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 supervision.6–9 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’10 and a ‘ministry of hospitality’.11 In which the integrity of pastoral care is held with gentle, supportive scrutiny.12 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’s13 ‘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). Kelly14 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 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.8 Merry 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.

...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 needs to be based on an appropriate level of congruence, so that perceptions and insights can be revealed and used therapeutically.
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Both supervisor and supervisee can make an error by Carroll as this is an inherent part 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 other models are also present. The relationship is characterised by a high level of rapport, trust, and confidentiality so that both parties feel safe to explore their areas of work that she is avoiding, and helping me to identify the areas of concern in the material brought to me.

1. The need for contracting with a specific and clear contracts, which both of us are accountable to meet regularly is to ensure both the client/priest are affected by the parallel process to be experienced which inhibit disclosure. This enables me to identify the potentially sensitive areas of work that she is avoiding, and helps me to identify the materials brought to me.

2. The need for focusing, which maximises the best use of supervision time, for example, by encouraging ‘interviewing with intention’ and reflection on the material brought to me.

3. The need to provide space for the counsellor to be held, supported, challenged, and affirmed.

4. The need to bridge what is understood in supervision with practice, so that it is integrated and applied in the counsellor/client relationship to the fullest extent.

5. The need to review the supervisor/ supervisee relationship to maintain feedback to both counsellor and client/priest.

6. The need to focus on the therapist’s process, with the supervisee clear and focused so that I can become aware of the parallel process of the supervisee.

7. The need to focus on the supervisor’s process.

8. The need to focus on the supervisor’s own process.

9. The need to focus on the supervisor’s relationship.

10. The need to focus on the supervisee’s relationship.

11. The need to focus on the supervisee’s own process.

12. The need to focus on the supervisor’s wider (or organisational) context.

I believe that in my supervisor’s relationship, we move between these ‘modes’, as the process may require 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 also legitimises the counselling relationship.

References


