

Holding the Line: The Seduction of Care in Professional Pastoral Supervision

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In my work supervising pastoral supervisors, I find myself returning again and again to the same tension. It is not new, but it is becoming more acute. The supervisors I work with are deeply caring people. They are attentive, relationally skilled, emotionally present, and genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of the pastors and leaders they supervise. And yet, repeatedly, I find myself confronting what I experience as a ‘drift’—sometimes subtle, sometimes overt—away from supervision and into pastoral care, spiritual direction, or counselling.

This drift places me in a difficult position. When I attempt to name it, to slow it down, or to re-orient the supervisory conversation back to the supervisee’s *work* rather than their *wounds*, I am occasionally experienced as too firm, overly boundaried, or insufficiently attuned to the emotional reality of the person in front of me. I am told that what they needed in that moment was for me to step into counselling and offer care, and that my insistence on staying within the supervisory frame felt, to them, like I was not meeting them emotionally where they were.

I want to take that accusation seriously. But I also want to question it.

The heart of the issue, as I see it, is not a lack of compassion. It is a lack of clarity about what supervision is and what it is for¹—particularly within church or pastoral care contexts where roles are already blurred and where emotional care is often prioritised over reflection, accountability, and formation.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that part of the confusion surrounding pastoral supervision arises because supervisory practice has inherited assumptions from the disciplines out of which it was originally formed—particularly counselling and spiritual direction—without sufficiently examining how those assumptions reshape the supervisory task. That heritage matters. Every modality carries the assumptions of the field that birthed it. When frameworks designed primarily for personal healing, emotional processing, or spiritual accompaniment are imported into supervision without clear differentiation, they inevitably pull the conversation toward the inner life of the supervisee rather than toward critical reflection *on their work*. When this occurs, the restorative impulse to provide care can begin to dominate the conversation, sometimes at the expense of supervision’s formative and normative functions.²

I say this as someone who is both a spiritual director and a pastoral carer. I understand the instinct to respond to distress with care, presence, and attentiveness. But supervision is not counselling, and it is not spiritual direction. When we allow it to function as either, even with the best of intentions, we quietly change its purpose. The focus shifts from examining

¹ Michael Carroll’s article entitled “One More Time: What is Supervision” reflects his desire to bring clarity to the ongoing confusion around the role and purpose of supervision. He articulates the history of clinical supervision (from where all supervision modalities originate), and offers a clear and concise definition of the distinctive purpose of Professional Supervision as distinct from counselling, mentoring, coaching or pastoral care. Carroll, “One More Time: What Is Supervision?,” 30.

² Proctor, B. “Supervision: A co-operative exercise in accountability.” Marken and Payne, *Enabling and Ensuring Supervision in Practice*, 21–34.

practice, authority, decision-making, and impact, to soothing the person in the room. At that point, we may feel kind, but we are no longer necessarily serving the supervisee's work—or *the people affected by that work*. In fact, the more emotionally supportive the space becomes, the harder it often is to name poor practice, avoidance of responsibility, misuse of power, or relational patterns that are harming others. Therapeutic warmth can unintentionally create relational safety for the supervisor while reducing the supervisory courage required to ask difficult questions.

Supervision requires care, but it also requires clarity of role, purpose, and consent. Without that clarity, we risk offering something that feels supportive while quietly abandoning one of the few spaces where pastoral leaders can be held reflectively accountable for how they exercise their authority.

Supervision, as I understand and practice it, is not primarily about attending to personal angst for its own sake. Nor is it a space for emotional off-loading, therapeutic processing, or pastoral soothing—however worthy those activities may be in other contexts. Supervision is a disciplined, intentional practice of reflection on *work*. It asks how the supervisee is functioning *in their ROLE*, how they are exercising authority, how they are using themselves in relationships, how power is being negotiated, how the structure/institutional context is impacting their work, and how meaning is being made in complex, often emotionally charged situations.

