the action-reflection-action model of education harnessed to the goals of ministerial formation. Beyond this, since theological field educators practice their art informed by their own ministry experiences and varied educational backgrounds, a wide variety of theoretical fields influence their individual practice. This unique feature of the community of practicing field educators makes for rich and generous interaction as each learns from the other.

Illustrative of this, theological field educators participating in this study come from divinity schools within research universities, denominational theological seminaries, and an interdenominational divinity school, all sharing a common conviction. Each of us believes that transformational field education sites are marked by excellent supervision. We asked ourselves the questions, "What would happen if we would each facilitate a learning community opportunity among a selected group of supervisors, regarding *them* as a community of practice?" "If these facilitated small groups became learning communities that resourced each other as supervisors (in a manner similar to how we have experienced the benefits of the ATFE community of theological field educators), how might the rest of our supervisors be enriched and embrace their identity as a community of practice?"[3]

Each field educator brought together on a regular basis a cohort of effective supervisors in their field education program. They met to discuss and reflect on their experiences and best practices of supervising ministerial interns. Each field educator was free to provide content related to supervision and design the meeting format in a manner appropriate to their program and context. All agreed that foci needed to include, but were not limited to, two fundamental mentoring competencies: ministerial reflection and providing helpful feedback.[4] Our objectives included:

- Enhanced supervision and mentoring of student interns,
- Deepened capacity for ministerial reflection with students,
- Clarity of purpose for the various facets of supervised ministry and mentoring,
- Articulation of best practices and exploration of innovative approaches to preparing students for ministry in an unknown future,
- Renewed commitment and enthusiasm among supervisor/mentor for the preparation of the next generation of religious leaders.

Our shared hope was that as a learning community of experienced and effective supervisors/mentors, the cohort would be able to identify and clarify purposes, methods, roles, resources, theological underpinnings, and pitfalls related to our common passion and calling for preparing students for ministry.

Previous experience with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion[5] demonstrated that these conditions would be essential in meeting the objectives:

- Providing time that is set apart for this work,

- Honoring the cohort's common work of mentoring and valuing the practice of critical reflection on it,

- Creating a hospitable environment that generates and supports community within the cohort.[6]

To that end, we as a group intentionally engaged as a community of practice to resource each other and prepare to facilitate the groups of supervisors/mentors we would create. We met on the campus of Duke Divinity School June 4-6, 2013, with the agenda of employing the power of the learning community model for the development of supervisors/mentors through a shared experience of actually practicing the model.7

A MODEL FOR LEARNING

Reflection on practice is widely recognized and employed as a fundamental method for the formation of pastors and religious leaders. Demonstrating the practical theological method of experience-reflection-action, ministerial reflection on practice begins with "lived, embodied, unfolding experiences in ministry," then "seeks to make sense of practice" within its complex social context and ultimately "form reflectors in habits for competent ministry."[8] Reflection on practice is an important way that all professionals sustain lifelong learning, as Donald Schön has argued in his work on "the reflective practitioner."[9] Our group of field educators met to reflect on our practice of identifying and cultivating excellent supervisor/mentor (and thus to grow in our own reflective practice!).

One exercise that has been useful for facilitating self-reflection on learning is the parallel process exercise. This involves taking a few moments at the end of a teaching or discussion session to talk about the learning process that participants have just experienced.[10] Stepping back or out of the event

provides the pause and attention necessary for new understanding.[11] Ronald Heifetz, writing about the importance of perspective for effective leadership, uses the metaphor of viewing the dance from the balcony rather than the dance floor.[12] Indeed, parallel process bears some similarity with metaphor because they both plant seeds of understanding by offering a vehicle for a new perspective on something habitual or overlooked or unconsciousness that can startle us into new understanding.

We designed our time together to include the elements that the Wabash Center has identified as fundamental to forming a learning community. We decided to use the parallel process exercise to analyze the design of our sessions and evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies, intending to glean from our own experience some wisdom about how best to engender a community of practice among each cohort of experienced and effective supervisors/mentors in our home institutions. "Parallel process" describes using our own experience of a learning community of field educators to reflect on and illuminate how best to structure our experience as a community of practice.

