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# Pastoral supervision for clergy and pastoral workers: a personal perspective

Peter Gubi reflects on his work as a pastoral supervisor

Pastoral supervision for clergy and pastoral workers is becoming a more widely accepted practice within many Christian denominations. Pastoral supervision provides opportunity to reflect on the part that one plays in pastoral and administrative encounters, develops better practice, and enables better safeguarding, better self-care, more appropriate boundaries and a more effective (or 'skilled') level of relationality. As a senior accredited pastoral supervisor, accredited with the Association for Pastoral Supervision and Education, working with clergy and counsellors in denominational-specific contexts, I thought it might be useful to write something about what underpins my practice as a pastoral supervisor, in order to enhance awareness of pastoral supervision. However, I bring to my practice my experience as a BACP senior accredited supervisor, as a person-centred counsellor, as a clergyman in the Moravian Church, as a pastoral/practical theologian and, most importantly, all that has informed me as 'me'. Each pastoral supervisor will bring a different emphasis to their work based on their training, life experience and background. So, I am in no way saying that 'this is how it should be' – rather, I am saying, this is how it is for me in my practice as a pastoral supervisor.

With that preface, the theoretical framework that underpins my practice of pastoral supervision brings together insights from some integrative models of counselling supervision<sup>1-3</sup> and theology,<sup>4,5</sup> with the practice of person-centred supervision.<sup>6-9</sup> Within those frameworks, the 'supervisory relationship' is (for me) the key issue in pastoral supervision, in that I believe that effective pastoral supervision is determined by the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. Pastoral supervision, like spiritual direction, can be described as a 'ministry of presence and attentiveness'<sup>10</sup> and a 'ministry of hospitality',<sup>11</sup> in which the integrity of pastoral care is held with gentle, supportive scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> The less the fear and anxiety that exist, and the deeper the mutuality in the relationship, the greater the commitment to learning will be from both supervisor and supervisee. This is not unlike Kelly's<sup>4</sup>

'theology of presence' which refers to the development of the embodiment of reflection in practice, and then being able to risk responding and acting with phronesis (or practical wisdom). Kelly<sup>4</sup> defines phronesis as 'being the creative and discerning use of knowledge (including awareness of self) in the moment, acquired through ongoing reflective practice and engagement with a relevant evidence base informing practice'. This leads to a theology that embraces risk as we face our vulnerable self. It risks staying with the mundane, even the boring, and being familiar with their patterns so that the treasure which points to possible transformation and glimpses of transcendence may be intuited and mined for. This requires a reflexive, embodied self in order to create opportunities for personal and professional growth, characterised by tenderness, gentleness and grace; requiring us to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), and to give forgiveness to self and others in a co-created safe space, secure in the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally by God. The embodied, reflexive self is the primary resource to facilitate the promotion of shared vulnerability and real possibilities of learning and transformation.

Mearns<sup>13</sup> suggests four essential conditions that are important for the development of a healthy pastoral supervisory relationship. First, there is a need for the pastoral supervisor to be committed to the supervisee. This is a

commitment which is fully involved, and which both challenges and supports the supervisee. Secondly, the relationship needs to be based on an appropriate level of congruence, so that perceptions and insights can be revealed and used therapeutically. Thirdly, valuing needs to be non-judgmental and non-threatening, for only then will the supervisee feel safe enough to take risks. Empathy is the fourth condition that is necessary to facilitate a deep understanding and reference with the supervisee. I aspire to provide all four essential conditions in my work as a pastoral supervisor who is attempting to build a 'community' in which we can reflect together.<sup>14</sup>

Merry<sup>8</sup> argues that the primary aim of person-centred supervision is to collaboratively enquire into how the counsellor is 'being' with her client, and how her 'way of being' is affecting the client's process. In my pastoral supervision, I try to abide by the five principles which underpin the collaborative enquiry. Summarised, they are:

- Both supervisor and supervisee are self-directed, and both can contribute equally to the enquiry;
- Both supervisor and supervisee are equally influential and both have a valid perspective to bring to the work;
- Both supervisor and supervisee have legitimate knowledge, experience and varying forms of knowing (cognitive and intuitive) which can be brought to the material;

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- Both supervisor and supervisee can make an evaluation of the quality of the counselling relationship because the supervisee does not feel threatened as a person;
- Both supervisor and supervisee are co-workers who offer expertise, knowledge and experience in the pursuit of deeper understanding.

In this approach, the sense of equality and phenomenological validity of what is shared is profound and freeing, but it does not offer a language for conceptualising and understanding the supervision and 'encounter processes' as other models do. It is also important that the key relational components that are expected in the counsellor/client relationship are modelled in the supervisor/supervisee relationship. It is different only in the fact that pastoral supervision needs to attend to 'particular issues' and so it has an agenda in a way that counselling relationships do not. These 'particular issues' are elaborated on more in other models that I have expressed later in this article. While I believe that this level of equality and collaboration is worth aspiring to, the reality of the pastoral supervisory relationship, in my experience, is that it can be complex and ambiguous because of the responsibility that a pastoral supervisor has to the client/patient/parishioner, which requires aspects of monitoring and accountability to ensure non-oppressive and competent, ethical practice.<sup>15,16</sup> I believe that for me to be ethical and effective, the pastoral supervision that I offer also requires the fulfilment of certain tasks

and functions. These are adequately identified by Carroll<sup>1</sup> as: 1) creating a learning relationship; 2) teaching; 3) counselling; 4) monitoring professional and ethical issues; 5) evaluation; 6) consultation; 7) monitoring administrative tasks. I regard these tasks as an inherent part of the pastoral supervisory relationship – tasks in which I have a therapeutically and theologically supportive role, and a training and monitoring role that have boundary and ethical obligations – in which both I and my supervisee are accountable to the professional bodies (if the supervisee belongs to one), APSE, the Church (or the context in which they serve/work), and to the wider community. However, the potential of that to limit the openness of the relationship is clear. My supervisee can feel scrutinised, as if she is held to account for her interventions with a client/patient/parishioner. I, as pastoral supervisor, may also feel anxious if I am unsure about my responsibilities. Being an educator, supporter, and 'one who monitors' can be difficult to balance. Hawkins and Shohet<sup>2</sup> state that the nature of the relationship inevitably creates a hierarchy with consequent issues of power. This may occur unintentionally, and be increased by a number of factors – not least being the supervisee's transference issues with authority, or the pastoral supervisor's inability to minimise the impact of the inequality of power on the relationship. Therefore, I regard good pastoral supervision as an 'alliance'<sup>17</sup> that is characterised by a high level of rapport, where these tasks can be carried out effectively and collaboratively.

I agree with Page and Wosket<sup>3</sup> when they state that an important part of the supervisory agenda within the relationship, is the supervisor's ability to 'contain' and hold the counsellor/priest/pastoral worker to her task, ie to keep the work focused, and to maintain appropriate boundaries and self-care. This may involve challenging my supervisee to acknowledge the areas of work that she is avoiding, and helping her to extricate her personal issues from what the client/parishioner is bringing. The relationship is, however, characterised by an 'adult-to-adult' level of engagement. Page and Wosket<sup>3</sup> also state that the supervisory relationship is characterised by the ability of the supervisor and supervisee to work through the cyclical model of supervision. This is a framework that stresses:

1. the need for contracting with a clear and specific contract, which is negotiated, and which demystifies the process and reduces anxiety
2. the need for focusing, which maximises the best use of supervision time by encouraging 'intentionality' and reflection on the material brought
3. the provision of space for the counsellor to be held, supported, challenged and affirmed
4. the need to bridge what is discussed in supervision with practice, so that it is integrated and applied in the counselling relationship
5. the need to review the supervisor/supervisee relationship to maintain regular feedback for both.

To this end, I contract (or covenant) clearly with my supervisee to create an opportune and purposeful space for all of the above to occur. Here again, ensuring the fulfilment of this agenda has the potential to raise issues of power and authority, particularly where issues of monitoring and the 'policing' of ethical practice are concerns that are present in the supervisory relationship (for example, particularly issues around working with difference, confidentiality, boundaries, anti-discriminatory practice, and maintaining good practice). However, the way in which I work with this is two-fold: a) by increasing the gentleness and

sensitivity of any challenge, so that it becomes almost 'covert' in quality, but 'overt' in nature so as not to avoid it; and b) by continually monitoring the pastoral supervisory relationship so that both parties have an ability to address aspects which inhibit disclosure. This enables me to work in a non-oppressive way while maintaining my 'authority' as a pastoral supervisor. If this way of working isn't sufficient, the contract (or covenant) makes it clear that if I, as the supervisor, have any concerns about a supervisee's practice, I will bring it to her attention first. We will explore the issues and, if necessary, contract for future practice. However, if I feel that, after doing this, the supervisee is not hearing, working with, or addressing the issues of concern, as a last resort I may have to stop her from practising by informing the agency, the Church and/or the professional body (where that is possible). I may therefore break the confidentiality of our relationship to take the issues elsewhere, but I will not do so without informing her first.

Finally, Hawkins and Shohet<sup>2</sup> also describe an agenda for an effective supervisory relationship that underpins my work as a pastoral supervisor. Their seven-eyed 'process model' of supervision enables focus to be placed on the following:

1. reflection on the content of the counselling session
2. exploration of the strategies and interventions used by the supervisee
3. exploration of the counselling process and relationship
4. focus on the therapist's process
5. focus on the supervisory relationship
6. focus on the supervisor's own process
7. focus on the wider (or organisational) context.

I believe that in my supervisory relationships, we move between these 'modes' as the process model gives a language to understanding both the process in our relationship, and the process in the counsellor/client relationship as it allows the emergence of the parallel process to be experienced and explored, which not only increases

the level of disclosure and trust, but informs the counsellor/client work at quite a profound level. We are also able to explore how the work and the counsellor/priest are affected by wider organisational issues, which this model gives a voice to more than others. Harborne<sup>18</sup> usefully translates this model for use in a spiritual context.

So while my pastoral supervision practice is person centred – with the relationship being collaborative<sup>9</sup> and process focused,<sup>7</sup> it is informed by a number of theoretical and theological reference points, which allow me to congruently offer greater insight into the counsellor's and client's process while being entirely congruent and open to my own process in relation to my supervisee – that which Worsley<sup>19</sup> terms as 'integrating with integrity'. I am also therapeutically supportive of my supervisee, yet ethically responsible to the client/patient/parishioner. The primary reason that we meet regularly is to ensure both their and their helper's wellbeing.

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Biography

Reverend Professor Peter Madsen Gubi, PhD, ThD, is Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment at the University of Chester, and Minister of Dukinfield Moravian Church. He is an APSE senior accredited pastoral supervisor, and a counsellor, counselling supervisor and spiritual director in private practice.

