

Excellence in Supervision: Practical Wisdom From Supervisors/Mentors

**Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, Catrina Ciccone, Marcus Hong,
and Susan MacAlpine-Gillis**

In order to understand excellence in theological field education (TFE) supervision, we sought the wisdom of site supervisors/mentors. Following good qualitative research practice, we created a survey that takes an open-ended and indirect approach to gathering images, narratives, and feedback from exemplary supervisors/mentors nominated from a variety of theological schools. This essay summarizes the wisdom from twenty-nine supervisors/mentors working around the United States and Canada. We conclude each section of the report with questions for additional reflection

Eileen R. Campbell-Reed is coordinator of coaching, mentoring, and internships at Central Seminary (Tennessee campus). Currently, she is visiting associate professor of pastoral theology and care at Union Theological Seminary, New York (2019–2020). She is also co-director of the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project. Email: eileen@pastoralimagination.com.

Catrina L. Ciccone is the contextual learning coordinator for the MDivX Pilot Project, Luther Seminary and associate director of the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project. Email: cciccone002@luthersem.edu.

Marcus Hong is director of field education and assistant professor of practical theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Email: Mhong@lpts.edu.

Susan MacAlpine-Gillis is assistant professor of pastoral theology at Atlantic School of Theology. Email: smacalpinegillis@astheology.ns.ca.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

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

* © Copyright 2020 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
All Rights Reserved

and research. Our observation is that excellent TFE supervisors/mentors not only accompany and support new ministers as they learn the embodied, relational, and integrative practice of ministry but that they also engage in *wise pastoral practice*. Students are not the only ones who benefit from excellent supervisory relationships; so do the congregations, health care settings, and supervisors/mentors themselves.

SUPERVISORS/MENTORS

We invited nominations from four schools in Canada and eight in the United States. We received forty-three supervisor/mentor names from nine schools. By our deadline, twenty-nine supervisors had responded to the questionnaire. The following is a summary of what they told us about themselves. Every respondent was ordained within their respective tradition.¹ Eighty-seven percent served in congregations, 10 percent in chaplaincy, and 3 percent in direct service in an urban community ministry. Their geographic locations included Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, New York, Minnesota, Arizona, Colorado, and Oregon in the United States, and Nova Scotia and British Columbia in Canada.

The majority of the respondents were in a mature stage of their lives, with almost half aged sixty to sixty-nine and more than a quarter aged fifty to fifty-nine. The remaining 24 percent were under age fifty. More than one-third of the respondents have been supervising ministry students for ten years or more, 21 percent for seven to ten years, 21 percent for four to six years, 21 percent for one to three years, and 3 percent for less than one year. Fifteen respondents were women, three were men, and one identified as genderqueer. Nearly three in four supervisors had a master of divinity, 18 percent had completed other master's-level graduate work, and 10 percent had a doctor of ministry.

These supervisors/mentors were affiliated with a wide range of schools.² More than half of the schools refer to this work as *field education*, and just under half alternatively or also call it *internship*.³ Largely, supervisors/mentors are a volunteer corps working in partnership with seminaries. Thirteen percent of these supervisors reported being paid for their labor either by the seminary or by their ministry organization.⁴ Four out of five understood this work to be part of their ministry and expected no other acknowledgment or compensation. Despite this, a variety of acknowledg-

ments and alternative compensations were reported: 34 percent received emails and/or letters of acknowledgment from the seminary, 30 percent received specialized training from either the seminary or their denominational body, 10 percent received books or other resources, 6 percent received free enrollment in seminary classes, and 3 percent were given access to a peer ministry group.

MINISTRY SITES

Supervisors/mentors in the study described urban, rural, and suburban ministry settings. Among the respondents were pastors and priests as well as church starters, hospital and hospice chaplains, and associate ministers. Supervisors/mentors served congregations ranging from quite small in number (seventy-five or fewer) to rather large (one thousand or more members). Some congregations were centuries old, and others had launched their work just a few years previous. Supervisors/mentors are involved in a vast array of ministry duties and activities. Students at these ministry sites have the chance to observe and/or participate in a wide range of ministries, including: community care, worship and preaching, education, social justice, benevolence, chaplaincy, music, and/or age-focused ministries.

