# The Discernment Unit as an Applicant Selection Process for Supervisory Clinical Pastoral Education

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The Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) has a long tradition of rigorous supervisory education. Those entering the supervisory education process will ordinarily hold a master's degree in theology and will have at least four units of CPE. They must be endorsed or have some manner of stated support from their religious organizations in which they are recognized as professionals in the field of pastoral care. If they are accepted into an education program at a Center accredited to offer Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisory Education, they should expect to spend from 2 to 6 years in the education process. Many will struggle with certification as a pastoral supervisor along the way and others will never be certified. This article is about discerning the vocation to pastoral supervision, specifically in the ACPE, and proposes that the intentional discernment of gifts early in supervisory training will increase the likelihood of a successful completion of the certification process.

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## The Discernment Problem

There are three separate committee votes in the ACPE Supervisory certification: 1) certification as a Candidate; 2) certification as an Associate Supervisor; and 3) becoming a CPE Supervisor. In 2009, with 8 of the 9 Regions reporting their results to the ACPE National office, 80 percent of those meeting a committee were granted entrance to Candidacy and 55 percent of those meeting the Commission were certified ACPE Associate Supervisor. From 2002–2009, only 65 percent of those meeting the ACPE National Certification Commission seeking to be certified as Associate Supervisors were granted their request.[1] Candidacy votes are based on potential while Associate Supervisor votes are based on demonstrated competence. While there may be several ways to interpret these reports, it is clear to us that the process of discerning which ACPE Supervisory Education Students (SESs) have the potential to become CPE Supervisors needs to be improved and initiated earlier.

The Admission Policy for Supervisory Education at both of the centers in this project includes the following criteria: excellent interpersonal skills, strong pastoral identity and skills, ability to receive and use feedback constructively, excellent academic skills, and sense of call to become a CPE Supervisor.[2] While these are adequate criteria, determining their presence or potential among applicants is difficult to access in the admission process for supervisory education. The difficulties in selecting appropriate students for CPE supervisory education include the inability to assess motivation (either the applicant's or the center's motivation); a lack of clarity in the CPE Training Center about what is required to prepare an SES adequately; and problems that cannot be foreseen until both the SES and the CPE supervisor(s) are well into the process. Personal integrity, emotional and spiritual maturity, awareness of culture, and informed and effective individual and group supervision must be cultivated in the formation process for CPE supervisors. Discerning the potential of an individual to achieve these and other competencies is difficult to assess simply through an interview process.

The purpose of this study is to describe one process for choosing Supervisory Education Students (SES) in Clinical Pastoral Education: the Discernment Unit. The two authors of this article recently designed a unit of CPE aimed at helping three potential candidates for supervisory training and the supervisors at their respective centers discern whether the students were well suited to enter Supervisory CPE. We called this process and course of

study a Discernment Unit. All three candidates understood the experimental nature of the unit and also gave us permission to write this reflective essay on the experience. This article will describe the focus on discernment, reflect on what we learned, and offer suggestions for future study.

## Literature Review

While Supervisory Clinical Pastoral Education has a very rich tradition in practice, very little research has been done on the process of educating CPE supervisors. Earlier research by Judith Ragsdale described an emerging theory based on the supervisory education process in CPE.[3] In this qualitative study of eleven supervisors nominated by the ACPE Certification Commission as excellent in the practice of educating supervisors for Clinical Pastoral Education, a focus on *CPE Supervisory Wisdom* emerged as a prospective theory. This theory holds that supervisors grow in wisdom as they continue to reflect in a consultative way on major dimensions in CPE supervisory education: the material for reflection is drawn from the supervisor's own developmental needs as well as those of the students in supervision. The dimension of *CPE Supervisory Wisdom* relevant for this study focused on the selection of students for supervisory education. It is generally agreed that selecting students for supervisory education is a difficult, complex process. Supervisors participating in this study made the following comments:

> Selecting well is half the battle.
>
> We need to be thoughtful as an organization about how we assess who gets admitted in supervisory training because it requires a unique set of skills, the most predominant of which is willingness to become vulnerable and open to the external critique.
>
> The idea of spiritual and emotional maturity is a must.
>
> Do they have a sense of calling—a sense of purpose or desire to be a supervisor?

