

# A Supervision of Pliable Presence during a Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

**D**ave Isay's book *Listening Is an Act of Love* is a favorite of field educators, including the authors of this article. A central thesis of the book is that "people need to be validated or heard," which is a theme that is also central for interns and supervisor-mentors in field education, especially during difficult times. Field education at theological schools was particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While other courses

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shifted to online contexts, field education, with its face-to-face ministries of validating and empowering students and the communities they serve, could not transition in the same way. In an effort to ascertain the impact these adaptations had on the intended outcomes of field education coursework, we set out to survey site supervisor-mentors in July 2020. The survey was distributed to field educators at fifteen Association for Theological Field Education membership schools representing a diversity of religious affiliations and geographic locales (see appendix B). Each field educator distributed the survey to their site supervisor-mentors with a personal invitation. This invitation went to roughly three hundred site supervisor-mentors, with eighty-three responses received within the two-week deadline. This article presents the results of this survey along with key insights and lessons learned from these respondents.

#### CONTEXT OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The survey contained six single-choice demographic questions that gave a perspective on the spectrum of experience of the site supervisors (see appendix A). These questions focused on the supervisor-mentors' backgrounds as well as the frequency of meetings and means used to meet with students. Regarding their backgrounds, of the eighty-three respondents who completed this question, more than 75 percent ( $n = 63$ ) reported having experience supervising and mentoring in a virtual field education environment. The next question asked for the type of setting in which they supervised ministry students. Of the fifty respondents who answered this question, the majority (74 percent,  $n = 37$ ) were currently supervising in a congregational, denominational, or parachurch ministry setting. The remainder of respondents were working in the following contexts: (1) community-based, non-profit, or social justice organization (6 percent,  $n = 3$ ); (2) educational placement (e.g., school setting; 4 percent,  $n = 2$ ); (3) chaplaincy setting (12%,  $n = 6$ ); or (4) other settings (4 percent,  $n = 2$ ).

Regarding the number of years that respondents reported having served in a theological field education supervising capacity, fifty people responded and the results varied widely. Thirty percent ( $n = 15$ ) stated that this was their first year of supervising. The number of survey respondents who had been serving as a supervisor-mentor for one to three years was 14 percent ( $n = 7$ ) of the pool. Thirteen respondents (26 percent) reported

having four to six years of experience as a supervisor-mentor, while only 8 percent ( $n = 4$ ) of survey participants had seven to ten years of experience. Finally, 22 percent ( $n = 11$ ) stated that they had more than ten years of experience.

Survey participants were also asked about the frequency of their meetings with the students that they supervised, both before and after the pandemic restrictions. Figure 1 shows the reported results.

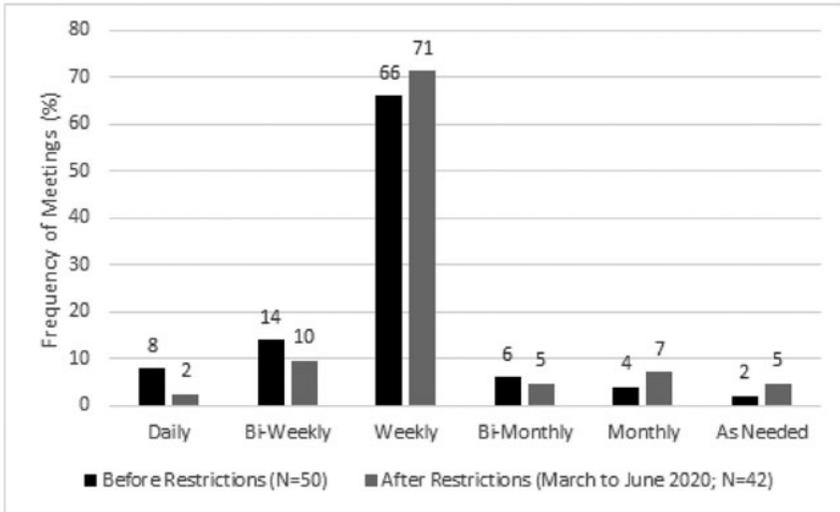


Figure 1. Frequency of supervisor-mentor meetings with the students they supervised both before and after the restrictions due to COVID-19.

