There are occasions when, much to one’s surprise, a casual conversation creates the spark that launches significant ideas and programs. A little over ten years ago, Rick Stern and Ryan LaMothe were chatting about Rick’s experiences in the now disbanded ‘supervision in homiletics program’ at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. By the time the conversation ended, we had decided to explore the possibility of developing a similar certificate in supervision in pastoral care and/or homiletics at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. A pilot group began the certificate program in January of 2005. This program in supervision education has drawn its inspiration and initial structure from the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary program. This essay is a reflection of what we have learned from the participants and from our mistakes over the last 6 years.

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry
The Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology program in supervisory education seeks primarily to train pastoral supervisors who are equipped to provide ongoing supervision in ministry in general and in preaching in particular. There are training programs in supervision for clinical pastoral education and for pastoral counseling but these programs are specialized, focusing on a particular ministry, and their graduates are few in comparison with the total number of people practicing ministry. Few supervisory programs, if any, focus on educating ministers in the supervision of homiletics or general ministry practices. We have become aware of the countercultural nature of this program because there is still individual and institutional resistance to the ongoing supervision of ordained ministers.

Supervisory training programs, like this one, are aimed at promoting best practices in ministry; and best practice in ministry is a constituent element in building the kingdom of God. We hope this reflection will inspire others to create their own programs with the aim of helping students and ministers develop a life-long passion for, and the discipline in, reflective practice. With these reasons in mind, we first address the need for supervision. This is followed by a clarification of terms: supervision, consultation, mentoring, and coaching. We then discuss the program itself and what we have learned along the way.

**Why a Program for Training Ministry Supervisors**

There are a number of reasons for developing a program that trains people to supervise individuals who are engaged in pastoral ministry and homiletics. First, we believe that knowledge and skills in ministry are dynamic and that models of ministry education need to incorporate this understanding into programs intending to form and sustain ministers. The underlying epistemological assumption of the current master-apprentice model of education is that knowledge and skills are static commodities to be obtained. This model is useful when educating novices in a professional discipline, but becomes limited when considering ongoing, lifelong education and supervision. The limitations of this model become evident when people new in ministry discover that they do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to do ministry well without further learning or supervision.

One of the gifts of postmodernism is the recognition that knowledge and skills are fluid and context dependent. Our involvement in a practice requires that we continue to develop knowledge and skills through disci-
plined reflection as long as we are engaged in that ministry. One may have the necessary knowledge and skills to care for a person or write and preach a good homily, but unconscious motivations and emotional experiences can impede the application of both knowledge and skill in any particular context. Similarly, providing pastoral care is influenced by one’s own subjectivity, which is dynamic, shaped by various people and contexts. Disciplined reflective practice with a trained supervisor will assist ongoing learning: it will also help a minister to discover and make use of previously unconscious material for the sake of caring for others.¹

The growth of diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives underscores the reality that knowledge and skills are deeply complex and varied. What knowledge and skills might be relevant in caring for someone who possesses different cultural experiences, meanings, values, and beliefs? How will preaching or pastoral care attend to the variety of contexts and perspectives that cultural diversity presents? Supervision provides opportunities to deepen the understanding of our own ways of constructing the world, as well as learning to appreciate the experiences of those from diverse ethnic perspectives.

A second reason for developing a program to train supervisors involves our strongly held belief in the value of lifelong learning, which is, in our view, inextricably related to best practices in ministry. Lifelong learning depends on a disposition of openness and curiosity, both of which are also necessary for effectiveness in ministering with people. Ministry is not only about our best efforts or intentions; it is also about best practices. Caring and preaching become best practices when individuals engage in the kind of critical reflection that fosters imagination and develops the requisite skills to minister and preach effectively. Lifelong learning that leads to best practices is fostered by supervision and/or an ongoing consultative relationship.

