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A pilot evaluation study of pastoral supervision provision in the Moravian Church (British Province)

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study (n = 17) is an evaluation of pastoral supervision within the Moravian Church (British Province). The findings indicate that pastoral supervision is considered sufficiently beneficial, with 94% having found pastoral supervision to be of help to them, to be worth continuing with, and to be worth continuing to be funded by the denomination; thereby adding a contribution to the discussion on the value of pastoral supervision for clergy.

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Introduction

Pastoral supervision is increasingly recognised in many Christian denominations, in the UK, as a way of enabling safeguarding and risk amelioration, of supporting the wellbeing of clergy and in enabling the development of reflexive practitioners for ministry in a complex society (Gubi et al., 2020). Pastoral supervision is sometimes also termed “reflective supervision” (Leach, 2020). Yet, there is little, or no, published evaluation of its effectiveness and value. The Association for Pastoral Supervision and Education (APSE) defines pastoral supervision (sometimes called reflective supervision or ministerial accompaniment) as:

A regular, planned, intentional and bounded space in which a practitioner, who is skilled in supervision (the supervisor), meets with one or more other practitioners (the supervisees) to look together at the supervisees’ practice. It is a relationship that is characterised by trust, respect, confidentiality, support and openness that gives the supervisee freedom and safety to explore the issues arising in their work. It is spiritually/theologically informed, which works within a framework of spiritual/theological understanding in dialogue with the supervisee’s world view and role. It is psychologically informed, drawing on relevant psychological theory and insight to illuminate intra-personal and inter-personal dynamics. It is contextually sensitive, paying attention to the particularities of setting, culture and world-view. It is praxis based, focussing on a report of work and /or issues that arise in, and from, the supervisee’s practice. It is a way of growing in vocational identity, role competence, self-awareness, spiritual/theological reflection, quality of presence, accountability, response to challenge, mutual learning; and it is attentive to issues of fitness to practice, skill development, management of boundaries, professional identity and the impact of the work upon all concerned parties (APSE, 2021, para. 1).

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The Uniting Church in Australia Ministerial Education Commission (2001) theologically justifies pastoral supervision by stating that it is through relationships that God is revealed – not as a theoretical or abstract principle, but in the actuality of a human person in the midst of human living, among the joys and sorrows, the needs and aspirations of ordinary human beings. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). Pastoral supervision seeks to know where God is in the events and engagements of supervisees’ ministry or work context, and thus to know where they need to be, and what they need to do in response to the activity of God in their lives. Pastoral supervision is concerned with the congruity between belief and practice. It is “confessional” in the sense that in advocating wholeness, pastoral supervision requires that people not only acknowledge and face their strengths and weaknesses, but also accept and integrate them. Pastoral supervision is reflective and occurs within a conversation in which people reflect critically on their personhood, ministry, work and faith. The supervisor assists people in seeing themselves and their ministry (or work) more accurately, clearly and creatively. Having seen themselves, supervisees can decide to make the changes they need to make. The process of reflection enables people to take ownership of what they have had reflected back to them from another angle of vision. One of the goals of supervision is to promote honesty. Supervision is tolerant of a person’s weaknesses and shortcomings. It understands, but does not tolerate, dishonesty and self-deception. Pastoral supervision calls for authenticity and integrity. Its function is to encourage openness to the tradition, culture, and experience: places where God reveals God’s self. God continues to work in our lives, bringing new and creative ways into being within us. Pastoral supervision provides a process that can enable people to reflect on the movement of the spirit of God in their lives. The process of pastoral supervision helps supervisees to consider what difference God’s presence makes in their life and assists in the “movement toward insight” about God’s ongoing revelation in the world. Pastoral supervision is about “wisdom” and grace. Pastoral supervision has a belief in the future and is contextual. It operates at many different levels of ministry and work, within and outside the church. The key to pastoral supervision is the facilitation of theological reflection in different vocational contexts.

In the UK, pastoral supervision is a relatively recent discipline. It has been implemented by the Methodist Church (2017) and the United Reformed Church (2020) in response to safeguarding concerns. Within the context of the Moravian Church (British Province), pastoral supervision was implemented in September 2020. The pastoral supervision policy of the Moravian Church (British Province) (Moravian Church, 2020) requires all serving ministers, Provincial Board members, and the Youth and Safeguarding Officer, to be in regular, monthly pastoral supervision for 1½ hours per calendar month, from September 2020, with a pastoral supervisor who is external to the Moravian Church (preferably an APSE Accredited Pastoral Supervisor), as a way of supporting Church servants’ wellbeing, developing them as reflective practitioners and countering their isolation in ministry (Stuart-White et al., 2018). The Moravian Church (British Province) is a small denomination in Britain, consisting of 1200 members, who are served by 17 ministers (Moravian Church, 2021).