The Standards of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education briefly describe students as entering the supervisory process with the following qualifications to pursue the goal of becoming a supervisor: "Through Supervisory CPE, qualified persons who have demonstrated pastoral, professional, and clinical competence will develop competence in the art, theory, and practice of supervision of clinical pastoral education."[4] Determining whether persons are qualified or how they could demonstrate pastoral, professional, and clinical competence is left to the discretion of local ACPE

supervisors. One difficulty with this practice is that no formal education is required to prepare supervisors who will supervise SES students desiring certification as supervisors. The thorough and rigorous preparation required to supervise CPE for pastoral care providers is lacking at the level of supervisory education. The absence of adequate training affects the ability of CPE supervisors to select appropriate students for supervisory education.

The Association of Clinical Pastoral Education is not alone in struggling with formational and supervisory practices in preparation for religious vocations. "Educators walk with people who are discerning their vocation … one confusing step at a time. …Since James Fowler's (2000) attention on this subject, however, little has been written to address the significance of vocation as a religious educational issue."[5] The following quote from Fowler applies, the concept of virtue to vocational discernment:

> Alasdair MacIntyre makes it clear in his important book *After Virtue* that virtues take form and come to be valued in relation to a particular people's culture's *social praxis*….the term *social praxis* refers to the characteristic patterns of action and reaction by which a social group conducts its affairs and pursues its mission. Virtues, in this sense, then, are strengths of personhood—capacities for discernment, judgment, and action and for learning, cooperation, and leadership—that have moral significance. By moral significance, I mean to suggest…strengths [that] are perceived to be the fruits of commitment to the community's collective vocation and instrumental to the effective service of its central passion.[6]

The social group discussed in our study is broadly defined as the pastoral care community and more specifically as the group in an ACPE program. Although discernment is not a traditional virtue, it is a component of prudence. The virtue of prudence in this context means having foresight to know what the cost of supervisory CPE would be for the interested applicant and the wisdom to know whether an applicant has the potential to become a CPE supervisor. Carefully identifying the gifts, abilities, and sense of calling of the applicant during the CPE process will aid in discerning whether an applicant would make good use of the SES process to develop the identity and skills required to be certified as an ACPE Supervisor.

Our perspective is that if more careful discernment is practiced before an applicant enters supervisory education, there is a greater likelihood for success for the gifted applicant or for refocusing of the person whose gifts are not suited to the work of pastoral supervision. *The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* defines discernment in two ways. First, as:

> [A} general ability to understand and interpret a person's spiritual state and religious experience…Wise pastors are generally able to discern those under their care who are endowed with particular gifts and graces… Conversely, they should be able to guide good and faithful people whose immaturity may be leading them along false paths of prayer.[7]

This ability applies to discernment in the selection of students for supervisory education because in the place of "wise pastors" we hope to have "wise supervisors" who are able to discern the particular gifts and graces of those seeking to become supervisors, and those whose immaturity may be leading them down a false path.

The second aspect of discernment has to do with understanding entities in the spiritual realm. Thornton explains that:

> [T]he contemporary pastor might prefer to deal with spiritual experience in terms of misinterpretation and self-deception, and to interpret the Spirit's leading by sanctified rational thought…In ordinary pastoral practice, the concern is with a correct interpretation of these common levels; is this or that experience a genuine disclosure of the will of God…God is unlikely to provide a detailed career blueprint...Ministry requires certain qualities: intellectual ability, leadership, compassion, a thirst for prayer. God can overrule any deficiency, but the plain lack of all such qualities makes the vocation suspect.[8]