A third motivation for developing this program is related to the use of field supervisors in seminary and graduate programs. Ministry supervisors for contextual education are often selected on the basis of how long they have been doing ministry and their perceived competence as ministers. We assume that field education supervisors are well-intentioned and competent in their respective ministries. The problem is not in their disposition or ministry effectiveness but their knowledge about theories and practices of supervision. From brief discussions with people in ATFE (Association for Theological Field Educators) and CATFE (Catholic Association for Theological Field Education), we concluded that few pastoral supervisors of stu-
dents have sufficient education and training in the theories and practices of supervision. We are also confident in suggesting that even some who direct field education programs in seminaries and graduate schools of religion are similarly untrained in the theories and practices of supervision.

The Need for Trained Supervisors Specific to the Roman Catholic Church

The development of this program is partly a response to the training and education of permanent deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. There are many Catholic dioceses that ordain men to the permanent deaconate after a process of selection and training that varies widely. As other denominations develop alternative ways to ordained ministry, this will become a more widespread issue. In general, deacons, who may or may not have a college education, are prepared in programs that meet once a month on weekends for about four years. On these weekends, candidates receive classroom instruction in church history, scripture, canon law, preaching, pastoral care, etc., but program requirements vary widely. During those four years, candidates may have two weekends devoted to pastoral care and perhaps a somewhat longer period of time devoted to preaching. While we do not question the intention of either the men or the programs that prepare them, this is not a formation process aimed toward best practices. We started our supervision certificate program in part to prepare people who would supervise deacons in pastoral care and homiletics for at least the first five years of their ordained ministry. Unfortunately, after numerous contacts with many Roman Catholic dioceses, none have yet shown interest in the supervision program. We suspect this institutional resistance to ongoing supervision of the ordained extends to other denominations.

Despite this resistance, there are various official documents of the Roman Catholic Church and the institution in which we teach (the primary context for this project) that support the need for ongoing formation. There are similar documents and/or policies extolling the importance of, even requiring, ongoing formation of clergy in other church bodies. We presume that the enforcement of these policies varies, however. While other professions require continuing education units (CEUs) and/or supervision for ongoing licensure or certification, nothing close to this exists for clergy. The master-apprentice model prevails.
This is complicated further by the current tendency in the Roman Catholic Church to cluster parishes, leaving one priest to administer two or more parishes. In addition, there are large parishes with 1,000 or more families where one priest is the leader. In both cases, he may have a large staff of professional and volunteer ministers. This reality is not unlike larger Protestant congregations that have large staff of ministers with varying levels of education and skills—many of who need ongoing supervision.

It is incorrect to assume that a person who is an effective minister will make a competent supervisor of ministry or that pastoral leaders do not need additional skills and training to attend to ministers who work with them in large parishes or congregations. Moreover, we assert that the practices of ministry and the practice of supervision do not call for identical skill sets. Our rationale for this Program in Supervision was to offer those involved in pastoral leadership and the supervision of ministry students the education and training that would improve their work with colleagues and students. The practice of supervision would also benefit those engaged in the formation of ministers, whether lay or ordained. As this program on supervision developed, it was important to clarify our working definitions of a variety of overlapping and interrelated terms.

**Clarifying Terms: Supervision, Consultation, Mentoring, and Coaching**

In the process of developing this program, we considered four terms carefully; coaching, mentoring, consultation, and supervision. Each, as we use them, has a distinct definition, but they can also suggest stages or an unfolding trajectory in the supervisory relationship. At one end of the continuum stands coaching with its primary attention given to the acquisition of skills. Ferguson and Weidmann write that:

[A] coaching conversation, as part of a coaching relationship, is a co-created space where the pastor and the coach can move between accountability for some daily and weekly task to a perspective that looks to where the pastor can be in a year or more and who the pastor can be as a leader and as a person.⁴

We would employ this as one possible scenario for supervision, but not as a comprehensive definition. This is typically the method used with students or those new to a practice. Coaching is more directive and tends more toward instruction. The acquisition of skills is often the stated aim of those seeking supervision. Coaching may in fact be the starting place for a pro-
cess that may eventually become supervision. The coach would presumably know more about the culture in which the practice is taking place, as well as what, in terms of skills, works and what does not. At the other end of the continuum is supervision, which calls for greater attention to the identity of a practitioner.