A starting point for building community is hospitality, about which much has been written.[13] Pertinent to our discussion here is the observation that creating a hospitable environment involves setting apart time and space that is collegial rather than competitive, curious rather than judgmental, and collaborative rather than defensive. (These characteristics often contrast with the typical academic environment.) Hospitality is a major determinant of the quality of community that develops. Reflection on practice requires considerable vulnerability because it is most productive when we are courageously honest about our struggles as well as our successes. Within the frame of *appreciative inquiry*,[14] we connect what is valuable, life-giving, energy-generating, and creativity-inspiring in our group to the issue that has brought us together.[15]

How does one nurture or enhance community among people with varying degrees of knowledge of each other—especially if they are accustomed to cultures of comparison, posturing, and elitism, as may be typical of most professional education? In addition to providing a hospitable environment for learning, we begin to build connections by sharing personal stories about our common *domain* and *practice*. Like hospitality, narrative and storytelling also have a sizeable literary corpus.[16] Here, we highlight the virtue of honoring, or confirming, persons by listening to and learning from their stories. We also honor persons by trusting them with our own stories

and the vulnerability that attends them. This type of honoring is quite different from awards or citations for being outstanding or exceptional. In communities of practice, we honor our daily commitments and efforts—all the micro-advances that compose a life[17] of professional competence and Christian discipleship.

The actual process of reflecting on practice is not easy. As human beings, our lives depend on doing many things *without* thinking about them—without pause, attention, or conscious reflection—because of the necessity of selective attention for human functioning.[18] We dress, eat, go to work, text our kids, greet friends—all without reflection until something grabs our attention and/or we take time to pause. Teaching ministerial reflection is actually quite difficult, as supervisor/mentor will assert. Patricia Killen has provided insight into such instruction in her well-known book, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, and in recent articles in *Teaching Theology and Religion.* Killen, with her colleague Gene Gallagher, has identified an intellectual practice that underlies our ability to learn from reflection on experience, which she calls "mid-range reflection."

"Midrange reflection lifts issues out of the particularities of teaching [our experience], explores them, and reaches conclusions that can be of general relevance in other particular settings, if adapted to those settings,"[19] Killen and Gallagher write. Midrange reflection creates the "crosswalks" and "intersections" that connect one person's experience to another's and that connect one field educator's preparation of supervisors to another's. By parallel process, the intricacies of supervision in one site can be connected with shared questions, problems, and solutions in broad area of theological field education and even of all of those who work in contextual education. "It is precisely that traffic back and forth, from the particularity of a specific moment of teaching and learning [mentoring] to broad generalizations about the processes involved in it"[20] that illuminates our understanding in meaningful and helpful ways.

While sharing our stories connects us and, over time, weaves more trusting relationships, mid-range reflection requires the additional work of identifying issues embedded in our stories and designing sequences of questions and activities that promote reflection on those issues.[21] To the extent that we can employ multiple intelligences in the exploration of issues, we increase our opportunities for creative insight. For example, when our group of field educators met in June 2013, we spent time walking in the beautiful Sarah Duke Gardens, reflecting on things we might need to "walk

away from" in order to be fully present in this embryonic learning community and things we were excited about "walking toward" as we engaged one another for the first time on this extended journey. Then, we drew on our garden experience throughout the meeting to expand our understanding of equipping supervisors/mentors and nurturing our own emergent community. A fundamental skill that facilitates midrange reflection is planning exercises that let participants perform in a fun way what they are beginning to realize and articulate about their practice. In the descriptions of the project communities below are examples of how each field education director attempted to expand the group's intellectual reflection by appealing to their imagination in various ways.

To complete the action-reflection-action circle and actualize what has been learned, our reflection on practice indicates new approaches to our tasks, different methods to try, or perhaps small adjustments to make. Assessment completes the circle when we return to our community of practice to share again, with increasing honesty and vulnerability, from our practical experience. Our cohort groups met regularly through the year, and we returned to Duke in June 2014 to learn from each other's experience with these first learning communities of supervisors/mentors.

As a result of this final shared experience, each of the theological field educators returned to their context to create an experience for the coming year that would leverage the insights and reflections gained for the benefit of a small group of selected supervisors/mentors. In the following section are brief descriptions of the schools and the groups that were created and summaries of a selection of their meetings. These descriptions reflect the particularity of each director's adaptation of our community of practice experience to his or her institutional context. They also illustrate the organic expression of individual personality and style in whatever we undertake with creative energy.

EXPERIENCES OF THE PROJECT COMMUNITIES

Duke Divinity School (Matthew Floding and Rhonda Parker)

Duke Divinity School is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. While it serves a great number of Methodist candidates for ministry, the school seeks to build a diverse and inclusive community consistent with the scriptural vision that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer

slave or free, there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Duke Divinity School's mission is to engage in spiritually disciplined and academically rigorous education in service and witness to the Triune God in the midst of the church, the academy, and the world.

Given this context, two groups of five supervisors/mentors who serve churches and agencies in the greater Raleigh-Durham area were formed prior to the 2013-2014 academic year. One (Floding's) was formed by specifically recruiting an ecumenically diverse group that was comprised of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist clergy. The second group (Parker's) was formed by voluntary response to an open invitation. Each group met five times for approximately two hours each time over the academic year.