Method

The research question for this research was: How has the practice of pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province) been helpful to Ministers

(Clergy), Provincial Board members, and the Youth and Safeguarding Officer; what have been its limitations; and how could it be improved? The aims of the research were:

- To explore what has been helpful to Ministers (Clergy), Provincial Board members, and the Youth and Safeguarding Officer in the provision of pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province);
- To determine what has not been helpful to Ministers (Clergy), Provincial Board members, and the Youth and Safeguarding Officer, in the provision of pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province);
- To discover if any improvements could be made to the provision of pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province).

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Chester through their approval process. The evaluation took place after only nine months of monthly pastoral supervision. An online survey was developed, containing a questionnaire of statements for participants to agree or disagree with, which were based on what research has already discovered to be the helping and hindering factors of pastoral supervision, albeit it within a reflective practice group context (Gubi, 2016, 2017, 2020; Gubi et al., 2020; Gubi & Korris, 2015), with opportunity for additional qualitative comment. The survey instrument, JISC, provided a statistical analysis of the data. All data were anonymised via the survey instrument. Although a coding was used by JISC, we have translated that into a simpler code (i.e., P1-P17) to anonymously attribute data to participants. Only eight participants offered comments. To maintain anonymity, any identifying features in the qualitative data were deleted. The online survey provided statistical evidence of the success and limitations of the provision. The qualitative comment was intended to add a textural dimension to the statistical data and gather data on participants' lived experiences and opinions. However, the comments that were added did not satisfactorily achieve this in the way that was hoped.

Pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province) was provided to 17 serving ministers, 1 non-ministerial Provincial Board member, and 1 Youth & Safeguarding Officer ($n = 19$). All of these participants were sent the link to the survey by email and were invited to complete the survey within a five-day time span. The response rate was 89% ($n = 17$), with two potential participants not responding. Because of the possibility that pastoral supervisors might feel "threatened" by what might be being said about them and about the quality of pastoral supervision that they offer, supervisors were made aware of the evaluation process and its content, in advance of the project, via a Zoom meeting. Four out of a possible thirteen pastoral supervisors attended and had the chance to ask questions about the research, offer comment on the content, and suggest some minor amendments to the content of the survey, which were incorporated. As the primary researcher had an insider-researcher role, being both the principal researcher and one of the participants, an independent co-researcher, Revd Dr Tuntufye Anangisye Mwenisongole, who would have co-access to the data, was engaged in order to validate and authenticate the data.

Findings

Participants were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements that reflect the benefits and limitations of pastoral supervision, identified in previous research (Gubi, 2016, 2017, 2020; Gubi et al., 2020; Gubi & Korris, 2015). The results are shown in Tables 1–7.

Discussion

To date, there has not been any published evaluation of, nor research into, the impact of provision of individual pastoral supervision in a UK context, to-date, other than Gubi's research (Gubi, 2016, 2017, 2020) into pastoral supervision within a reflective practice

Table 1. The benefits of pastoral supervision

	Agree %	Don't know %	Disagree %
My pastoral supervision has enabled me to:			
Feel supported	88	12	0
Feel less isolated in my ministry	76	12	12
Gain insight into the way I think	88	12	0
Process my feelings	82	18	0
Gain insight into my way of being in the world	59	35	6
Gain awareness of how I impact others	71	23	6
Have greater respect for difference	41	47	12
Have a better sense of self-care	76	12	12
Have a better quality of pastoral encounter with others in my ministry	57	31	12
Grow theologically	50	19	31
Interact better with others in my ministry	59	35	6
Grow as a human being	65	35	0
Trust others more	12	69	19
Experience my own vulnerability safely	76	18	6
Negotiate and manage boundaries better in my ministry	70	18	12
Deal with difficult pastoral situations more effectively	82	12	6
Become a more reflective Minister/person	70	18	12
Develop greater wisdom	53	47	0
Build and affirm strategies that can be taken back into my relationships with my congregation (or in my work)	88	6	6
Gain different perspectives on situations and people	93	7	0
Gain self-preservation strategies for dealing with others' expectations	76	12	12
Gain improved relationships within my work	41	53	6
Improve my priestly skills	35	53	12
Approach meetings more positively	59	23	18
Manage situations in more helpful ways	88	6	6
Discern better what God may be saying in certain situations	69	31	0
Gain a clearer sense of my vocation	76	12	12
	Agree %	Don't know %	Disagree %
I have found my pastoral supervision to be:			
A place of learning and support that can help to stop, or diminish, my cycle of feeling constantly drained	65	12	23
A place for gaining a sense of well-being within the institutional relationships, within the Church community, within family and self	59	29	12
A space for gaining self-awareness which is necessary in balancing a role that is called upon to model both authority and vulnerability	77	23	0
A chance to share my experience and to feel less alone	82	12	6
An opportunity to receive support and encouragement in the situation that I found myself, which can be taken back into my life and ministry	88	12	0
A place where I have gained confidence to engage/explore my call or ministry purpose	75	25	0

Table 2. Additional comment on the benefits of pastoral supervision.