Mentoring presumes a more hierarchical advisory relationship, in which a veteran works with someone new to the practice or new to the situation in which he or she is practicing. Mentoring can serve as a transitional stage between coaching or instruction and the supervisory concerns with the identity, ethics, and values of a practitioner. The term has its origins in *The Odyssey* by Homer. Mentor, an old and trusted servant in the household of Odysseus, is asked to look after Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, while Odysseus is off fighting the Trojan War. It was actually Athena who had assumed the guise of Mentor to offer her guidance to Telemachus. Mentoring has come to connote a top-down sort of advisory role in which an experienced professional looks after and advises a novice on how to thrive in the system or institution. There is a value to this, but it should not be equated with supervision.

Coaching and mentoring certainly have roles to play and may even have a collaborative dimension, but the agenda is largely set by the coach or mentor. This effectively prevents it from reaching the collegial mode of consultation or supervision. We are aware of judicatories that assign newly ordained ministers/pastors to meet occasionally with a veteran pastor, someone familiar with, and wise to, the ways of pastoring in that context. However, this is not the same as supervision. Both coaching and mentoring are largely driven by top-down hierarchies, no matter how benevolent or collaborative the leadership. After a time dealing with the mechanics in the coaching phase, the supervisor may step back a bit from the mechanics of the practice and look more at how the supervisee functions within the larger institutional framework. In some arenas, a new member may be assigned to a mentor in order to ease his or her transition into the new environment. Mentoring, when seen as a step in a longer process, moves beyond coaching to an awareness of how one can best function within a system or institution. Mentoring, as a single or comprehensive model, can also lead to institutional stagnation, repeating and reinforcing embedded patterns that may resist change or growth that could be beneficial to both the individual and the institution.
Yet another term is consultation. This moves one step beyond mentoring in that it suggests a closer equality of status between two parties. The one seeking consultation and the consultant may well be peers, though for a given time or situation, the expertise of the consultant is acknowledged and drawn upon. It is likely that there remains a momentary degree of asymmetry between the two, but far less than in mentoring. The asymmetry is based more on deference to the one being sought for guidance or expertise and less on any structural discrepancies in their institutional status. It is possible to think of making progress along the trajectory from coaching to mentoring to consultation and supervision.

Supervision often serves a dual function. It remains the term we use to describe the overall process of oversight, but it also refers to that point in the process when one moves beyond coaching and mentoring, even beyond consultation to an exploration of one’s identity as a practitioner. Our Program employs the term supervision to identify what we do when we seek to train our participants to work toward a collegial relationship among peers. It is particularly important to understand how other terms are sometimes conflated with supervision. Douglas Steere writes that:

[S]upervision is an extended relationship in which supervisor and supervisee agree to meet at regular intervals for systematic reflection upon the concrete practice of pastoral care in which supervisees are engaged in order to focus all available resources on each supervisee’s personal growth in the pastoral role.5

Frances Ward adds nuance, noting that supervision is “what happens when a practitioner takes space and time out in an environment that facilitates ongoing processes of reflection on practice. It is facilitated by the ‘supervisor,’ who may work individually with the reflective practitioner, or in a group.”6 In supervision, the supervisee takes the initiative in determining the goals to be achieved. Supervision with students may initially require coaching and occasional mentoring but eventually supervision moves beyond both coaching on mechanics and mentoring to matters of ministerial identity and best practices framed and guided by the stated goals of the supervisee.

Saint Meinrad Supervision Program Description

The following statement describes our mission, program goals, desired outcomes, and curricula:
Mission
This Certification Program sets out to provide theory and practice in supervision of people in diverse ministries of the church. A program for the formation of supervisors begins with the understanding that supervision is an art and a discipline that enhances ministry.

Program Goals
This program seeks to 1) sharpen effective listening and communication skills for the pastoral supervisor to become a more effective mentor and 2) enhance one’s ability to analyze critically pastoral practice using a variety of theoretical and methodological tools necessary for helping others improve practice.