This does not mean that emotions are excluded. On the contrary, emotional material is often central. It matters. But in supervision, emotions are not the destination; *they are data*. They are explored not in order to relieve distress, but to understand how that distress is shaping perception, behaviour, decision-making, and relational patterns in their supervision practice. When supervision slides into pastoral care or counselling, something important is lost.³ The focus shifts from inquiry to containment, from curiosity to comfort, from formation to emotional relief. The supervisor becomes a caregiver rather than a reflective companion, and the supervisee is subtly positioned as someone to be supported rather than someone to be stretched and challenged.⁴

Using the language of supervision theory, what is being displaced in these moments is not care itself, but the balance between restorative, formative, and normative functions. When the restorative dimension dominates, the supervisee may feel supported, yet the formative task of examining role, authority, and decision-making is softened, and the normative responsibilities that address ethical blind spots, misuse of power, or poor practice becomes harder to hold.⁵ In this way, excessive restorative warmth can unintentionally weaken both professional development and ethical accountability.⁶

³ in *Reflexive Supervision*, Moore suggests that “a common dilemma for supervisors (particularly counsellors and therapists) is how to allow emotions into the conversation without the supervisory conversation itself morphing into a counselling one by proxy.” Moore, *Reflexive Supervision*, 24.

⁴ Langer suggests that this desire to help and rescue can stem from a “spiritual hubris” and a fear that they have not “adequately helped”. Bumpus and Langer, *Supervision of Spiritual Directors*, 38.

⁵ Hawkins & Shohet describe and expand Proctor’s normative–formative–restorative model in Hawkins, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*.

⁶ Hawkins and Smith name these three supervision movements as “Developmental, Resourcing and Qualitative” where “Resourcing” would be the restorative or care-based function. Hawkins and Smith, *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision, Skills and Development*, 147–48.

In pastoral contexts, the movement toward care is both understandable and deeply rooted in theological and vocational identity.⁷ Most pastoral supervisors have been formed in traditions that rightly prize attentiveness, compassion, and responsiveness to distress.⁸ They unintentionally equate care with kindness and boundaries with coldness. As a result, without sufficient clarity around the distinctive formative task of supervision, the lack of emotional rescue can feel unsympathetic or even ‘unsafe’. But what is often named as ‘unsafe’ is not really a matter of ‘safety’, but rather the discomfort of challenge. The issue is not whether care is present — it must be — but whether care is being offered in a way that still serves the formative purpose of supervision rather than quietly replacing it. This makes the task of pastoral supervision particularly demanding, because the supervisor must honour the pastoral impulse while also preserving the reflective function of the space.

When I hold the supervisory boundary, I am not doing so because I lack empathy. I do so because I believe that supervision has its own integrity, and that integrity matters. Supervision is one of the few spaces where pastors and leaders can be invited—not forced, *but invited*—into reflective distance from their own experience. It is a space where they can stand back and critically examine their own work in order to accompany others in their desire to likewise do better. Thus, the question is not simply “How are you feeling?” but “What is happening in your work, and how are you participating in it?”

This is where the accusation of being “harsh” lands painfully for me. I care deeply about the people I supervise. I am not indifferent to their struggles, exhaustion, grief, or disillusionment. I have walked in their shoes. I *still* walk in their shoes. But I am also wary of colluding with a model of supervision that prioritises immediate emotional comfort over long-term formation.⁹ In my experience, supervision that avoids discomfort in the name of care ultimately diminishes both.

There is also a power dimension that concerns me. When supervisors move fluidly—often unconsciously—between supervision, pastoral care, and counselling, the lines of consent and purpose become blurred.¹⁰ The supervisee may not know which “hat” the supervisor is wearing at any given moment, nor what is being asked of them. Emotional disclosure can increase, which in turn builds emotional ‘closeness’ and reduces the ability for challenge or objective feedback. Dependency can be subtly reinforced rather than reflection-on-practice constructively evaluated. It’s difficult to challenge a ‘friend’ or ‘companion’ regarding their work practices when collusion has developed and being ‘liked’ has become overly important in the relationship.

⁷ Pembroke suggests that Pastoral Supervision “becomes pastoral by employing the Christian triad of faith, hope, and love” which I believe narrows supervision to a pastoral-care framework rather than what would be universally accepted as supervision theory. Pembroke, *Supervision as Pastoral Theology: A Christological Vision for Ministry.*, 20.

⁸ Strasser explains the important influence that the Supervisor’s worldview has on their work practice. Strasser, “Givens of Supervision: A Cross-Theoretical Framework.”

⁹ Revell and Burton examine collusion particularly in pastoral and safeguarding contexts, showing how supervisors and practitioners can unconsciously align in ways that avoid confronting risk, power, or poor practice using “optimistic” language rather than exploring hard truths.. Revell and Burton, “Supervision and the Dynamics of Collusion: A Rule of Optimism?,” 1596.

¹⁰ Although primarily addressing the therapeutic role of supervision, Peterson makes some important observations around dual agendas and some of the complications that can arise when role and purpose are blurred. Peterson, *At Personal Risk: Boundary Violations in Professional-Client Relationships.*

As a mature supervisor, I need to ask myself if I am willing to challenge an unhelpful pattern in my supervisee's practice and risk them feeling temporarily disquieted towards me. Am I able to hold the tension between my relationship with the person in front of me, while protecting the people most at risk *who are not in the room*? What is my responsibility to the congregants, staff, and communities who live with the consequences of unexamined leadership due to my desire to be 'nice'? When care is used—consciously or unconsciously—to avoid difficult reflection, supervision risks becoming a space that soothes immediate distress while leaving the supervisee's practice—and those affected by that practice—insufficiently examined and therefore more vulnerable to unhelpful or harmful patterns.

Of course, I am not arguing for rigid, mechanistic supervision devoid of warmth or humanity. Nor am I suggesting that pastoral, or therapeutic caring moments never arise in supervision. Of course they do. But when they do, they need to be named, time-limited, and held in service of returning to the work. Without that clarity, supervision risks becoming a vaguely supportive conversation that feels good in the moment but does little to deepen practice or maturity.¹¹

As I undertake my own supervision, I am challenged to deliberately and consciously hold this tension within myself. I do not assume that my stance is beyond question. I regularly check-in with my own supervisor to ensure that my supervisory boundaries remain in-step with what is actually needed by those I supervise. I take seriously the possibility that my framework could become too narrow, or too strongly shaped by professional supervision models that do not always allow enough space for the raw and unregulated emotions that surface in pastoral realities. Sometimes people are not ready or able to do the work and must be 'steadied' before they are ready for supervision.

I know the importance of engaging people emotionally and pastorally—I do that, and I care deeply about the people in front of me. And sometimes, if I am honest, there are moments when I wonder whether instead of trying to hold this boundary, it might be easier, and certainly more immediately affirming, to simply relax and offer the kind of care that is being asked for in the moment. Sometimes I wonder if I should just give them what they want and meet their expectation of being pastorally cared for, rather than asking them to sit with discomfort in order to grow.

What I cannot escape, however, is the quiet conviction that if I let that line dissolve, something essential about supervision is lost. And I worry that those outside the room, in the places where the people I supervise work, will perhaps be vulnerable and exposed.

Supervision, at its best, is a formative practice. It invites people to examine how they inhabit their role, how they respond under pressure, how their history and theology shape their leadership, how the structure in which they work impacts their practice, and how they relate to power, authority, and vulnerability. In other words, it is reflective enquiry into the supervisor's practice, role, authority and impact. This kind of work does not always feel

¹¹ Leach and Paterson write "the supervisor needs to be clear that their role is to work on spiritual and personal matters with their supervisee only in so far as they impact upon those with whom they work as ministers." And further state "if a supervisor thinks the supervisee needs more support in a particular area, they should say so in order to free up the supervision space for ministry-focused work." Leach and Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, 19.

caring or comforting. It often requires tolerating ambiguity, restraint, and the frustration of not being immediately rescued. If holding that line means that I am occasionally experienced as less soothing, I can live with that. What I would struggle to live with is a model of supervision that slowly dissolves into pastoral care because it feels kinder or more familiar. In my view, that is not kindness—it is a loss of purpose. Sometimes caring means being honest enough to address the difficult patterns and issues that prevent excellent practice.

The question, then, is not whether we care. Pastoral supervisors care deeply. The question is whether we are willing to care enough to hold *emotions as data rather than the destination* and preserve supervision as a distinct and disciplined practice—one that serves not only the emotional needs of the moment, but the long-term formation of reflective, accountable, and resilient ministry leaders.

That is the boundary I am trying to hold. And for now, I believe it still matters.

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