- It has helped me to reflect on what I offer in terms of pastoral encounter (P1);
- Pastoral supervision has given me the opportunity to look at the shape of my future and discern how it might develop to serve the Church better (P4);
- Giving me time to reflect on various issues (P2);
- Pastoral supervision has given me a chance to pause, rest and reflect (P5);
- Pastoral supervision is very helpful to me and has gone some way to fill the gap in pastoral care that I have felt for over twenty years (P3).

Table 3. The limitations of pastoral supervision.

	Agree %	Don't know %	Disagree %
I have found that my involvement with my pastoral supervision has been held back by:			
My difficulty in committing the time to attend regularly	12	6	82
My difficulty in sharing openly with my pastoral Supervisor	0	6	94
My difficulty in making time to prioritise attendance	18	0	82
The manner of facilitation	12	6	82
The structured nature of the sessions	19	0	81
The unstructured nature of the sessions	0	6	94
Feeling unsafe	0	0	100
The use of online provision	12	12	76
Being sent (having to do it as a provincial requirement)	6	6	88
Poor facilitation	0	6	94
Struggles with expectation	6	0	94
A lack of prayer	6	0	94
Too much prayer	0	0	100
My sense of spiritual dryness	0	18	82
Not being able to discuss my relationship with God	0	0	100

Table 4. Additional comments on the hindrances to pastoral supervision.

- Sometimes the supervisor has imposed an agenda which hasn't always been helpful (P1);
- Nothing (P2);
- I thought that Covid-19 restrictions would be a problem, but the online provision has been excellent (P3);
- I am lucky to have a supervisor with whom I immediately got on and with whom I felt I could be completely open and honest. I hope this support continues (P6);
- My pastoral supervisor is what I would describe as being "on the clock". While I appreciate that there needs to be a beginning and an end, sometimes the session ends on the dot, and in the middle of an important point of discussion and reflection (P7).

Table 5. The overall helpfulness of pastoral supervision.

	Yes %	Don't know %	No %
The helpfulness of pastoral supervision			
Has the use of online pastoral supervision provision been of help to you?	94	6	0
Is regular monthly pastoral supervision worth continuing with?	94	0	6
Is pastoral supervision worth continuing to be funded by the British Province?	94	0	6

group context, conducted in Church of England and Church in Wales settings; although, the Methodist Church (2021) has included considerable research evaluation in their report on reflective supervision. This research represents the first published evaluation of individual pastoral supervision within a Christian denomination in the UK, and it is hoped

Table 6. How the provision of pastoral supervision could be improved.

-
- I can't think of anything. I am really enjoying reflecting on my life and vocation (P8);
 - It has generally worked well online. Although in-person meetings would be nice, they are not essential. I'm not sure it needs to be monthly, but it is certainly worth doing regularly – perhaps every two months (P4);
 - Having one session led by the supervisor, to coach or teach (P2);
 - Group sessions with other ministers (P5);
 - I hope to be able to meet with my supervisor face-to-face soon, but we are still working well together on Zoom (P4).
-

Table 7. Participants' additional comments on their pastoral supervision experience.

-
- It has been helpful to work with a wise, facilitative presence (P1);
 - It's odd, but the fact that it is by Zoom makes it easier because it does not involve travelling time. So, in a busy life, this is really good and helpful, and makes it easier to make time (P8);
 - This has been a positive experience, giving me the opportunity to look face-on at some of the issues in my ministry, identifying the frustrations as well as the rewards. I think that at this particular time, it was even more valuable, as everything seemed to be under evaluation. It has given me the chance to look at what I might do differently in the future. Thank you for providing it (P4);
 - Other denominations have the same requirements for ministers and lay people to attend pastoral supervision (P2);
 - I respect the discipline and professionalism of the supervisor (P5).
-

that other denominations will evaluate their provision of individual pastoral supervision similarly, so that researchers and funders can gain a better picture about the effectiveness of pastoral supervision as a practice for ameliorating risk and supporting the wellbeing and development of clergy.