Our groups met separately three times and twice jointly. We addressed some themes unique to the group we were facilitating and also addressed shared themes. Methodologically, we were committed to metaphor exploration to foster the parallel process described above. Supervisors/mentors were enjoined to reflect on ministerial formation and their role, the role of the people of God, and the role of the dynamic community of the Trinity in ministerial formation. They did this by means of insights that were generated through a shared experience and the space in which it happened as they heard and experienced presentations from other angles of vision.

One fruitful outcome of the meetings was that over the course of the year each member of Floding's group identified their own empowering metaphor for supervision. As a group, they then offered a workshop at Duke's summer field education orientation. They each shared their experience over the prior year and their discovery of a personal empowering metaphor for supervision that complemented the others to which they had been introduced. This allowed a larger discussion among workshop participants, which encouraged them to identify additional empowering metaphors for supervising and mentoring.

Hospitality (Floding).

Our second meeting was designed around a leisurely lunch in the café of the Nasher Art Museum, an open, light, and airy space.[22] We considered the museum as a physical space that has something to give/teach. Two of the features the group identified prompted the following observations that compared the museum space to a ministry setting.

1. The Physical Space:

- The museum creates space for observing before engaging with freedom to explore, wonder, and ask questions.

- The museum creates spaces that feel invitational.

- Easy access to each gallery is built into the architecture. Access to ministry experiences and opportunities should be as easy. This is the supervisor/mentor's responsibility.

- It's about the relationship with the art. Relationships are critical in ministry.

- The museum artfully moves guests from being strangers to members/sustainers.

- The building is designed to allow natural light to shine in and illuminate. We need to illumine the art of ministry with our students but not ignore the shadow sides.

2. Docents are present and take initiative:

- Docents make themselves available. Each congregation member can be encouraged to make themselves available to students.

- Orientation to the museum is important. Ministry is new terrain. Guides are important!

- Tutoring in the language of art is necessary. Ministry too has a specialized vocabulary.

- The careful work of docents communicates respect to the learner. Our students come eager and are gifted. The stewarding of these persons and their God-given gifts is a privilege.

- Guide students from where they are to the next level of competency or experience. The Triune God who calls also equips and sends.

Thriving (Floding).

Our group had lunch with a neo-natal intensive care unit doctor (who is also a second-career seminarian) who spoke about "helping challenged infants thrive." This prompted the following four observations and rich cross-disciplinary questions.

1. Triage (three immediate checks to do with a baby failing to thrive)

- *Nutrition*. Is the seminarian learning to feed him or herself? What nutritional support can the supervisor/mentor and the congregation provide so that the seminarian develops holy habits that sustain him or her as a ministerial leader?

- *Breath* (respiratory function). How can we and our congregation participate with greater awareness of the Holy Spirit's work of ministerial formation?

- *Warmth* (temperature stability). A nurturing environment is important. Sometimes personal touch/pastoral care is critical to thriving, along with what the doctor referred to as "kangaroo care," which is equivalent to the congregation enveloping the student with love and support.

2. Team effort. Leverage the power of the collaborative—a mentoring team should care for students.[23]

3. Stress levels. Positive stress yields growth. Too much stress shuts down students.

4. "Trial of life" (unplugging the technology and seeing if life can sustain itself). There comes a time when the student must practice the ministerial arts and discern, with God's people, his or her faithful response to the call and the resulting fruitfulness.

Creativity (Parker).

Our group met at an art museum to talk about the role of creativity in supervision. Specifically, how creative can a student be in practicing ministry when they are still learning (and becoming competent) in the basics? Some students struggle with mastering the fundamentals of ministry due to their drive to be creative; others are leery of venturing out of their comfort zones. The art of supervision that fosters appropriate creativity includes:

- Clarifying and enabling what the student is eager to pursue while also ensuring that the student engages in areas in which they need to grow.

- Deciding to strive for breadth or depth in a single internship. There is a tradeoff; a student can gain a breadth of initial experiences or focus on a few skills to develop deeply and well.

- Assessing basic ministerial competency. This determines the amount of creativity an intern is encouraged to pursue. Like jazz, the most inspired creativity comes from improvising on a theme . . . which takes time and practice to master. The real work of supervising interns is to help students be disciplined in achieving competence in the basic arts of ministry. Then, they can improvise.

Messiness (Parker).