From this data, it can be noted that the percentage of weekly, monthly, and as-needed supervisory meetings increased after the restrictions were put into place. However, the percentage of bi-weekly, daily, and bi-monthly meetings declined for this time period. Overall, the general trend indicates a decrease in more frequent meetings (particularly daily and bi-weekly meetings) and an increase in less frequent meetings (particularly weekly, monthly, and as-needed meetings). Such trends may be reflective of a decrease in ministerial activity after the stay-at-home restrictions were enacted.

The survey next asked respondents about the means by which virtual supervisory meetings were held. Forty-nine responded, and the most common means was via online technologies (e.g., Zoom, Skype, FaceTime).

Twenty-one survey participants (43 percent) reported using these technologies for meetings. The next most common medium of communication was the phone, which 27 percent ( $n = 13$ ) respondents reported using. Four (8 percent) survey participants stated they primarily used email or other asynchronous technologies for their virtual supervisory meetings. Twelve percent ( $n = 6$ ) of the respondents stated that they used a combination of two or more of these media. Finally, two (4 percent) of the survey participants reported meeting with students in person, while three (6 percent) stated that the field education experience ended early.

#### CONTENT OF SUPERVISORY MEETINGS

The next set of questions asked respondents to focus on the period of time from March 2020 to June 2020 as a way to see the impacts of the shifts during COVID-19 (see appendix A). The first question in this section asked, "How did the content of your supervisory meetings change due to the shift to an online environment and/or the stress of the pandemic?" This was an open-ended question that some site supervisor-mentors opted not to answer; thus, the data for this question represents only forty-eight responses. Responses generally fell into one of four main categories: (1) everything stopped, (2) there was no major shift in the way supervision happened, (3) there was a shift to more task-oriented and logistics-focused supervision, or (4) there was a shift to more reflective focus or a focus on self-care as a response to the pandemic.

Ten percent ( $n = 5$ ) of site supervisor-mentors indicated that due to COVID-19 either the school or the site ended the internship early and all supervision stopped. Eighteen percent ( $n = 9$ ) noted that the content of their supervisory sessions experienced no real change. One example of this response is: "The content of the meeting stayed basically the same, prayer, theological reflection (but on the pandemic, as well as the content of her classes), and operational details."

Thirty-one percent ( $n = 15$ ) of respondents indicated that the content of their supervisory sessions shifted to become more task-oriented and the meetings became shorter. One example of this type of response is the following:

The supervisory meetings were shorter than prior to the restrictions being put in place. Also, the content of the meetings were not as focused on

supervision or theological reflection. Our weekly became a function of checking in on the student's physical and emotional health, communicating assignments for the upcoming week, and checking the progress of ministry assignments from the week prior.

Another example includes the statement, "They were shorter in length and more tactical in terms of how we are going to do worship and ministry and tasks for each of us to perform to accomplish this." This shortened time or task orientation led to some loss of the reflective space normally created by the supervisor for the student. As one supervisor-mentor conceded, "I think they probably became more planning and logistics and communication focused rather than more open discussion of experiences. (That didn't totally go away, but I think has been diminished.)"

Although some site supervisor-mentors noted a loss in the reflective space together, more (41 percent,  $n = 20$ ) noted the shift to more intentional focus on self-care in the moment. As one noted, "We reorganized the format of our meetings to include time at the beginning to process the losses due to the pandemic, whether loss of stability, predictability or other. We took more time discussing theological thinking regarding change. Our meetings ended up being longer than the usual original hour by about 20 more minutes." Another example of this type of response is the reflection by one site supervisor-mentor: "We discussed how our personal stressors were impacting our pastoral identity more. We were less task oriented, reflecting theologically from a '30,000-foot view' more often."

This focus on self-care was an important shift for the health of the students, and in 10 percent ( $n = 5$ ) of the responses, the pastoral presence the student offered was a form of care for the supervisor-mentor as well. As one respondent noted, supervision sessions "became much more personal and pastoral—mutually so. My intern truly moved from being just an intern to being a co-laborer in the field." Another example of this type of ministry of presence is reflected in the response of the supervisor-mentor who stated, "We went from a doing ministry to a being ministry."

As we look at the data from this one question, it is important to invite site supervisors to continue to be intentional about building their supervisory sessions as a time for theological reflection and ministerial identity formation even in the midst of a crisis. The shift to focusing on tasks may be necessary in the immediate response to a crisis, but the reflective space of supervisory sessions is an important pastoral resource for students and

supervisor-mentors alike. As the need to move to more digital education and ministry continues in the current pandemic, there are very real stressor points of ministers experiencing COVID-19 fatigue. Educating, mentoring, and empowering students while also teaching them how to carve out reflective space continue to be critical learning outcomes of field education. Those site supervisor-mentors who allowed for supervisory sessions to become a reflective space to unpack the impacts of the crisis offer an encouraging pastoral model.

#### NAVIGATING THE STUDENT SHIFTS IN MINISTRY

The next open-ended question asked participants, "Through supervision, how were you able to assist your students through these shifts in ministry?" The essence of "people need to be validated or heard" truly came to life as these well-qualified supervisors shared how they were able to assist their students through these shifts in ministry and how they were able to bring the students' learning to a close. Forty-seven supervisor-mentors responded to this question, and a consistent thread was "being intentional." Whether they met virtually via Zoom, email, phone, or in person, most of the supervisor-mentors noted that their meetings were intentionally set to maintain frequent contact with the student during these shifting times in ministry.

As a result of the supervisor-mentors being intentional in their meetings with their students, new ideas and ministry opportunities were birthed that may not have happened under normal field placement settings. Most of the supervisor-mentors, 62 percent ( $n = 29$ ), noted that during their meetings the students were able to envision how to do ministry in the pandemic. One supervisor-mentor stated, "Yes, we joked she is going to have to write a book called *Pastoring in the Pandemic*." Another interesting point in this section was just how the supervisor-mentors handled the challenges they were facing during the pandemic. It was refreshing to read that supervisor-mentors did not shy away from the challenges before them; instead, as most of the supervisor-mentors noted in one way or another, "We reflected on the new challenges we were facing because of the pandemic."

Not only was assisting students in ministry during this pandemic a learning curve for the students and supervisor-mentors regarding ministry, it was also a learning curve for supervisor-mentors to attend to the needs

of the students themselves. Thirty percent of the supervisor-mentors ( $n = 14$ ) specifically noted that they learned they needed to be more sensitive to the challenges the students faced, be more flexible, and make themselves more available for conversation. This intentional focus on the needs of the students was in addition to those supervisor-mentors above whose focus on creative thinking in the midst of a pandemic was sure to include attentiveness to the student as well. An additional point was made by 10 percent ( $n = 5$ ) of the respondents, who articulated clearly that the learning curve was such that they learned along with their student. As one supervisor-mentor noted, their roles became closer to “partners” rather than “supervisor/student.”

During this pandemic, out of the tension between how to care for the students and how to do ministry in these shifting times arose a powerful statement from one of the supervisors that summarizes what doing ministry during a pandemic is all about: “God is always doing a new thing and we are equipped to minister to God’s people even in these unique and unusual times.”

#### KEY LEARNINGS IN REMOTE SUPERVISION

Albert Einstein is reported to have said, “In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity.” Such is surely the case when it comes to what supervisor-mentors reported on their experience of doing the work of supervision in the midst of COVID-19 and the ensuing restrictions that affected not just supervision but pastoral ministry as a whole. The survey asked two open-ended questions that invited supervisor-mentors to reflect on what they saw as their key learnings and the tips they would pass on to others regarding remote learning. As one supervisor-mentor said, “I found it very difficult. I was involved in learning new ways to do ministry myself. We didn’t have much time for reflection.” Even in the midst of this difficult transition, however, there was still wisdom to be gleaned.

Some supervisor-mentors found the transition “exceedingly difficult,” primarily because in the past they had relied on lots of interpersonal contact and losing that was hard. Another indicated that “having a strong foundation with in-person meetings prior to stay at home restrictions facilitated the transition to using virtual meetings.” Beginning a new supervisory relationship without the benefit of in-person meetings will most certainly be

a challenge, but what was learned early in the pandemic will certainly be of value.

Most supervisor-mentors reported that Zoom was a helpful platform for remote supervision. As one noted, "Supervision was actually more effective, and meetings were easier using Zoom. Without having to travel, the seminarian was able to more easily attend Session meetings, committee meetings and our virtual coffee hour." Others indicated that they would be open to using Zoom in the future, even when stay-at-home orders were not in place: "After having experienced the effectiveness of video calls for meetings and supervision, I will definitely keep this open and as an option for future students."

Consistency in supervision, clear communication, creativity, and staying connected to both the supervisor-mentor and the congregation were identified as crucial to making remote supervision a positive experience. It was important for supervisor-mentors and students to continue the regular pattern of supervision to normalize the situation as much as possible by maintaining a regular meeting schedule with an emphasis on theological reflection. Many indicated that more frequent contact was helpful. In larger sites with more staff, having more frequent staff meetings helped to deepen connections and led to greater bonding among the staff. By using Zoom or another video app, the student and supervisor-mentor were still able to see each other, and this was deemed helpful. Many also indicated that weekly or even daily check-ins by email or text were essential in keeping the student up to date on the activities of the site.

This emphasis on clear and timely communication was an important learning. As one supervisor wrote, "Keep up the patterns of communication. Small doses more frequently kept us synced better than longer and less frequent meetings." Setting a schedule, being clear about responsibilities and expectations, and offering as many opportunities for the student to interact with the site and develop relationships, albeit at a distance, were critical. Flexibility was also seen as key.

Acknowledging and communicating both the personal challenges and the ministerial challenges with a greater level of vulnerability between the supervisor-mentor and student also seemed important. As one site supervisor-mentor noted, "In many ways we were both 'babies' in March, figuring this out together. This allowed for a level of vulnerability that is rarely present in a typical field ed supervision setting. Having an intern created

space for me to both share my knowledge and my lack of knowledge, vividly pointing to the ways that pastoral ministry lives at our growing edge." And another example of this same insight is, "Since no one had ever done ministry or supervision in a pandemic before, everyone was learning, so in some ways there was more permission to try new ways and then change them if they were ineffective."

Several respondents mentioned that this kind of creativity was important. "Those who were able to be creative, out-of-the-box thinkers were much more able to adapt." Just being able to reflect on technology as a gift rather than a burden, and thinking about the opportunities that this technology was offering for the church's mission and ministry was very beneficial.

Clearly, most supervisor-mentors prefer in-person supervision, and without the stay-at-home restrictions imposed by COVID-19 they would not have ventured into the world of digital supervision. Without this crisis, the opportunity to learn the value and benefits of remote supervision would not have happened. Most people do not easily move outside their comfort zone to explore new ways of doing things. However, because of the forced engagement in remote supervision, helpful learnings did occur. As one supervisor-mentor noted, "We were still able to connect personally and have good theological and pastoral conversations. The technology or distance didn't prohibit any of that." Another reported, "Effective supervision is simply a matter of will and consistency. Physical proximity is preferable but not mandatory."