Program Outcomes
At the conclusion of these certificate programs, participants should be able to:
- describe his/her theory and model of supervision within the range of supervisory theories and models;
- articulate his/her theology of supervision as well as his/her theology of preaching/pastoral care;
- articulate the ethical issues relating to supervision;
- accurately reflect the supervisee’s experiences and professional needs;
- help supervisees make decisions about goals vis-à-vis their ministry;
- formulate a supervisory contract with the supervisee;
- demonstrate sufficient self-awareness to set aside or employ his/her subjectivity in order to understand the supervisee and the supervisory interactions;
- differentiate between supervisory and therapy issue;
- describe the various supervisory issues that arise between the supervisor and supervisee;
- implement appropriate courses of action with regard to identified supervisory issues;
- describe the various issues around termination of supervision.

We hoped that the juxtaposition of homiletics and pastoral care would not foster confusion among those who would eventually be reading our brochures.

Curricula
The Program is designed to last 18 months, including two weeks of residence, and experiences of supervising and being supervised. In the first residential week, program emphasis is on general supervision skills. The second week is more discipline specific. The first week of classes is weighted toward defining supervision, establishing a supervisory relationship, identifying vari-
ous models and theories of supervision, addressing the complexities of and good habits of supervisory listening, and the use of multiple frameworks in listening. (This includes presentations on transference/countertransference dynamics in supervision, the role of the unconscious in ministry, and attending to race, gender, and multiculturalism in supervision.) These classroom presentations and discussions are followed by practice sessions in each discipline area. The overall aims of the first week are to familiarize students with a) the models and theories of supervision, b) constructing a supervisory relationship, and c) listening from a supervisory stance.

During the second week, common sessions include: small group supervision, ethics, theological interpretation, and theologies of supervision. There are fewer didactic sessions and more practice supervision sessions and group discussions regarding participants’ videotapes of supervision. The classes address such topics as ethics, getting unstuck, theologies of supervision, and small group supervision. Small group supervision is an important model for people in polities where individual supervision is not cost effective or efficient. Both weeks include practice supervision sessions. Between the two weeks, participants are expected to be preparing videos of supervision that will be part of the educational experience of the second week. In developing the curricula, we began with program requirements. Besides the required reading, each student was to make 12 videotapes of their supervision sessions and meet with a supervisor after each one. (There were some differences between homiletics and pastoral care regarding how these 12 sessions were to be accomplished.) The taping and supervision of supervision were to be accomplished within 15 months of the start of the program. Participants were also required to write a 10–12 page paper at the end of the 15 months in which they would define supervision, identify the model and theory of supervision they used in a case, and articulate their theology of supervision. Those seeking admission were required to have least a master’s degree and five years of ministry experience and send in three letters of reference (peer, lay/clergy, and professor) and one from their governing body endorsing their participation. While these requirements or, more accurately, guidelines, seemed a bit onerous, we expected to make adjustments on a case-by-case basis.

Cohort Selection
One dilemma that emerged early in the homiletic supervision in particular was determining who should be admitted to the program. Can someone be a supervisor in a discipline in which they are not a practitioner? The
general assumption is that supervisors are experienced practitioners in the area in which they supervise. A similar concern arose when seminarians expressed interest in the program. With reference only to the homiletics track, should they take the supervision course if they are not canonically approved preachers yet? In the homiletics track, we discovered very few of those actually eligible to be homilists (priests and deacons) seemed interested or available for the supervision certification process. It has improved some since the onset of the program and yet the majority of those in the homiletics track have been Catholic lay and religious women, people not canonically permitted to preach during the Mass.