Because the Moravian Church (British Province) is a small Christian denomination in the UK, the particular organisational size, context, culture and frequency of individual pastoral supervision, which the denomination has required in its policy on pastoral supervision (Moravian Church, 2020), may have helped pastoral supervision to work well, as the data from this research indicate – 94% have found pastoral supervision to be a help to them, to be worth continuing with, and to be worth continuing to be funded by the denomination. However, it is not clear how generalisable and universally applicable these findings can be, because individual pastoral supervision is offered differently in other UK denominations, in terms of organisation, context, culture and frequency. The variance in practice may impact on any future comparable study of pastoral supervision and includes that the Methodist Church requires their ministers, in the UK, to be in individual pastoral supervision for 1½ hours per alternate calendar month (i.e., every two months), with pastoral supervisors who largely are internal to the denomination, and who are often a supervisee's line-manager (which has significantly impacted the level of trust able to be developed, and has led to confusion of roles at times) (Methodist Church, 2021); and the United Reformed Church requires its ministers to be in individual pastoral supervision for 1-1½ hours per alternate calendar month (i.e., every two months) with an external pastoral supervisor who is APSE Accredited (United Reformed Church, 2020), some of who are internal to the denomination, but who have no dual roles, and some of whom are external to the denomination. The Moravian Church (British Province) has required its ministers to be in individual pastoral supervision for 1½ hours per calendar month, with an APSE Accredited pastoral supervisor who is external to the Moravian Church (Moravian Church, 2020). These variations in practice, culture and organisation may affect the benefit and limitations of pastoral supervision.

The data show the benefits of pastoral supervision, as it is organised in the Moravian Church (British Province) context, to be:

- a relationship which enables the supervisee to feel supported (88%);
- a relationship which enables the supervisee to feel less isolated in ministry (76%);
- a relationship that is helpful in gaining insight into what is behind the way that a supervisee thinks (88%);
- a relationship where a supervisee can process his/her feelings (82%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain insight into how s/he might be impacting on others (71%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can establish, and understand, the need for better self-care practices (76%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee feels that they grow as a human being (65%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can experience and explore his/her own vulnerability safely (76%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can learn to negotiate and manage boundaries better in ministry (71%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can learn to deal with pastoral situations more effectively (82%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can learn to become a more reflective minister and person (71%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can build and affirm strategies that can be taken back into his/her ministry (88%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain different perspectives on situations and people (93%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain self-preservation strategies for dealing with others' expectations (76%) and manage situations in more helpful ways (88%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can discern what God may be saying in certain situations (69%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain a clearer sense of his/her vocation (76%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain learning and support that can help, or diminish, feeling drained (65%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can gain a sense of well-being within the institutional relationships, within the Church community, within family and self (59%);
- a relationship in which self-awareness which is necessary in balancing a role that is called upon to model both authority and vulnerability, is gained (76%);
- a relationship in which a supervisee can share his/her experience and feel less alone (82%);
- an opportunity to receive support and encouragement in the situation that a supervisee has found his/herself, which can be taken back into his/her life and ministry (88%);
- and a relationship in which a supervisee has gained confidence to engage/explore his/her call or ministry purpose (75%).

These benefits are comparable with what Gubi (2016, 2020) discovered of pastoral supervision within a reflective practice group context, although it would be wrong to conclude that both contexts of pastoral supervision, group and individual, provide

comparable outcomes for everyone. There are different funding provisions, dynamics and cultures within each denomination that may render a particular form of pastoral supervision to be best for that context. That needs to be further researched.

The data show that the limiting factors, for most, have *not* been:

- the ability to commit to (12%), or prioritise, the time (18%);
- nor difficulty in sharing with the pastoral supervisor (6%);
- nor the manner of facilitation (12%);
- nor the structured nature of the sessions (19%).

The use of online provision, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, has not limited the pastoral supervision for most (12%). Indeed, some have found the online provision of pastoral supervision to be useful in terms of fitting supervision into a busy life and reducing travel (P3 & P8). There haven't been many struggles with expectation (6%) or a disillusionment with the place of prayer – either too much (0%) or too little (6%). Participants have been able to address any feelings of “spiritual dryness”¹ (82%) and their relationship with God (100%). These were all factors identified in Gubi (2017, 2020) as potential limiting factors in pastoral supervision but are not evident in these data. What the qualitative data reveal as hindrances are the occasional imposition of an agenda which the supervisee hasn't found to be useful (P1), and a supervisor who is keen (perhaps too keen) on time boundaries (“on the clock”, P7). Yet, there is a recognition of the importance of time boundaries from P7, and the modelling of boundaries is important, especially as they can become “messy” in pastoral ministry (Hudson, 2015). In pastoral supervision, learning takes place through modelling as well as through facilitation (Leach & Paterson, 2015).