CPE supervision is a specialized ministry that also requires certain qualities, the "plain lack" of which should indeed make the vocation suspect. The ACPE Standards outline a series of qualities such as "personal integrity and a deepening pastoral identity; emotional and spiritual maturity; [and] awareness of how one's culture affects professional and personal identity," among 27 descriptions of required competencies. One of the most inclusive competencies might be Standard 319.1: "integrates educational theory, knowledge of behavioral science, professional and organizational ethics, theology, and pastoral identity into supervisory function.[9] The challenge for supervisors is to identify and foster discernment of the qualities in a potential Supervisory Education Student (SES) that are needed to achieve integration. Learning how to read the signs of supervisory potential based on the careful study of experience requires that CPE supervisors themselves develop a level of wisdom that we believe comes from the continual use of an action/reflection method in community with other committed colleagues.

Bradley T. Morrison has described a 'Stewardship Model of Pastoral Supervision' that—while not about CPE supervision—suggests a model for discernment in pastoral supervision. Morrison notes that "*Pastoral discernment*

in supervision refers to the stewardship of the supervisee's gifts and calling for pastoral care and counseling ministry. The pastoral supervisor exercises a gate keeping function in the selection, training, and commissioning of designated pastoral caregivers and counsellors. Gate keeping in pastoral supervisory ministry is a function of discerning God's activity."[10] In keeping with the culture of CPE, Morrison notes that "the pastoral supervisor approaches gate keeping in a discerning manner, not confusing personal, contextual biases and preferences for faithful gate keeping. Communal discernment operates as a safeguard against conflicts between the personal agenda of the candidate and supervisor."[11] The ability to be aware of, and not be controlled by, one's biases and preferences requires a high level of discernment.

In his essay "Living with Discernment in Times of Transition," Giallanza notes that "by etymology, discernment means 'to separate apart,' to distinguish something from everything around it so it can be perceived clearly. This is the challenge."[12] We determined that this challenge could best be met by crafting a strategy to help with the process of discernment. As Richard Beck writes about another social process, "What is needed is a practical tool of discernment devoted to assessing the moral complications that arise in simple everyday conversation."[13] We are not addressing moral complications in conversation; rather we are discerning vocation. To that end, we developed a practical tool for discernment: the Discernment Unit for Supervisory CPE.

## The Discernment Unit

There were three students in the program, all of whom had CPE several years previously. One student, a 49-year-old African American male pastor and chaplain in the Pentecostal tradition, had completed four units of CPE ten years ago. Another student, a 56-year-old Euro-American male Roman Catholic layperson serving as both a chaplain and a department director had completed at least four units of CPE more than 18 years ago. The third student requested that identifying information not be included in this article but agreed that material from the process could be reported and reflected on. That student had done several units of CPE in the 1980s and had been serving in specialized ministry for a number of years. These three students were supervised in the Discernment Unit by a 52-year-old African American woman ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination and by

a 51-year-old European American woman holding ordination in the United Church of Christ.

This group met for an opening day-long retreat at a retreat center and after that, once a week for about 6 hours for clinical presentations, interpersonal group (IPG), and didactic seminars over the course of 5 months in this Extended CPE Unit. Each student met at least weekly with his individual supervisor. Students were required to present 1) 'Grace Maps' (a chronological story of their lives with pictures and an explanation of how they experienced God at key points in their lives), 2) learning goals, and 3) verbatim reports (case studies of ministry events with reflection on theological themes and psychological dynamics) two out of every three weeks. In addition, each student presented a paper entitled "Why I Want to be an ACPE Supervisor" at the beginning of the unit, a Theology of Pastoral Care paper mid-unit, and a Discernment Paper at the end of the Unit. In the Discernment Paper, the students were to identify strengths they saw in themselves in terms of supervision; describe what they had learned about the process of becoming an ACPE Supervisor; and reflect on their sense of whether they were being called into the ministry of pastoral supervision. Each student also presented Mid-Unit and Final Evaluation papers to the group.