**Formation Issues**

While formation as been a standard dimension of supervision for ministries of pastoral care, it has been less common in homiletic instruction. Two overarching areas of need predominate in supervision: formation of identity and acquisition of skills. These two factors are important for both initial and ongoing formation. Identity formation is key and an increasingly important aspect of teaching homiletics. The challenge is how to confer or communicate the difference between preparing a sermon or homily and being a preacher? A significant part of teaching preaching is the formation or reformation of an identity to include the role of preacher. Preachers certainly need good initial formation, but initial formation also needs to include as a foundational attitude that ongoing formation comes with the practice of being a priest, deacon, or lay minister.

Our impression, as a result of participation in this program, is that after ordination, clergy are among the worst of the helping professions at getting ongoing formation or significant continuing education. Reasons for this are legion: fear; a crushing list of other, more immediate demands; never developing the attitude for ongoing formation; little encouragement from parishes; no enforcement of policy by judicatories; not aware of any place to look for education; financial limitations; etc. Clergy of various denominations typically report that the first two things that suffer in assuming their pastoral roles are a) time to prepare to preach, and b) time for regular prayer.

**What We Have Learned**

Any nascent program such as our certificate program in supervision is subject to revision and growing pains as it develops. As with supervision itself, those involved need to be open to both giving and receiving feedback. Thus
far, the feedback from our participants, who were from several denominations and mostly lay women, has been quite positive with helpful suggestions along the way that we have endeavored to incorporate. We have been surprised and gratified by the creative spirit and energy of those who have completed the Program. What have we learned in the process?

*First, thorough planning paid off.* We consulted with those who administered supervision programs and with supervisors in several fields. We made some revisions of the models we looked at or experienced directly and have been satisfied with the initial vision we developed. We have also modified the structure of the program based on critical feedback. For example, one group overlapped cohorts, so first and second year participants were combined for the residency weeks. During practice sessions, we discovered that the second year participants were far more eager to get into deeper, more probing supervision than the first year participants, who were just being exposed to the concept of supervision. There was considerable tension on several occasions. In light of this experience, we have chosen to work with one cohort at a time in our program.

*Second, our initial schedule was too ambitious.* The energy of the initial cohort, though enviable, was not quite at the level we had planned for. For the second week and for subsequent cohorts, we cut back on the amount of time given to classwork during the residency weeks. We did not fully recognize how tiring it is to listen to supervision sessions for several hours daily and for several days in a row. This was true both for the participants and for the instructors. We have also built in more free time to absorb the content, prevent overload, and for the participants to become more comfortable with one another and with the instructors. We have a get-acquainted dinner on the first evening and, on the last day, a closing lunch where we ask for feedback on the week’s program.

*Third, the choice of co-instructors is key.* Instructors need to be people who get along with one another but who are also comfortable giving feedback to participants and to one another in appropriate ways and settings. The instructors set the tone for the residency weeks and model styles of interaction. It is important to set a tone that is relaxed and open but clearly oriented to doing the work. There is a more established culture of supervision in pastoral care than in homiletics. Counselors often have supervisors they consult with. Spiritual directors presumably have their own spiritual directors. But preachers? No one. So where could we look for homiletics co-instructors? We chose faculty we knew well and who, though operating out of the same
general pedagogical and theological framework, still provided a point of view that would provide texture to the observations made by the two homiletics co-instructors. Homiletic co-instructors, new to the concept of supervision, were quite willing to learn “on the job” and have proven to be excellent colleagues, teachers, and supervisors.

In our initial offering, we invited a number of outside experts to come and serve as lecturers in areas of their expertise. For subsequent cohorts, we concluded that the lead instructors (two in pastoral care and two in homiletics) could effectively cover the content. This was less disruptive of the flow of the residency weeks, requiring less adjustment on the part of participants to a new element in the group dynamic. It was also more cost effective; that is, fewer people to pay.

Fourth, we eventually decided to include seminarians as participants, but with mixed results. Our initial decision was not to include seminarians because, by definition, they did not have the requisite five years of activity in the practice of ministry. Yet the reality for most seminarians is that they will hit the ground running immediately after ordination, even in the role of Associate Pastors. They will be given responsibility for organizing and running programs, as well as working with staff and developing staff competencies—the very activities of supervision. Some seminarians have been unable to complete the program because they did the first week of residency in their last year of seminary and were too busy to come back for the second residency week. Others did not do a sufficient job of time management even while still in seminary. Still others completed the program and have been able to put their formation as supervisors to work in creative ways that they and we could not have anticipated.