The last major theme our group explored was the messiness and the possibility (even inevitability) of failure in ministry. We began with the image of clay, of working at the potter's wheel to create something beautiful and functional. It's a very messy process! We acknowledged the challenges in dealing with the messiness of supervision/ministry:

- Motivating a high level of investment so that feedback is valued, creating accountability;
- Crafting clear learning-serving covenants as a helpful tool for setting common expectations and for noting when those expectations are not being met;
- Encouraging "falling upward," as Richard Rohr puts it; failure is essential, counter-cultural, and undervalued. Failure is often when we learn and grow the most.

Joint Meeting—Coaching a Voice (Floding and Parker).

Divinity choir director Dr. Brian Schmidt addressed the topic "coaching a voice" in Duke Divinity School's Goodson Chapel. This allowed the two groups of supervisor/mentor to explore five themes related to effective voice coaching.

1. Vulnerability

The voice is the only instrument that is actually part of our body. Our students feel very vulnerable as they experience many "firsts" in ministry. This calls for receptive humility on the part of the coached and sensitive, skillful teaching and guidance on the part of the supervisor-mentor.

2. Listening

Part of being a vocal coach/conductor is training oneself to "listen" and simply "hear" things. In music and mentoring, it seems that James has it right: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak." This requires discipline on the part of the supervisor-mentor.

3. Collaboration

All of the individual skills we learn as singers are complicated immediately in an ensemble setting. A pastor's voice is always exercised in an ensemble/community setting. Listen to the Spirit, and listen to each other.

4.Persistence

Excellence with musicians requires persistence. "Good job! Now, can we try to do even better with_____?" Musicians at a serious level love music; they are motivated to be better at their craft. Our task is both to push for better performance and to model the quest for excellence.

5. Discovery

Be open to the possibility that singers may discover more than we intend. Teachers should mind the advice to "work your plan, don't die by your

plan." We use breath to vocalize. Coincidentally, the Greek and Hebrew words for breath mean either breath or spirit. This is where the authentic voice is found. The Spirit is full of surprises.

Beeson Divinity School (Thomas Fuller)

Beeson Divinity School is the graduate theological school of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The school is committed to preparing ministers for the Church of Jesus Christ in an educational setting that is interdenominational, evangelical, and personal.

In late summer 2013, I recruited four supervisors/mentors to form a community in which we might learn from one another and thereby enhance our practice of supervision. I selected these individuals based on their past performance as supervisor/mentor. Each one had distinguished herself or himself in their devotion to the work of supervision and skill in its practice; each one genuinely cared for students, both personally and professionally; and each one assigned supreme value to preparing faithful and skilled ministers for the Church of Jesus Christ. I approached these four with a view to their dispositions, also—I regarded them as highly engaged supervisors, eager to learn and grow in the art of supervision. Last, I sought to convene a diverse group of supervisors/mentors. The community of practice, not counting myself, consisted of three Caucasian men and one African American woman, each serving in a pastoral role in different denominations: African Methodist Episcopal, non-denominational, Presbyterian Church in America, and Southern Baptist.

The group met seven times, beginning in late October 2013 and ending in late April 2014. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours. The first two meetings were devoted to group members sharing their stories—of discerning God's call to ordained ministry, of formal preparation for ministry, and of persons and experiences God used in their formation for ministry leadership. Each one related his or her own supervised ministry experience as a theological student, reflecting on what was memorable and valuable about the work of their supervisor/mentor. Each one also shared meaningful reflections on her or his experiences as a supervisor/mentor. This was vitally important to the learning community process in several respects:

- *Community-building/Rapport.* Group members became better acquainted; relationships were formed beyond the boundaries of professional collegiality.
- *Modeling.* Group members engaged in a reflective exercise similar to that which they commonly employ with their student interns.

- *Collecting.* In their recollecting of past experiences, group members collected a rich pool of living artifacts from which to draw for critical engagement and midrange reflection upon the practice of supervision.

In the five meetings that followed, the group drew from this well of experience, engaging a variety of topics:

1. The role of expectations in supervisory relationships

A complex matrix of expectations exists among student/intern, supervisor/mentor, educational institution, church/ministry site, and (in some cases) a denomination/credentialing entity. The negotiation and management of these expectations are essential not only in the beginning of a supervisory relationship but throughout the term.

2. Finding balance in the teaching-learning equation

There is a delicate balance to strike between allowing student/interns to define their own learning/growth goals and supervisor/mentor setting forth learning objectives for them. "Student/interns don't know what they don't know (or need to know)." Each student-intern is different and has unique learning/growth needs. Respecting that uniqueness and making space for discovering needs is important in a healthy supervisory relationship.