It would be an understatement to say the Discernment Unit unfolded differently than we all anticipated. The transition from being a professional to being a student again took considerably longer than any of us expected. How could a professional goal be rethought as a learning goal? In the authors' practice of CPE supervision, a learning goal needed to involve the educational resources of the CPE process and needed to either build on an identified strength or address a perceived limitation. Also, the verbatim presentations were either superficial in reflection or, of more concern, lacked the demonstration of appropriate pastoral care. One student presented a verbatim in which the student expressed sarcasm toward a patient and struggled to reflect on what meaning this might have—either for the student or for the patient. The supervisors speculated between themselves and, as seemed useful, with the students, that regression was taking place as the students considered beginning a new stage of professional identity formation.

One of the students progressed through the unit to a place where the supervisors would have supported his move into Supervisory CPE. However, he was ambivalent in terms of motivation and chose not to continue the process, although he did choose to remain in a process of discernment for the time being. A second student was beginning to make good use of the

CPE process for learning, but his progress was slow in part because of the variety of commitments in his vocational life outside the CPE context. It was suggested that if he wanted to engage in Supervisory CPE, he would do well to do another unit of Level II CPE as a way of continuing his discernment. His greatest difficulty seemed to be his inability to set limits on his willingness to serve in different ministry venues. "Counting the cost" became a critical theme for him. The third student seemed to be using CPE for support during a major life transition. This student's ministry did not reflect sound pastoral care practices, although the referrals received from respected colleagues suggested that this student would be a strong applicant. While quite academically adept and likely to have been selected for supervisory education, this student's verbatim material presented in the course of the Discernment Unit revealed a significant struggle with pastoral identity.

## Reflection on Outcomes of the Discernment Unit

Several practical themes emerged from the outcomes of this pilot Discernment Unit:

1. One cannot assume that participation in four units of CPE—even if those units include two units of Level II—will assure that participating chaplain students achieve appropriate performance at the expected level of competence. All three of the participants presented several verbatim reports which, at times, did not indicate the level of pastoral care consistent with completion of Level II CPE. Some of the participants had done their original CPE work several years ago and rather than entering this process with clarity about how to focus on professional pastoral development, they were anticipating that CPE would focus on their personal needs for support. The supervisors had imagined that these personal needs, often addressed as part of professional development in Level I CPE, would not be the focus of clinical work. While any new professional identity development might begin with regression, this type of presentation endured far into the Discernment Unit suggesting significant personal work needed to be done before the applicant(s) would be prepared to enter Supervisory Education.
2. Because these participants had been away from CPE as students for several years, (although some of them had engaged the CPE process by working with CPE students in centers where they were professionally employed), they had to get reacquainted with the dynamics of an Interpersonal Relations Group (IPG). They didn't seem to know how to use the Interpersonal Group (IPG) for support, clarification, or confrontation in the service of their learning goals. This raises a question about how long skills learned in IPG in another setting survive when professionals don't continue to do small group work as

part of their professional development and practice**.** The participants used IPG primarily for personal sharing rather than for seeking or offering feedback about vocational discernment—the task at hand.

3. One cannot assume students come into CPE supervisory education being able to articulate their theology of pastoral care. The supervisors found this to be quite surprising since all the applicants had been practicing as chaplains or pastoral counselors for a number of years. Yet, in the context of verbatim reports, inviting theological reflection proved to be challenging for more than one participant. We amended our program to include didactic instruction on how to reflect theologically about particular cases.
4. The students' awareness of their learning issues was not clear. They had difficulty knowing the difference between their professional goals and their learning goals. Becoming a student again after having been an established professional is a major transition. Returning to the vulnerability of acknowledging gaps in knowledge and in self-awareness in one's own profession proved to be more challenging than the participants or the supervisors had anticipated.
5. Some professionals in the pastoral care community make the assumption that with two units of Level II CPE, a student will be able to do self-supervision of his or her pastoral care. With this group of motivated prospective Supervisory Education Students **(**SESs), self-supervision was not as well developed as the supervisors had expected. If they are not aware of how their family of origin themes and dynamics impact their pastoral, personal, or professional encounters, they are certainly not ready to journey that path with beginning CPE students.
6. The Discernment Unit is not a unit of Supervisory CPE as the supervisors had thought it would be. Most likely a Discernment Unit will be Level II CPE; one student in this pilot received credit for Level I CPE.

In addition to these observations gathered by the authors, the students were invited to read this article and offer their own reflections. All three participants of the Discernment Unit said that the process had been very helpful for their professional development. One participant sent a written comment affirming that it had taken a longer time than he expected to re-engage the CPE process even though he had participated in professional development regionally and nationally for a number of years as a chaplain. He wrote:

> But once I began to trust myself, as well as the CPE process, I felt that I utilized the unit to enhance my professional development as a chaplain and discern whether I felt called to CPE supervision. Several key factors helped in this process:
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> • The CPE Supervisors were extremely competent and caring...They were skilled in helping us identify areas of professional and person-

al growth. It was clear that their motive was not based on creating a model discernment unit for CPE supervisors, but rather, their primary purpose was to help us grow as individuals and as chaplains.

- The supervisors did not pressure us to make a discernment decision. They allowed the process to develop as it needed, giving each of us time, while gently and professionally guiding us in the process.
- My supervisor invited me to participate in her summer CPE unit. On two occasions, when the students were meeting to set their learning goals, and during several of their subsequent verbatim groups, I was allowed to actively participate in their process. This experience was extremely helpful. Although limited, it gave me "first-hand" supervisory experience, which was very insightful. This aspect of my experience was extremely helpful. I would recommend that more opportunities for this type of shadowing experience be included in any future discernment CPE supervisor groups.[14]

This participant's experience suggests that an 'observation component' should be a key element of the Discernment Unit.

## The Value of a Supervisory Discernment Unit

Reasons for wanting to enter Supervisory CPE cover a wide spectrum and include motivations beyond, as well as within, the potential Supervisory Education Student (SES)'s awareness. Applicants' ability to interview convincingly sometimes does not equate with success as a potential supervisor. This is not the fault of the applicant. One of the supervisors interviewed for a qualitative study about educating CPE supervisors noted this:

> I found pretty quickly that there [are] people who wanted to do supervisory education because of the wonderful experiences they'd had in CPE… they just have a good feeling about CPE. And they want to pass it on. When that happens, I don't think it's the student's responsibility, I think it's the Center and the person that takes them on that's made a mistake. And I made some mistakes.[15]

It may take considerable work and frustration on the part of the students and the supervisors to figure out whether the prospective SES is seeking support from CPE, is equipped with a vocation to become a pastoral educator, or some combination of the two. If we had a process for selecting SESs that could assess this with greater precision, much time and pain might be avoided. The authors of this article have proposed a model of the Supervisory Discernment CPE Unit. This process may include one or more units of Level II CPE if, following the first Discernment Unit, the CPE students and

supervisors of the unit are not yet mutually clear about the student's ability to continue into supervisory CPE.

The authors co-led this unit of CPE to discern whether the students participating in the Unit were prepared to engage the CPE supervisory education process. The unit was undergirded by the emerging theory of *CPE Supervisory Wisdom* that includes a process for selecting SESs. A previous study of experienced CPE supervisors regarding the process for successfully selecting SESs included the following factors: 1) having first-hand experience of a student's pastoral work; 2) assessing students' applications for interviews carefully for signs of integration of personal issues and pastoral identity; and 3) receiving thoughtful consultation from CPE colleagues about student applicants.[16] Those supervisors requiring first-hand experience of a student's pastoral work reported this as a strong indicator that a potential SES had pastoral identity and skills sufficient to engage the supervisory education process. Another theoretical component of *Supervisory Wisdom*, assessing applications for signs of integration of personal issues and pastoral identity—proved to be less successful for two reasons: pastoral identity has not been well defined and personal integration cannot be discerned adequately in an application.