#### CONCERNS OR MISSED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

As theological field education supervisor-mentors learned to adapt, they became quite experienced and skilled in remote learning and supervision, but it was still a challenge. In addition to the questions about key learnings from the shift to digital supervision, the survey also asked, "Where do your deepest concerns lie for remote theological field education supervision?" Forty-six supervisor-mentors offered responses to this question. In March, many supervisor-mentors found themselves "winging it" and learning a technology that, in time, they could utilize to provide "savvy pastoral engagement." Nevertheless, they admitted there was a steep learning curve. Many respondents mentioned that they were grateful that they had developed a "strong rapport" and that the students had been able to de-

velop relationships face to face at the beginning of the internship. This observation leads to concerns about how to build relationships remotely when early relationship-building experiences between supervisor and student might have to be “mediated by a screen.” This raises questions about the intuitive nature of personal and ministerial interactions and the lack of opportunity to develop skills in reading “subtle cues of body language” both in the supervisory moment but also as students develop relationships with other ministry partners mediated through technology. Twenty percent ( $n = 10$ ) of supervisor-mentors mentioned concerns specifically regarding communication and formation in pastoral presence.

A more obvious concern is the ability of a ministry site to be able to provide substantive experiences that will provide interns with opportunities to develop and refine the arts and skills of ministry while deepening their sense of pastoral identity which, then, becomes the core material for theological reflection and spiritual and professional growth. Fewer ministry engagements are a concern not only for the student but also for the supervisor-mentor’s ability to observe, process, and reflect with the student about their ministry experience and leadership. As one respondent wrote, “The deeper ramifications come in the student not being able to participate in practical church work, which affects the conversation.” Particularly noted was the difficulty of pastoral care experiences. Pastoral care without actual pastoral presence is quite difficult. Telephone calls or virtual calls, even if parties are able and/or have technology and technological skills, still do not allow for the kind of intimacy and care that face-to-face encounters facilitate.

Other missed learning opportunities included the spontaneous, unstructured, serendipitous moments of office drop-ins, conversations on the way to a meeting, a chance meeting of a parishioner at the coffee shop, an after-worship greeting that turns into a pastoral care opportunity—the kinds of face-to-face encounters where students find themselves living into their pastoral call without a formal plan or script. A common thread in the responses was the loss of face-to-face encounters that were not only for the student’s benefit but also would enable the congregation/ministry site to learn with, teach, and care for the student to whom they had made a commitment. Fifty-four percent ( $n = 25$ ) commented on the fact that they felt a keen sense of loss for the face-to-face interactions both within the community itself and in their own relationship with the student.

Accountability was raised not only with regard to intentionality and commitment to the scheduled time but also to a “greater need to make clarifications and check-ins to make sure the transitions for both pastor/supervisor and intern continued.” Remote learning posed some difficulty in how to help students be accountable in their ministry presence. At least seven respondents (15 percent) commented specifically on a concern about accountability, noting that they felt it was hard to observe the student’s active ministry engagement.

As supervisor-mentors responded to the similarities and differences between this remote experience and that of a “normal” field education experience, the apparent difference was, as mentioned above, the face-to face component. However, a number of the responses were nuanced in a particular way. What rose for consideration was the role of ritual and hospitality—the loss of “feeding our interns,” farewell liturgies, celebrations and gifts, and communing with “people in person at church, in their homes and out in the community, a shared meal.” Even respondents who indicated that the experiences were not that different often added comments about the loss of in-person experiences: “Only the actual parish participation was compromised greatly”; “More would have been ‘in person’ and probably less uncertainty and anxiety in general, . . . we are accomplishing them now mostly not in person”; and “different in that they were done virtually instead of in-person, but otherwise remarkably similar.”

#### INTERACTIONS WITH FIELD EDUCATION STAFF AT THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

The survey also questioned participants about their interactions with field education staff at each theological school (see appendix A). When asked about their relative and subjective experiences of the amount of communication that they had with this staff, 6 percent ( $n = 3$ ) reported having “a great deal.” Eight respondents (16 percent) stated that they had “a moderate amount” of communication with field education staff, while 64 percent ( $n = 32$ ) reported having “a little” communication. Finally, seven respondents (14 percent) stated that they had no communication with the field education staff.