What the data doesn't indicate, in the way that other research shows (e.g., Gubi, 2016, 2020), is that, for this group of participants, individual pastoral supervision has been a relationship in which participants have effectively gained insight in their way of being in the world (59%), and yet there is a gaining of awareness of how supervisees may impact on others (71%). It may be that group pastoral supervision, in the form of reflective practice groups, enables a greater opportunity for others to share how one person in the group impacts on others in the group, whereas in individual pastoral supervision, there is less opportunity to explore this dimension. In individual pastoral supervision, participants didn't feel that they had gained a greater respect for difference, with 47% uncertain, and 12% disagreeing with the statement that pastoral supervision had enabled a greater respect for difference. Again, it may be that within a reflective practice group context, there is greater difference expressed, which can enable “respect for difference” to be developed more readily. Even though 59% of participants felt that pastoral supervision enabled them to interact better with others in their ministry, only 56% felt that pastoral supervision had enabled them to have a better quality of pastoral encounter with others in their ministry. Only 50% of participants felt that pastoral supervision enabled them to grow theologically. This may be because not all pastoral supervisors are theologically trained and able to work with this aspect of pastoral supervision, or that this mirrors a societal expectation in the UK that “matters of God” are not readily to be expressed, or that pastoral Supervisors were more focussed on the facilitation of the participants' feelings, rather than of their thinking. It may also be that Moravian ministers don't readily overtly engage with theology and so would not readily think about their work through

a theological lens. In spite of all the benefits which the data highlight, only 53% perceived that they had grown in wisdom. This may reflect an unclear understanding of wisdom, or a humility within Moravian culture which makes it difficult for ministers to recognise or “own” their wisdom.

Perhaps most interestingly, only 12% of participants felt that the relationship of pastoral supervision had enabled them to trust others more. This may reflect a culture of mistrust within Moravian ministry or may simply reflect that it was early days into the supervisory relationship (only nine months), and therefore in the development of trust within Moravian ministers towards others – possibly including their supervisor. Yet, the data reveal that 100% felt safe in the supervisory relationship, and that 76% felt that they were able to experience their own personal vulnerability safely, so trust was clearly present in most supervisory relationships. Another follow-up evaluation with the same participants, after a longer period of time, to see if the ability to trust had developed, is recommended. There was also the perception that pastoral supervision didn’t enable many (35%) to feel that they had improved their priestly skills. This may indicate a lack of definition about what “priestly skills” are, or the inability of participants to regard their identified areas of development, through pastoral supervision, as being a part of priestly skills. Most participants (59%) also felt that pastoral supervision hadn’t helped them to gain improved relationships within their work. This may echo participants’ inability to respect difference better and be why many found it difficult to approach meetings more positively (41%), and why only 59% felt that they had gained a sense of well-being within institutional relationships and the Church community. It may be that the assumed greater relationality found within a reflective practice group would develop these aspects of ministry better, because of the sharing of experiences within the group, and of the building of relationality, which is arguably less possible in individual pastoral supervision.

Conclusion

Whilst this research is limited by its small sample size, its context within a small denomination, and the period of pastoral supervision which was evaluated (i.e., nine months), nonetheless it has shown individual pastoral supervision to be of value to participants, even after a relatively short period of time. There is certainly a desire within most participants (94%) for pastoral supervision to continue in its current format, and to be funded provincially. This may be less possible in a larger denomination because of limitations on funding and larger numbers of clergy. Suggestions for improvement from the participants have contained a desire to be occasionally “taught” (P2), to work face-to-face instead of by Zoom (P3), or to have pastoral supervision less regularly (P4). What is not clear from the research is how pastoral supervision has helped to ameliorate risk – although that is not a primary purpose of pastoral supervision in the Moravian Church (British Province), unlike in other denominations (e.g., The Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church). However, working with a wise, facilitative presence (P1), working by Zoom (an online platform) (P8), and working within a disciplined and professional approach of a trained and experienced supervisor (P5), has made pastoral supervision worthwhile for these participants, and enabled them to feel supported, less isolated, received, enabled to embrace better self-care, and “accompanied”, amidst the complexities of their ministry.

Note

1. Chandler (2009, p. 283) identifies “spiritual dryness” as a depletion of spiritual vitality but this does not necessarily indicate a lack of spirituality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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