3. Cultivating a mentoring environment

In truth, most field education experiences involve a plurality of mentors, some formal and others informal. While it is necessary and helpful for supervisors/mentors to improve their practice of supervision, it is likewise beneficial for them to encourage and equip others in the ministry setting for their roles. Cultivating a mentoring environment can indirectly improve the learning/growth experience for student/interns.

4. Improving the quality of feedback

"Student/interns don't need flattery; they need caring and constructive feedback from people who know what they're talking about and want the best for them (the student/interns) and for God's people." Supervisors/mentors do well to help student-interns distinguish between good and poor feedback. They may also lay the groundwork for higher quality feedback by having greater involvement in the development of learning/growth goals and by skillful facilitation of theological reflection on ministry experiences.

Yale Divinity School (Lucinda Huffaker)

Yale Divinity School (YDS) educates students from a full spectrum of Christian denominations and faiths for a lifetime of ministry, scholarship, and service to the church and world. Participating in the vibrant life of Yale University, YDS has an enduring commitment to foster the knowledge and love of God through scholarly engagement with Christian traditions in a global, multifaith context.

The YDS project group reflected the diversity of our supervised ministry sites and the emerging models of ministry. The group consisted of a lawyer, school chaplain, director of a nonprofit, campus minister, and professor, all ordained in different denominations (except the Catholic woman). Several were bi-vocational. They did not know each other, so relationships developed from a "level playing field" through sharing stories, food, and care for the wellbeing of each other as we checked in with and prayed for one another.

It was the group's consensus that their diversity, particularly of denominations, enhanced their depth of vulnerability, honesty, and integrity during the group's monthly meetings. One member explained, "The cautiousness that sometimes marks sharing between colleagues of the same denomination, for reasons of politics or professional advancement, was absent." It was important that they could speak freely about frustrations and challenges of their ministries as one means of teasing out lessons to be passed on to their student interns.

As the group shared stories of their ministries—stories about vestry meetings, capital campaigns, working with staff, hospital visits, weekly sermon preparation, and so forth—certain qualities and values emerged that these supervisors/mentors passionately want to inculcate in their students as future pastors and leaders. These questions are indicative of the courageous conversations to which they committed:

- Where is *creativity* expressed in the life of a pastor? One supervisor likes to have his weekly meeting with staff while walking in the park.

- How do we find the *courage* to practice ministry in *freedom* and with *authenticity*? "You must be free to be authentic," the group agreed.

- Can we cast off our *fear of failure* in order to be ourselves and do what enlivens us? And when we fail, what does *forgiveness* look like? One participant shared a saying from Lily Tomlin, the comedian: "Forgiveness means letting go of any chance of a different past."

- How do we motivate uncompromising *self-awareness* in ourselves and our students, practicing *discernment* of feedback that we should attend to and feedback that is toxic and judgmental?

- When and in what form do we exercise *authority* comfortably? Is our understanding of pastoral authority matched by our aspirations to *humility*?

- And, finally, how do we *really* make time to honor the Sabbath and receive its promise of self-renewal?

At the end of the year, several members of the YDS group wanted to continue meeting. We planned a one-day retreat during the summer at one of the sites to celebrate our community of practice and talk about the upcoming year. We invited another pastor to join us, since two group members could not continue. Sharing leadership, the group continues to reflect, ask hard questions, and support one another in their mentoring of students and their leadership in Christian communities.

Princeton Theological Seminary (Jennie Lee Rodriguez)

Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA) and hosts a student body that is ecumenical, interdenominational, and international. The seminary's mission is to prepare women and men to serve Jesus Christ in ministries marked by faith, integrity, scholarship, competence, compassion, and joy, equipping them for leadership worldwide in congregations and the larger church, in classrooms and the academy, and in the public arena.

Our group consisted of five supervisors/mentors and met eight times from September 2013 to May 2014. Members were selected from outstanding pastors and chaplains who are committed to supervising PTS students. Diversity reflecting the seminary community was important, and the group included men and women—African American, White, and Latino—and representatives of four major denominations.

As the group evolved and the relationships developed into a safe and honest space, it was natural to invite members to share the facilitator role. Storytelling, particularly ancestral stories and biblical history, were important parts of the early meetings. Two of our meetings provide examples of the process and insights that we enjoyed through the year.

The Gathering.

   In the first gathering we affirmed that our time together was a space to slow down, reflect on the meaning-making that takes place as we supervise, and ponder why we supervise as we do. We were invited to be comfortable, welcomed and vulnerable. In the same way, the gathering between the supervisor/mentor and student is meant to be a consecrated relationship established by a covenant. Both the supervisor/mentor and student will make sacrifices for the purpose of their goals and the student's vocational discernment (Ps. 50:5). We realized, however, that vulnerability is challenging. We invite our students to be vulnerable, yet we supervisors are not always vulnerable with them. Where does this reluctance come from? Is God vulnerable? A related question we considered: Am I comfortable with my position of authority and my role as mentor to this student?

      At the same time, the shared experience of what it means to be a supervisor/mentor revealed the satisfaction and joy of being collaborative while acknowledging that tensions will exist. Supervision/mentoring is like midwifery—letting the student bring to birth the realization of his or her call, while the supervisor/mentor accompanies. God accompanies us and has no problem disclosing God's-self to us. God did this through Jesus, born into humanity, into vulnerability. As supervisors, we too are to be vulnerable in sharing the complexity and challenges of ministry.

The Labyrinth.

   The context for our third gathering was walking a labyrinth. The labyrinth provides a sacred space where our inner and outer worlds can commune and where the thinking mind and the imaginative heart can flow together.

   Each supervisor/mentor was given instructions, developed by Jill K. H. Geoffrion,[24] for engaging in a labyrinth prayer walk. Our focus was on three stages of the walk:

   1. Releasing.

      Each of the first steps represented a letting go. The following mantra was provided (Ps. 46:10):

   Be still and know that I am God
   Be still and know that I am
   Be still and know
   Be still
   Be

Releasing is challenging for supervisor/mentor and student alike. As students travel from class to their field education placement, they transition to the next thing to *do,* not to *be*. The work of the supervisor is to help the student to be present to their experiences to discern with greater clarity their call to ministry.

2. Receiving.

The center presented a space to be open to receive. For supervisors, it is much easier to give what they know than to be receptive to what they might learn from their students. Yet there can be a degree of mutuality in the exchange between the supervisor/mentor and student.

3. Returning.

Leaving the center, we take back with us what we have learned and received to share with others.

For supervisors/mentors, the challenge is to assist the student in reflecting theologically and becoming more self-aware of what this practical field experience is revealing to them about their call and formation for ministry.

The group expressed the desire to continue meeting, and the Field Education office has plans to incorporate portions of the reflective process into our new supervisors' orientation.

Virginia Theological Seminary (Allison St. Louis)

Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) is a seminary of the Episcopal Church. VTS's mission is to provide graduate theological education for persons who are preparing for lay or ordained leadership in the Episcopal Church. Formation for leadership occurs in a residential community, and students and faculty are expected to participate daily in the three foundational areas of our common life: class, chapel, and lunch.

All supervisors are required to complete a three-year training program that consists of monthly two-and-a-half-hour meetings during the course of the academic year. Upon completion of the training program, all supervisors have the option of exploring additional topics of interest in a monthly Supervisors' Consultation Group (SCG). In 2013, a group of supervisors for seminarians in VTS's recently implemented two-year internship—the Ministry Resident Program (MRP)—was formed. Four SCG clergy and six MRP clergy accepted the invitation to participate in

this research project. Diversity in both groups was present in the following areas: age, gender, years of supervisory experience, ministerial roles, seniority, location of parish, and diversity of congregations. Both groups met separately for six two-hour sessions during the course of the 2013-2014 academic year. Sessions followed this general format: opening prayer, check-in while sharing a snack, telling our stories and experiences as a catalyst for deeper reflection on best practices in supervision, noting new insights/learnings, resource sharing, and closing prayer.

Following are the topics and a few excerpts from each session.

1. Review of project, norms, reflections on memorable supervisors, and our journey toward supervision

- Reasons for participating in the group:
  "Possibility of sharing what we've learned with other supervisors."
  "Sense of collegiality, collaboration, and support for my own journey of faith and how this experience ripples out in ways for the community of faith/parish."
- Memorable supervisors who have influenced me:
  "Knew who he was, who I was, and wasn't trying to make me him."
  "Very slow to react, not because he didn't think quickly, but because he thought so deeply."

2. Beginning a supervisory relationship

- "Importance of naming expectations of self and supervisee."
- "Create a safe space that is both external and internal. Do not let the seminarian hide—nor myself. Foster honesty."
- "Build a relationship of trust."

3. Offering constructive feedback

- Give feedback on "learning/formation/behavior (on meta level as well): I see you and you matter."
- "The soul of a congregation is fragile. So learn how to confront bad behavior as soon as it happens."
- Be aware of the "vulnerability of offering feedback in ambiguous situations."

4. Promoting excellence

- "Know yourself well enough to say I can't do this; know your limits."
- "Prayerful, careful preparation—accountability and grace."
- "Focus on faithfulness rather than excellence."

5. Encouraging theological reflection

- "Theological language becomes part of who we are."
- "Live theologically examined lives."

6. Ending a supervisory relationship

- "Creating space for saying goodbye with intentionality."
- "Goodbye is a process rather than an event, a series of 'little deaths.'"
- "Leaving connects us to our own sense of mortality. If practiced well, it can become a resource."
- "Encourage the ability to express appreciation for others, including those whom we find challenging."

OUTCOMES

Reporting on our various approaches to learning community experiences for supervisor/mentor was the core element of the group's agenda as we re-gathered at Duke Divinity School June 3-4, 2014. Each group member's passion for our shared *domain* was evidenced by spirited storytelling, wondering at the power of the learning community model, resourcing each other, and supporting and celebrating each other's creativity and gifts as fellow field educators. It also reinforced the fact that we ourselves were a learning community and validated the claim (consistent with Wenger) of Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass that "human beings become who we are in large part through embodied participation in shared activities sustained by traditioned communities and oriented toward specific goods."[25]

Supervisors/mentors also expressed gratitude for the experience in their responses to a questionnaire administered in September 2014.[26] The questionnaire was designed as an indirect measure of project effectiveness, relative to the project objectives. Group participants reported modest to significant enhancements to their capacity for theological reflection with ministerial students (93%), understanding of the purposes for various facets of supervised ministry and mentoring (93%), ability to articulate best practices and innovative approaches to preparing students for ministry (93%), and level of commitment to and enthusiasm for preparing the next generation of religious leaders (97%). The response rate was 72.5%.[27] Male respondents reported significantly greater gains than female respondents in all four areas.

Among those who engaged in supervision during or after participating in a learning community group, 76% indicated that the group experience

made a difference in how they approached their task. Eighty-three percent of respondents would commend the learning community model (LCM) to others as an effective framework for improving the practice of supervision/ mentoring. Among those who have supervised 16+ students in years past (the most experienced supervisory segment), 100% said they would commend the LCM to others. Among those who have served in a formal ministry capacity for 26 years or more (the most experienced ministry segment), 92% said they would commend the LCM to others. Those who would not commend the LCM to others (17%) had a much weaker experience of community in their group (4.6/10) compared to all others (8.0/10).

Supervisors/mentors reported anecdotally other gains from participation in a community of practice. These included:

- Excitement about collegial sharing and learning in small groups that overcomes the isolation often experienced in ministry,[28]

- Recognition of the joys and challenges of engaging in midrange reflection,

- Greater awareness of the importance of priorities in attending to self and students,

- Renewed commitment to the roles of supervision and mentoring,

- Deeper sense of connection with the seminary or divinity school,

- Stronger bond with the field educator as a partner in forming students for ministry.

As energized by the experience as we were, we also acknowledged the challenges to sustainability. This rich new dimension to training and supporting supervisor/mentor became one additional commitment on already crowded calendars. Each member of the group found the need to make adaptations in order to continue offering this kind of experience. For example, at Duke Divinity School, a once-per-semester experience (as described above) that is offered to all supervisors (but limited to the first twenty to sign up) has been substituted on a temporary basis for the project's monthly meetings of small groups of supervisor/mentor for 2014-2015.

It is not surprising that the general outcome of our project reinforced the importance of time, space, and energy for meaningful communal practices that can enrich and enliven many aspects of theological education. We know that our busyness prevents us from giving attention to relationships and practices that are avenues for spiritual formation. Yet we press on to find ways to make the most of each moment of engagement, trusting the power of Christ's spirit to perfect the work begun in us and in each of our students as we serve God together.

APPENDIX A
RESPONSE DATA FROM SURVEY OF
SUPERVISORS/MENTORS LEARNING COMMUNITY

Which of the following statements best expresses your chief motivation for participating in the learning community group?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I wanted to improve in the practice of supervision.	44.8%	13
I wanted to engage in theological discussions with colleagues.	48.3%	14
I wanted to accommodate the request of the Field Education director.	3.4%	1
Other (please specify)	3.4%	1

To what extent did the learning community experience enhance the following:

Answer Options	Not at all	Somewhat	Significantly	Response Count
Your capacity for theological reflection with ministerial students?	2	13	14	29
Your understanding of the purposes for various facets of supervised ministry and mentoring?	2	11	16	29
Your ability to articulate best practices and innovative approaches to preparing students for ministry?	2	10	17	29
Your level of commitment to and enthusiasm for preparing the next generation of religious leaders?	1	8	20	29

If you supervised a student intern/seminarian at any time during or since the meetings of your learning community group, would you say that the group experience made a difference in how you approached supervision/mentoring?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	65.5%	19
Not sure	13.8%	4
No	6.9%	2
I have not supervised a student during or since the group's meetings.	13.8%	4

On a scale from 1 (no meaningful connection) to 10 (highly relational; intensely personal), how would you rate your experience of community in the learning community group?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
1	3.4%	1
2	0.0%	0
3	6.9%	2
4	3.4%	1
5	10.3%	3
6	0.0%	0
7	13.8%	4
8	27.6%	8
9	13.8%	4
10	20.7%	6

Based on your experience, would you commend the Learning Community Model to other supervisors as an effective framework for improving the practice of supervision/mentoring?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	82.8%	24
No	17.2%	5

What is your gender?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Female	34.5%	10
Male	65.5%	19

What is your age?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
25 to 34	0.0%	0
35 to 44	13.8%	4
45 to 54	24.1%	7
55 to 64	48.3%	14
65 or older	13.8%	4

How many years have you served in a formal ministry capacity or position?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
3-7	3.4%	1
8-15	13.8%	4
16-25	41.4%	12
26+	41.4%	12

Approximately how many student interns/seminarians have you supervised?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
1-3	7.1%	2
4-8	42.9%	12
9-15	17.9%	5
16+	32.1%	9

NOTES

1. Wenger Trayner, "Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses," Wenger Trayner, accessed June 27, 2014, http://www.ewenger.com/theory.

2. The definitions of these concepts are sourced in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

3. We wish to express our gratitude to the Research and Publications Committee of ATFE for providing a grant that allowed us to explore these questions.

4. "Ministerial reflection" as used here is described in detail in Barbara Blodgett and Matthew Floding, "The Role of Theological Reflection within Field Education," *Reflective Practice* 34 (2014) 268–83. See also Emily Click, "Ministerial Reflection," *Welcome to Theological Field Education!,* ed. Matthew Floding (Lanham, MD: Alban, 2011): 31–43.

5. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, a Lilly Endowment-funded organization in Crawfordsville, Indiana, supports teachers of theology and religion in higher education by offering workshops, grants, and other resources.

6. "Special Issue: Hospitality in Service of Excellence in Teaching and Learning," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10, no. 3 (July 2007). Since 1996, the Wabash Center has worked with small groups of religion department and theological school faculty to achieve goals very similar to ours around the practice of teaching and learning.

7. For a schedule of the experience, please contact the author(s).

8. Blodgett and Floding, "The Role of Theological Reflection within Field Education," 270.

9. Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 22–40.

10. Richard Ascough explains parallel process as it is used in teaching teachers and with his students in New Testament courses. See "The 'Parallel Process,'" *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17, no. 4 (October 2014). See also Sallyanne Miller, "What's Going On? Parallel Process and Reflective Practice in Teaching," *Reflective Practice* 5, no. 3 (October 2004): 383–93.

11. Patricia O'Connell Killen, "Midrange Reflection: The Underlying Practice of Wabash Center Workshops, Colloquies, and Consultations," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10, no. 3 (July 2007): 144.

12. Heifetz, Ronald A., and Linsky, Martin, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

13. A few examples: Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999); Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth,* 2nd rev. ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989); David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004).

14. Appreciative inquiry addresses a desire for change by building on what is already working well rather than focusing on fixing what is broken. See David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, "What Is Appreciative Inquiry?" Appreciative Inquiry Commons, http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm; Sue Annis Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Plano, TX: Kodiak Consulting, 1996).

15. Patricia O'Connell Killen, personal communication (2005).

16. For example, Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009); Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories,* rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Chris Rice and Emmanuel Katongole, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing,* Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

17. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Plume,1989).

18. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2007); Shankar Vedantam, *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

19. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Eugene V. Gallagher, "Sketching the Contours of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion," *Teaching Theology and Religion*16, no. 2 (April 2013): 121–22.

20. Ibid.

21. Killen, "Midrange Reflection," 143.

22. Floding's first group meeting consisted of an orientation to the project, discussion of methods, affirmation of the participants' skills as supervisor/mentor, and an invitation to join.

23. For more on this concept implemented in field education, see Matthew Floding, "Fostering a Mentoring Team," *Reflective Practice* 32 (2012): 272–81.

24. Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion, "Labyrinth Prayer: An Ancient Yet 'New' Way To Pray," accessed Jan. 10, 2015, http://www.jillgeoffrion.com/Jill/Articles%20by%20Jill/2009LabPrayerRaysJKHGeoffrion.pdf.

25. David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith, *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), vii.

26. See Appendix A for survey data.

27. Of forty participants, twenty-nine completed surveys.

28. Duke Clergy Health Initiative, "Clergy More Likely to Suffer from Depression, Anxiety," Aug. 27, 2013, Duke Divinity School, accessed Jan. 7, 2015, https://divinity.duke.edu/news-media/news/2013-08-27chi-depression.