Survey participants were also questioned about whether field education staff communicated “any shifting expectations of their students” during the pandemic time period. Sixty-four percent ( $n = 32$ ) reported in the af-

firmative, while the remaining 36 percent ( $n = 18$ ) marked “No,” indicating that the staff did not communicate any changed expectations.

As a follow-up to these two sets of questions, the survey asked participants about their level of satisfaction “with the school’s response to and support of [their] TFE [theological field education] supervision needs.” Almost 39 percent ( $n = 19$ ) reported that they were very satisfied with the school’s level of response and support for them. Another 55 percent ( $n = 27$ ) stated that they were satisfied, while three respondents (6 percent) reported being dissatisfied.

In the comments that were associated with this question, respondents who were very satisfied or satisfied stated that there was plenty of communication (sometimes weekly) from field education staff and that this staff “did a great job of sharing ideas and expectations.” One respondent did remark, however, that they would have preferred more regular communication and updates from the staff. Other comments also noted the stress that everyone was under and said that they did not expect too much additional support during the pandemic. At least two of the respondents commented that there was too much information being provided at times. Finally, one person commented that they would have preferred more direction regarding evaluations. The respondents who were dissatisfied with the school’s level of response and support reported in their comments that they did not receive any communication at all from field education staff.

#### CLOSINGS AND SENDINGS

One of the final questions asked was “How did you bring the student’s learning to a close?” At the time this survey was taken, some of the supervisors noted they had not yet completed this aspect of the placement, but they were concerned about doing it well. Of the seventy-seven respondents who did report bringing the students’ learning to a close, 48 percent ( $n = 37$ ) stated they completed the evaluations and had a discussion either via phone or Zoom without any celebration or ritual. One of the supervisor-mentors who stated that circumstances prevented them from having any type of celebration or ritual felt this was not a satisfactory way of closing. Another supervisor-mentor said they planned to bring the student back in July for a proper goodbye. Twenty-six percent ( $n = 20$ ) stated that they did have a celebration or ritual, which included a “sending in worship” or a “ritual

and closing reception, both virtual” or “an outdoor worship and goodbye.” Twenty-six percent ( $n = 20$ ) reported other forms of bringing the students’ learning to a close in the form of “having a conversation over lunch,” “recognition in online staff meeting,” or “nothing other than a big thank you, a written and verbal closure.”

### CONCLUSION

Regardless of the supervisor-mentor’s technological expertise and/or the use of technology in supervision, common practices and values were affirmed. These practices and values include the supervisor-mentor’s commitments to consistency in meeting times, intentionality in the theological reflection process, clear communication about responsibilities and expectations, mutual learning, vibrant spiritual practices, creativity, and adaptability. Shifting to the use of technology was a technical change that created opportunities for adaptive change in ministry as students and supervisor-mentors alike were invited to contextualize ministry in new ways. This invitation highlights anew the importance of the theological reflection process as it offers possible visions for new ministries in a new age.

As we think about field education in the twenty-first century and the ways we prepare men and women for ministry in the church and the world, we offer the following questions for further consideration:

- What kind of agility do our field education programs need in order to meet the unforeseen challenges of this new age?
- What are the tools and skills needed for ministry? Which ones have shifted and which ones remain just as critical as ever?
- How do we support supervisor-mentors in their ministry with students?
- How do we find ministry sites and supervisor-mentors who see possibilities and not problems, regardless of the challenges?
- As we reflect on our roles and responsibilities in our various institutions, what sacrosanct processes might need to come to an end?

If anything, this pandemic has shown us unknown fissures and connections and newly discovered strengths and limitations for our own reflection as we continue to provide deeply contextual opportunities for faithful witness in our world. This survey provided a snapshot of concerns and key learnings that will help all theological field educators and pastoral site

supervisor-mentors to continue to adapt and grow as we embark on new horizons in ministry.

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*Written in memory of Paul Gillis, husband of one of the authors, who passed away during the drafting of this article.*