We asked supervisors/mentors, "What got you into the work of TFE supervision?" They described three pathways into field education: (1) through an invitation from the seminary; (2) by choice, thanks to personal enrichment, learning, and enjoyment; and/or (3) field education was already embedded in the history or "DNA" of the organization when the supervisor/mentor arrived.

The majority of the supervisors/mentors taking the survey used traditional methods of on-site supervision, meeting face-to-face for weekly or biweekly supervision of approximately thirty minutes to an hour and often longer at the student's ministry site. This on-site supervision let itself to organic feedback opportunities as student and supervisor/mentor work together in planning, worship, and other pastoral events. Many supervisors/mentors stayed connected with their students through text or email and seek to be responsive to the needs of students as they arise.

Some supervisors/mentors met in public spaces such as coffee shops, and some did supervision in multiple places, including by phone. The use of technology for supervision was very limited in our sample, with only

one supervisor/mentor using video conferencing technology. This raises the question: How will we assess best practices for off-site and distance supervision?

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

Supervisors/mentors fell into two groups regarding orientation and training. More than half of those surveyed (fourteen of twenty-five) noted that schools offered orientation or training events once or twice a year.⁵ Those who did not receive training said they depended on their own prior seminary education, years of ministry experience, other kinds of training (e.g., spiritual direction), their own gifts and calling, and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Whether they attended training events or not, many supervisors/mentors said they felt supported and accompanied by TFE faculty and staff, knowing they could seek consultation any time. The majority of the respondents described a combination of intentional training and ministry experience that prepared them for their work of supervision. Some supervisors/mentors also received compulsory training from their denominational bodies.

To supplement our understanding of what supervisors/mentors receive from seminaries in the way of support and training, we asked the same schools who nominated supervisors to provide some basic information. Field education staff from seven programs provided brief descriptions of training.⁶

Recruiting and Vetting

At a few schools, students identified and nominated sites and supervisors/mentors. More schools had long-standing and highly cultivated relationships with pastors, ministers, chaplains, and nonprofit leaders. They placed students, with input and discernment, into previously successful TFE sites. In other cases, alumni and friends of the school nominated sites and supervisors/mentors to the TFE director. Whether new supervisors/mentors were recruited or nominated, the common pattern for vetting included a phone and/or video interview to determine the fitness of the site and the supervisor/mentor.

Training

All TFE programs in our sample reported offering a host of guiding documents by email. Some provided annual and regularly scheduled training and workshop events and/or refresher courses as needed. Some schools provided only documentation, with little or no group training.⁷ Most schools have developed a system of covenants or agreements that include student learning goals and work responsibilities and that shape the relationships between supervisor/mentor, site, and student. Faculty and staff reported offering support by phone, email, and some site visits. Topics for training included boundaries, preventing sexual harassment and misconduct, theological reflection, pedagogical principles, and case studies.

Supervisors/mentors named other kinds of preparation, such as spiritual direction training, “theory, group discussions and role plays,” and their own curiosity. At least one site supervisors/mentor was on a seminary team that provided annual training to other supervisors/mentors.

Feedback and Evaluations

Schools in our sample asked supervisors/mentors to evaluate students based on learning goals once or twice per term, guided by a series of questions or a rubric. In some TFE programs, supervisor reports became part of a discussion with students, who also evaluated their own learning goals.

Compensation

None of the schools reported compensating TFE supervisors/mentors directly.⁸ However, some supervisors/mentors received creative benefits such as credit toward enrolling in a DMin program, working as small group facilitators in courses that ran parallel with TFE, and/or opportunities to audit classes and attend lectures.

In the area of orientation and training, these questions are notable: How can schools expand training that is relevant and regular and that fosters resilience for volunteer TFE supervisors/mentors? As coursework keeps moving online and students attend from a greater variety of geographical locations, how will TFE training and communication change to address these new realities? How might schools better acknowledge and compensate supervisors/mentors?

THE WORK OF SUPERVISION

We asked a set of questions that prompted supervisors/mentors to share about when supervision had been effective, when it had not gone well, and what they found most challenging. The responses made it clear that providing good feedback and facilitating reflection remain the two bright stars of the supervisory relationship—more important, for some, than providing specific experiences or discussing nuts and bolts. For many, the most effective supervision occurred when confronting difficult realities alongside their students, which involved truth-telling, relieving student anxiety, and creating space for failure. Other times, this meant slowly cultivating students' confidence in their own pastoral identity and authority.

Several supervisors/mentors led students to outside resources, people qualified to help students process their emerging self-understanding, such as spiritual directors, therapists, or a "gender doula."⁹ On the flip side, supervisors/mentors reflected that supervision did not go well when students resisted receiving feedback or when supervisors/mentors overshared, failed to listen with empathy, or became defensive. We learned of a few painful experiences of ending the supervisory relationship early and learning how to say goodbye with grace. Overwhelmingly, respondents pinpointed *time* as the most challenging factor; the supervisory relationship requires a significant amount of time for trust to develop and feedback and reflection to be meaningful. Several also struggled to maintain their own health, boundaries, and ministries. Finally, a significant number wrote about the difficulty of working with students who lacked motivation or interest in their own emotional and spiritual development. One described this as students being "asleep to their own lives."

We asked supervisors/mentors what they noticed ministry students were well prepared to do. Nearly one-third of the supervisors/mentors articulated that preparation varied by student. In the midst of this truism, their answers nevertheless mapped out several strong areas of preparation. Worship leadership was the most frequently named, followed by intellectual capacity (for example, critical thinking, theological reflection, understanding of the Bible and church history) and rounded out by preaching and pastoral care.

Conversely, we asked supervisors/mentors about areas where students struggled to be prepared, and they noted again that it varied by student. Most commonly, supervisors/mentors encouraged students to discern and

focus on their particular growing edges. But again, responses tended to cluster around certain distinct categories. Concerns included humility and/or vulnerability, lack of curiosity, “overconfidence, under-competence,” and resistance to allowing oneself to be “new” and *not know everything*. Interestingly, preaching was also named as a struggle (particularly sermons being too academic or lacking the diversity of preaching styles needed), as was pastoral care (especially the initiation of pastoral care). Church administration and governance, claiming one’s pastoral authority, and developing pastoral leadership skills and strategies were additional areas that respondents regularly saw students struggling with, along with healthy boundaries and time management.

Our research team observes that many of the things students struggle with are best, and perhaps only truly, learned through practice over time, with the support and guidance of a mentor further along in the trajectory of their vocation and more deeply embedded in the community of practice.¹⁰ This underscores the importance of field education as a critical component of theological education. Multiple supervisors spoke to the need for “sufficient time and exposure to really enter into” certain aspects of ministry. They named the struggle of students to gain that experience within the limited parameters of their field education requirements. One chaplain supervisor noted that “students feel tremendous disappointment that their seminary experiences failed to prepare them adequately for their professional lives.” This supervisor/mentor worried that too much in a seminary curriculum is “hard to make actionable by the majority of our students.” He observes that students longed for “faculty who were more invested in their spiritual/personal development.”

We asked supervisors/mentors to express their understanding of the work of supervision (1) through metaphors and images that guide them and (2) through describing the most important tools for their work. The most common theme that emerged from the first question was the need for supervisors/mentors to balance their own experiences and capabilities with the students’ experiences, skills, and felt calling. They articulated this balance between “leading and serving” through a series of similar metaphors: yoked oxen, Elizabeth and Mary, Moses and Joshua, Paul and Silas, Jesus and the disciples, a seed dying to self, a parent bird teaching fledglings how to fly, and a trail guide assisting hikers with differing abilities and desires for different paths. Others utilized spatial metaphors to emphasize a supportive

role: open channel, bridge, space for context, circle, and “holding space” for students to integrate the self and make room for others. Several imagined themselves as coaches or midwives. Several others described themselves as part of a team or a “three-cord rope.” Unique metaphors included “minor poet,” “gardening and agriculture,” the folk tale “stone soup,” and being “mirrors that reflect” rather than “mirrors that distort.”

Respondents generally understood the question about tools in one of two ways: personal skills or practical resources. Personal skills included deep listening (mentioned the most), building trust (including trusting students to know their own needs), being honest (with students and with themselves), being willing to be vulnerable, being encouraging, good time management, and patience. Practical resources were Bowen’s family systems theory, prayer, developmental theories (including adult learning theorists Robert Kegan and Jack Mezirow), trauma-informed supervision, clear goals and evaluation tools, the seminary/divinity school and the TFE staff (including a director who “cares about and knows students and who values supervisors and congregations”), verbatims, theological reflection, and calendars.

These responses invite additional reflection and research about the work of supervision. What feedback do curriculum committees and professors across disciplines need to hear from TFE supervisors/mentors? How could supervised ministry be incorporated into seminary education sooner and more often?

LEARNING AND DELIGHT

We asked supervisors/mentors what they had learned about ministry itself from the practice of supervision, and we also asked them how the work delighted them. Many spoke about the “magnificent diversity” of gifts, callings, and talents they saw in the students they supervised. Supervisors/mentors have learned about ministry’s improvisational character, the reality that challenges will always be part of the work, and that *how* they listen, the *words* they speak, and their *ways* of communicating make an impact. Perhaps one of the most important things supervisors/mentors have learned is how to reflect more deeply on their own vocations and practice of ministry. They also reported feeling inspired and invigorated by the curiosity, inquisitiveness, and “fresh eyes” that students brought into their internships

and TFE placements. As one supervisor/mentor put it, "There's not enough space here for the thousand little things" learned by accompanying student ministers."

Supervisors/mentors reported delighting first and foremost in being a witness to the growth and transformation of students. This learning happened through relationships in the congregation, navigating struggles, "aha" moments, exploring new theological ideas outside the classroom, and the everyday ministry tasks of preaching, caring, and teaching. Supervisors/mentors were delighted by the energy, ideas, eagerness, and enthusiasm that students brought to each ministry moment, feeling inspired with hope for the future by the courage and resilience that student ministers embodied. One supervisor found great encouragement "when a student . . . is being a minister . . . not just 'doing' ministry." The reports about learning and delight led us to wonder: How can we fold the experiences and insights of supervisors/mentors more intentionally and fully into the curricula of our schools?

This survey included the perspectives of many supervisors/mentors who have been at this work for decades, and they offered their perspectives of seeing growth over time and of seeing students become pastors in their own right and even adopting the stance of one day becoming TFE supervisors. This is the power of apprenticeship, of learning side-by-side in practice, and of keeping alive the wisdom and complex skills of ministry. This is the excellence in ministry, mentoring, and supervision that we hope schools will continue supporting from generation to generation.

NOTES

- 1 Traditions of the supervisors/mentors included the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Canada, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ, and Baptist.
- 2 Supervisors reported working with Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Seminary of the Southwest, Atlantic School of Theology, Luther Seminary, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Vancouver School of Theology, McAfee School of Theology, Union Theological Seminary (New York), Central Baptist Theological Seminary (Kansas), Candler School of Theology, Columbia Theological Seminary (Georgia), Princeton Theological Seminary, United Lutheran Seminary, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and United Theological Seminary.
- 3 Other terms used with less frequency were ministry placement, contextual education, residency, externship, mentorship, and supervised ministry education.
- 4 None of the schools that answered our questions about their training programs said they compensated TFE supervisors directly, but many of the supervisors oversaw students from multiple schools. And, some supervisors did other compensated work for schools such as co-teaching courses, long-term mentoring, or small group facilitation. For more about compensation, see “Excellence in Supervision: Training Site Supervisors/Mentors” by Zaker, Bennett, Elliot, and Wilden in this issue of *Reflective Practice*.
- 5 Not every supervisor took the survey that included a question about preparation for supervision.
- 6 Some TFE supervisors worked with ministry students from more than one school. The seven programs were in six schools: Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax, Nova Scotia), Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota), Central Baptist Theological Seminary (Shawnee, Kansas), Columbia Theological Seminary (Atlanta, Georgia), Louisville Presbyterian Seminary (Louisville, Kentucky), and Union Theological Seminary (New York, New York). See also “Excellence in Supervision: Training Site Supervisors/Mentors” by Zaker, Bennett, Elliot, and Wilden in this issue of *Reflective Practice*.
- 7 For example, Central Baptist Theological Seminary students are dispersed around the United States, making long-term relationships rare. Supervisors are often recruited to serve only once for twelve weeks.
- 8 In some cases, in-class facilitators (Luther Seminary) and long-term mentors (Central Baptist Theological Seminary) receive stipends for their work, but not for site supervision per se.
- 9 A gender doula supports anyone who is exploring their gender identity or expression, for instance, those who may define themselves as queer or questioning or those who may be undertaking the physical transformation of transitioning.
- 10 See Christian A. B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, *The Learning Pastoral Imagination Project: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice*, Auburn Studies no. 21 (New York: Auburn Theological Seminary, 2016).