While experimental to us, we have learned that this kind of discernment unit is not unique. When describing this Discernment Unit to an ACPE supervisory colleague, Rhonda Gilligan Gillespie, one of the authors learned that she had also put a discernment unit process into practice. When asked what she had learned from her experience of offering a discernment unit, she wrote the following:

> Entrance into the supervisory education process involves a discernible call to pastoral supervision. It is therefore wise to offer a dedicated and formalized discernment unit of Level 2 CPE to those experiencing this potential call. The discernment unit provides the program with opportunities to assess the individual's abilities to conceptualize theories of pastoral care, which may in turn demonstrate his/her abilities to conceptualize theories of pastoral supervision. While the discernment unit may not be predictive of successful certification, it may allow the center to choose individuals who can make meaningful use of the intensive learning process involved at the SES level, even if the call is found to be other than that of certified supervision. While both individuals involved in the discernment unit I supervised were accepted into the SES program, one went on to be certified at the Candidacy level (at the time of this writing) and the other used the process to move to a significant position of leadership within her

denomination. Both of these individuals successfully used the supervisory education process.[17]

The Discernment Unit would be worthwhile in determining either a call toward or away from CPE supervisory education. Learning that one does not demonstrate the potential to become a pastoral educator may at the same time reveal other skills and interests that reveal the student's true calling.

We were fortunate to put together a group in which all three members were discerning whether they were prepared to or interested in participating in Supervisory CPE. However, one of the limitations of this study was that all three students had completed their CPE over ten years earlier. Another approach to this process might be to have a student take part in a Discernment Unit whose peers are working on other educational goals in ministry development. Another limitation of this process was that while we had racial and gender diversity, we did not explore those dynamics as fully as we might have. Robinson and Needham suggest that diversity issues in supervisory relationships may be—and should be—beneficially explored to enhance learning.[18] We concur, and imagine that such exploration would take place further into the Supervisory Education Student (SES) process. We are certainly open to exploring in continuing research and discourse distinct elements that are not necessarily shared with the dominant culture when persons of color are included as part of the CPE community. These elements include such themes as the issue of privilege, identity crisis, and the selection of SES curricula and resources.[19]

## Conclusion

The careful selection of Supervisory Education Students (SESs) for CPE requires preparation. CPE is an action/reflection format, yet few practitioners write about what they have learned as they reflect on their action in terms of the selection of SESs. Thus, much pain can result for both ill equipped students and poorly prepared supervisors in the formation of CPE supervisors. Discernment requires several virtues that can be cultivated as we study the selection process and learn how to more accurately assess applicants' interpersonal skills, pastoral identity and skills, ability to receive and use feedback effectively, ability to write well, ability to both learn and develop theory, and a sense of call to be a CPE supervisor. In addition to prudence, the virtue of courage in particular will serve both supervisors and potential

SESs as they seek to perceive clearly and communicate honestly in the decision making process.

In Parker Palmer's *The Courage To Teach*, Palmer discusses the theme of discernment in the context of reflecting with the "other" about whether a particular vocation is the one that is truly and authentically suited for that person. He describes a process that is used quite often in the Quaker community called the clearness committee. This process essentially offers a way to dialogue and reflect with the "focus person" (potential student) in a way that empowers them to also get at the inner truth about their decision-making process toward vocation. Palmer reflects: "As a member of many clearness committees, I have been privileged to witness a remarkable thing; human beings in dialogue with their inner teachers. Watching the focus person in this setting provides the most vivid evidence I have ever seen that each of us has a teacher within—all we need are the conditions that allow us to listen, to speak, and to learn."[20] Our hope is that the Discernment Unit could provide this kind of intentional process for the potential SES and for the CPE supervisor(s) considering bringing a student into a Supervisory CPE program. The Discernment Unit is a tool that could benefit from further study and may provide significant aid in the selection process. Although the context for this Discernment Unit was Clinical Pastoral Education, other disciplines that need to select people qualified to function as pastoral supervisors could benefit from examining this pilot project.

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