Fifth, supervision still seems to be a difficult concept for upper levels of church administration to see as vital to the ongoing life of the church. Some administrators fear that those they oversee will see supervision as remedial or even as punishment for some failure to measure up rather than an integral activity in the practice of ministry. Relatedly, many clergy/ministers already seem to feel burdened, if not burned out, by the demands of their work, a situation which would seem all the more reason to provide supervision possibilities. Yet, practitioners often see it as an imposition they do not have time for. While most church administrators affirm the idea of supervision, they seem reluctant to actually put policies and resources into place. Therefore, the willingness to enter this program depends on the individual’s own initiative to seek supervision.
Sixth, recruitment for future cohorts consumes an enormous amount of time and energy. The recruiting demands are relentless and burdensome. Despite prior warnings, we did not anticipate the work and energy it would take to get enrollment: letters, calls, letters, emails, more letters, and more phone calls. We are working on a video that may be of some help in getting to wider audiences. The best, most productive resource for identifying new participants has been previous graduates of the program. That previous participants would recommend and encourage others to take the program surely testifies to its value. It also speaks to the quality of the participants. It has been impressive to discover the creative ways they have used what they have learned. Two graduates started a lay preaching institute in their diocese. Participants have also been successful in including supervision for ministers as part of a revision of the strategic plan of the diocese. Others have started their own small group supervision sessions. Another is working on developing supervision programs for preachers in his diocese, both deacons and priests. Another, a recently ordained priest in Korea, who has had an unexpected opportunity to work with preachers in Korea has been encouraged to pursue graduate studies because the diocese has recognized that the work he was doing on a small scale needed to be enlarged. This creativity among graduates of our program has inspired us to persevere at times when it felt too much like Sisyphus eternally pushing the boulder up the hill. Past participants tell us that the program changed and deepened their understanding of what they were already doing as supervisors of, for example, seminarians in field education or in staff settings. They had also experienced growth themselves in their own ministry as supervisors.

Conclusion

Supervision is a good model for ministry because it supports the communal nature of the church and to the mutual and reciprocal nature of ministry. It promotes the responsibility of the general pastoral minister and the preacher to be a good, ethical practitioner. The decline of the major denominations suggests that preachers need to be as well equipped, as healthy and competent as the church can help them be. It is in our best long-term interests to ensure that capable and perceptive preachers inhabit our pulpits and ambos. Supervision can make a significant contribution to this process.

After several rounds of participants, lots of feedback, discussion, and private reflection, several conclusions come to mind. First, the program is
worth it. Participants have affirmed this for us. Even so, promoting the idea of homiletic supervision in particular is still an uphill slog. No one we have approached about the program (institutions, diocesan personnel, etc.) has thought it a bad idea, but there has been little institutional commitment or even encouragement to promote supervision of ministry in general or preaching in particular. Such ongoing formation requirements as there are seem often to be flaunted or ignored. Finally, recruitment is a relentless task.

Some trends on the horizon of theological education point to the increasing need for supervision: fewer Master of Divinity degrees, questionable financial viability of seminaries, more online education, increasing debt among seminarians. These suggest that more people will become pastors with less face-to-face contact with other students and with teachers. Who will these preachers go to for feedback? Where does the accountability for ongoing formation fall? It still depends on individual motivation. Structures will need to be put in place so that ongoing formation does not become just another idea lost in the cracks of expediency and good intentions.

We believe deeply in the importance of supervision for all ministers and would call supervision an essential ministry of and for the ecclesia. With this in mind, we created a certificate program in supervision that would foster lifelong learning and best practices in ministry. In writing this article, we hope to share our work with the larger community and invite conversation regarding the training and practice of supervision for pastoral ministry and preaching.

NOTES


For further reading, see also:

