Courageous conversations : the teaching and learning of pastoral supervision

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COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

The Teaching and Learning of Pastoral Supervision

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Reading the engaging and thoughtful chapters in this timely text appropriately titled *Courageous Conversations* brought back memories of my CPE summer in 1961 at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. I had just completed my junior year at Yale Divinity School and like many of my classmates, I was struggling with the question of whether I was cut out for ministry. A particularly memorable experience was my exit interview with Ernest Bruder, head of the Protestant chaplains. I knew, of course, that he was one of the most highly regarded and influential hospital chaplains throughout the country. This knowledge, plus the fact that he had not been around much during the summer due to illness, made me quite anxious as I entered his office. After a few pleasantries, he asked me to identify the most important thing I had learned about myself through my experience at St. Elizabeth's. I hesitated, then replied that I was giving serious thought to becoming a hospital administrator because it seemed to me that mental institutions like St. Elizabeth's needed to be changed from the top down and chaplains were powerless to effect the changes needed. Not surprisingly, I gained the distinct impression that this was not the answer he was expecting.

At the time, I had not heard of Erving Goffman whose contention that the most important factor in the formation of a mental-hospital patient is not the illness but the institution. This contention, which was derived from his field work at St. Elizabeth's in 1955-1956, had been articulated that very year in his book *Asylums.* If I had heard of him, I would have realized that the observation I made in my exit interview had the support of a distinguished sociologist. On the other hand, I was also unaware that Karl Menninger had recently given his presidential address to the American Psychiatric Association on the subject of hope and that this address had so inspired Fr. William F. Lynch that he had...
also provided a stimulating and challenging intellectual environment where theory development and critical purchase of theory was expected and cultivated.

To be more personal, I wish to acknowledge Jay Foster, Sharon Engebretson, Jane Litzinger (who first coined the term courageous conversation), Mark Jensen, Morris Briggs, as well as my training peers, Anna Nobeck, Francis Rivers Meza, and John Titus, all of whom invested countless hours in dialogue around theory development and clinical practice.

Finally, I owe a debt to the administration of BroMenn Healthcare System, who for the past 13 years have provided for and insisted upon a quality Clinical Pastoral Education program in central Illinois. Their dedication to faith-based medical care shows in many ways throughout this organization, but perhaps is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in providing quality spiritual care to patients, families, and staff. Through this program, and the many students who have participated in CPE at BroMenn Healthcare, I have learned and am learning the art of pastoral supervision.

CHAPTER ONE
Focusing Upon Skill Development

Mark Hart

As many of us have learned in the pastoral integrative process, much of who we are may well be connected to who we were and whose we were. Themes from our families of origin are lived out not only in personal and professional relationships, but also in what our attitude is in learning something new. This chapter revolves around skill development in relation to how any one of us may be involved in the pastoral supervision of others or on the receiving end of someone else’s pastoral supervision. However, before that conversation takes place, I need to set the stage for where and how I learned the fundamentals of developing an unknown or new skill set.

My father grew up in the Texas Panhandle oil boomtown of Borger and worked for a refinery from the time he was sixteen until he retired. He was one of those practical, self-made men who learned by action/reflection/action, even though he never even thought about using those terms. He learned by observing the senior operators, being given the task of doing a job himself, and then having his “mentors” review his work with him. In addition to his job at the refinery, my father was a carpenter who contracted himself out around the community for a variety of homebuilding or home improvement projects. My brother and I worked alongside him during our childhood and adolescent years, learning the carpentry skills that seemed to have come so naturally for him. Making the connection between those childhood “skill” lessons and the educational focus in pastoral supervision is an easy one. I learned four key lessons from my father that has influenced how I do pastoral supervision now: 1) “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.”—passion for the work, 2) “We’ll figure out a way to
make it work."—improvisation in the face of impasse, 3) "That’s okay, just get another board."—grace in the face of failure, and 4) "You can do that."—confidence in the learner. In the interest of full disclosure, I’ll be the first to admit my own father’s inconsistency when he did not exhibit the aforementioned “key lessons” and when the limits of these lessons pushed past their utility. They are used here for illustration only and I do not begin this writing with an exaggerated sense of his saintliness nor sinfulness.

A PRELIMINARY WORD

As any of us can easily recite, the litany of learning goals of first unit students go something like this: “I need to learn how to listen better,” “I’ve never been around a death before and so I want to learn how to cover everything at a death that I need to cover,” “I need to acquire basic knowledge and skill for spiritual ministry to the sick.” Assisting students in the writing of their initial learning goals related to pastoral competence to also include pastoral reflection and pastoral formation is nothing new to us. The occasionally overlooked component in goal writing is their dialogue/awareness regarding how they came to be the kind of learners they are today. What were the processes surrounding the student’s learning in those crucial developmental stages? Were they encouraged or ignored, ridiculed or praised, over-taught or minimalized as they ventured into the initial steps of learning something new?

I am reminded of the enjoyable pastime of watching new parents with their child when the first steps are taken. One parent kneels down with the child on wobbly legs, facing the other parent just a few feet away. The baby, with a big smile on her face, knows her parents are close and begins the awkward journey. She falls. There is laughter, but not ridicule. The parent says, “That’s okay, honey. Let’s try it again.” The baby takes a few more steps and falls into her father’s arms with more laughter and applause. What all is present in this picture that can help us understand the dynamics in skill building? There is encouragement, playfulness, no harsh recriminations when “failure” takes place, and, ultimately, celebration when the first walk is successful. Later, parents lose some of the playfulness and get very serious about their child’s learning. Parents become police and the earlier enjoyment of those first skills of walking is replaced by harping about homework or, worse yet, neglect/abuse and rendering the child invisible. Before we can get to the question of skill development in pastoral ministry, we must ask the question, “How has that student learned in the past about their own capacity and motivation in learning?”

There’s the intriguing story of Milton Erickson, the father of modern hypnotherapy, who, at the age of 17, was severely crippled with polio. His year long recovery provided him lessons that remained with him the rest of his life. Lying paralyzed, Erickson watched his baby sister learning to walk and closely observed how his parents communicated with his sister and how the unconscious mind works. There was focus on the potential for the child to walk versus state-

ments commanding, “Don’t fall!” He focused on recalling and visualizing those same movements in himself. He gave himself direct commands: “Move legs! Rock the chair!” Nothing happened. Finally, he gave up, sank back into his daydreams, and once more imagined playing outside. Again, the chair began to rock! It was the indirect suggestion—that vivid imagining—which produced a response. Using this discovery, over the following two years, Milton taught himself to walk. Consequently, one of the hallmarks of hypnotherapy was born: indirect suggestion.

PASSION FOR THE WORK

The hospital system to which I belong has undergone a cultural change within the last six years by integrating the “service excellence” concept by the Studer Group, recognizing what motivates people toward doing the best possible work they can do. The language that Studer uses regarding the essential value of passion provides the self-motivation toward a person’s sense of “purpose, worthwhile work, and making a difference.” In relation to pastoral supervision, the question of passion involves both the student and the supervisor. What do students report regarding their sense of “passion for ministry” under your supervision? Do they know what you are enthusiastic about? Is there a theoretical rationale for withholding that segment of your supervisory identity in order for the student to write upon the tabula rasa of their transference upon you? Students often report that a portion of their decision-making in choosing one CPE center over another has to do with their “feel” about the place. “I just felt a connection with them” or “You seemed to be excited about the program that you have” or “They have a good reputation for having a strong program” are not unfamiliar responses to questions we might raise with students. In relation to pastoral supervision, how contagious is that element of enjoyment that can’t help but be noticed by those around you? These are intuitive, less definable variables that suggest the power of one’s passion about ministry and supervision and that positively and negatively impact those around you.

My father’s passion about doing the best job possible seemed to be motivated by how he viewed his own performance versus how others might view his performance from the outside. Time would have a tendency to slip away and he would often “get lost” in his own project he was working on. The question of the difference between passion and obsession is a good one to ask, but there was an element of enjoyment in what he put his hands to do versus a sense of dogged “oughtness” that seemed to breed an attitude of resentment and blame. What are the implications of the student’s own passion, or their sense of “call,” that informs our own supervision of their ministry?

I’m reminded of Edwin Friedman’s concept of self-definition that eases the burden of expertise with our own cultural momentum toward an anxiety of appearing incompetent. So which came first, the passion (or call) or the competence? One former student, whom I’ll call M, captured a sense of this anxiety we
often experience in students. M’s learning in his clinical assignments came as he confronted his anxiety of being incompetent while in the chaos with families. He reflected that his analytical, distancing persona served as a defense when he became anxious of being found out as inept. He operated from a self-reliant stance, which insisted that he should always know the right thing to say and the right way to be. He thought his passion or call was primarily experienced in this evidence of competence. His assumptions about his pastoral role undervalued the present. He began to reframe what “bearing witness” with persons meant—that is, accepting and celebrating the present moment. He changed his perspective of “witnessing” to patients and families, which consequently kept the onus of responsibility on his own performance to “bearing witness” of their story, struggle, and expression, which helped him become a participant with the other. His scope of learning expanded from being centered on himself to more realistically assessing and providing pastoral care to specific, hurting people.

**IMPROVISATION IN THE FACE OF IMPASSE**

I also learned from my father, “We’ll figure out a way to make it work”—better known as improvisation in the face of impasse. I saw him on more than one occasion take the materials he had on hand and work within the constraints that presented themselves to bring about an acceptable result. What he could do with bailing wire, a few nails, and a few pieces of lumber was amazing! A mark of competence is the ability to think outside of the box when a more obvious solution is not presenting itself, whether the improvisation is applied to carpentry, music, drama, or ministry. Samuel Wells in Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics states, “Improvisation in the theater is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another, in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.”

Often in pastoral supervision, students expect to receive the definitive list of how to make an initial visit, manage a conflictual situation, attend their first death, or provide advance directive information. While there are definite skill sets that can be applied to any and all of these scenarios, it is often the student’s own flexibility in the moment that will help them retain their own sense of their pastoral authority. Isn’t much of what is done in ministry unscripted? That sense of the unknown can be part of the very attraction to ministry because of the limitless presentation of similar themes in people’s lives. How many of us have attended countless deaths and crisis situations, but can we say that they presented themselves in the same fashion with the same predictable results? If those moments in ministry do begin to feel like the same old mundane repetition, then those moments may speak more directly to our own attitudes of compassion fatigue, need for renewal, or reassessment.

Even with the challenge of remaining flexible in ministry when rigidity seems to be driving the momentum around the event, students have a right to expect skill sets from their pastoral supervisory context. We have certainly seen the pendulum swing in the volume of information provided to first unit CPE students in the form of student handbook and orientation material. I remember the story from an older supervisor who told of his first day of CPE in the early sixties when his supervisor entered the classroom on the first day of the unit, welcomed them all to the unit, and said, “I’m now going to write on the board the most important word you need to remember this unit.” He then proceeded to write the word “LISTEN.” Students dutifully pulled out their notebooks, expecting more to follow in their day of orientation. The supervisor laid the chalk down, asked if there were any questions and then began to walk out of the classroom. The students began to ask then, “Well, what’s next? What do we do now?” The supervisor’s response was, “I think you can figure that out.” The students asked, “What are our assignments? What else do we need to cover?”

The supervisor again responded, “I think you can figure that out.” That was the end of the classroom orientation and the students began their first day of clinical ministry. It is certainly arguable that the supervisor then did not adequately prepare them with a base of knowledge that would then assist them to “figure out” what came next. In our current complex environments of ministry, pastoral supervision constantly deals with the tension of the students’ anxiety that can both paralyze and/or energize. If what Malcolm Knowles said about the adult tendency to learn is task-oriented, then the student handbook and orientation must address their need for a certain amount of skill building information.

Students feel anxious because they do not know a particular skill and assume that once they are immersed with more information, they will then be qualified as a professional. This tendency in students can be honored by dialoguing with them about the need to utilize their own selfhood as an avenue, alongside the skills, to help them become a better minister. William McElvane talks of the task of ministry formation in relation to three partially intersecting circles entitled being, doing, and knowing. Being includes such things as selfhood, life in the spirit, passion, and soul. Knowing includes such things as content, analysis, and cognition. Doing includes such things as function, task, and methodology. If students learn exclusively by their knowing, then, theologically, they try to seek salvation by their own knowledge. If students learn exclusively by their doing, they try to seek salvation through their works and not by faith. If students learn exclusively by their being, they insist that their personal experience is the greatest criteria. The place where they intersect is the critical learning for students as they integrate their whole selves into ministry. This integration helps students balance their orientation to tasks with the rest of their pastoral selves. For example, M, again, wanted to learn the “skills of ministry” so that he would be qualified as a pastor. M operated out of the assumption that his authority came out of his ability to know and do. A supervisory intervention with M helped him address his focus on skill development by utilizing his peer group’s feedback and the clinical method of learning to provide examples where he could reflect on what he based his authority—knowing and doing or being/creating relationship with people.
This less defined reality of being is where improvisation resides. Let’s assume for the moment that sufficient pastoral skill and knowledge has been demonstrated. As a student moves through the unit, building on their growing awareness that all of ministry cannot be prepared for and that ambiguity is a pastoral reality, the student begins to demonstrate more ease in being in pastoral encounters that are unscripted. From the Christian tradition, Jesus’ ministry was constantly interrupted, greatly irritating his disciples. The interruptions became Jesus’ platform to teach, heal, and proclaim. He utilized the resources on hand, like an accomplished carpenter. Jesus possessed an element of trust in himself and in God that allowed for the improvisation that disquieted the complacent people around him who needed the challenge. He also provided comfort to those who needed sanctuary, something different than what they had received from the religious authorities.

Pragmatically, let’s look at a curriculum component that offers a twist on the use of role-play. Beginning in the second unit of a residency, a student is asked to present a clinical vignette in which they take on the role of the patient, not the chaplain. They solicit a volunteer peer to play their part as chaplain in the pastoral encounter. The student is able to think outside the box now as they participate as the patient/client/parishioner and receive other variations of what might have been possible within that pastoral encounter. Students have positively reported that this twist is a useful tool and has helped them hear what all might be possible that they did not consider and what it might feel like on the part of the patient/client/parishioner or family member.

GRACE IN THE FACE OF FAILURE

In my office I have a fabric board behind my computer in which I have put a variety of quotes that attempt to keep me honest about my own ego needs. Among those quotes is one from Walter Wangerin, a teacher and Lutheran pastor who has a great website in which he says, “Finally, I am convinced that we are not called upon to succeed at anything in the ministry. We are called upon to love. Which is to say, we are called upon to fail—both vigorously and joyfully.” The paradox of a statement like this not only challenges the disturbing prosperity theology of some contemporary churches but also, closer to home, challenges my own measuring stick of success. Any one of us would want to experience success in ministry as seen in a CPE program being financially strong, a church growing and meeting the needs of the community or, more to the point, a pastoral encounter having a positive outcome. An unnerving component of ministry is that awful awareness that much of what we do is immeasurable. I currently provide CPE in a clinical context highly committed to initial visits, even to the point of integrated goals developed by the Pastoral Care Department and electronically monitored on a daily basis. While these tools assist in giving a snapshot on the numbers of initial patients seen, the successful outcome of the visit—whatever that means—remains intangible.

Students, often living in the fearful paralysis of their own incompetence, can be so focused on their performance that they “fail” to realize the power of their pastoral compassion as being sufficient unto the day. I’ll return to my childhood again to provide an illustration. I was 13 years old when I picked up the circular saw for the first time. I had watched Dad for years cutting boards using this essential carpenter’s tool. He made it look so easy and I thought, “I don’t think I can do it that easily, but maybe I’m ready.” He set me up with a marked board to cut a straight line. I picked up the heavy tool in my small hands, placed the wobbly saw on the board and began to rip through the board showing a jagged mess. The more I cut, the bigger mess I made, until I knew I had destroyed the board. Dad didn’t seem too phased by my cut and simply said, “We can use that board somewhere else. Don’t worry about it. Just get another board and try again.” My competence didn’t begin at that moment, but my courage in trusting his gentle teaching with me did begin. I simply felt his okayness with my mistakes in order for me to learn. In retrospect, I could risk the mistake because he had communicated that was the only path to learn how to do the job better.

The question for students, and any one of us for that matter, has to do with what they risk when they enter the pastoral encounter. They certainly risk rejection, dismissal, toleration, or condescending disdain. In addition to the fear of judgment and isolation from those he/she is trying to provide care for, he/she also risks receiving judgment and isolation from the peer group if brought in for consultation. The CPE community and the individual supervisor is subject to the same ambiguity as any other human experience. The difference, hopefully, resides in the community or group’s decision to remain in relationship despite the ambiguity. As pastoral supervisors, we guide students in helping them identify the process of their control as they are in relationship. This includes how they protect themselves from the feelings of anxiety in tension with the content of their behavior. Certainly a goal as a pastoral supervisor is to help students by enabling them to name the anxieties that hinder their function in ministry. This encourages students to identify for themselves their own stories so that they will be able to evaluate their own ministry formation.

Painful learning for students takes place as they provide ministry to patients/clients/parishioners who are faced with pain, suffering, and death, as well as to the family and staff who provide for their care. My second year residency and supervisory residency took place at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas where feelings of helplessness are confronted daily. Students questioned issues of adequacy as they struggled with the theodicy issues of childhood suffering. This represented a painful yet teachable moment for students, as well as myself. Part of the offering of grace in the face of failure with students happened here. I attempted to bring focus for the students as they experienced their teachable moments and to assist them in embracing more fully the hope of their gifts that they bring to ministry even in the middle of the ambiguity.
One example of this was seen in D, a Southern Baptist student whose learning issues of pastoral authority sometimes limited his ministry. He was called on to provide pastoral care to a family grieving the death of their child. He wondered about his competency with the family because of denominational and ethnic differences. This was evidenced in his ongoing struggle of speaking up or shutting down when emotions began to run high. I kept the focus of supervision on his ministry with the family. I asked him, "What was the family needing from you? How did you provide community for them? What would this have to do with learning issues around pastoral authority and identity?" He began to reflect that the family relied on his presence to help direct them through the chaos and that he provided a "reminder of the Holy." Paradoxically, as he became more focused on his competency with the family, the less competent he felt. Theologically, you could say that D refused to die to self, pointing to an idolatrous worship of his own abilities and a rejection of God's creative grace. Despite his internal anxieties, he connected with them on a deeper, more transcendent level, dealing in the realm of the Spirit working in community with them, which was at the heart of his learning. The teachable moment for D was that in spite of himself, somehow God was sufficient.

It is such exciting moments, as with this student, that redeem and give hope to lean into the unknown despite these anxieties of inadequacy and fears of not being accepted. This is what helps me when I stand in the threat of being isolated or rejected; the life affirming response of courageously accepting and taking in the threat of not being, as Tillich would say, a courageously affirming self when everything else seems to scream to its contrary. Courage comes at a time, like hope, when I accept the presence of death and choose life anyway. Douglas John Hall reminds me:

The suffering God—the God who yearns parenally towards creation; the God whose power expresses itself unexpectedly in the weakness of love... This, I believe, is not only a more profound image of God... it is also more accessible to the human spirit.

While at Children's Medical Center, the Pastoral Care Department provided an annual memorial service for the medical staff, nurses, and other care providers who needed an opportunity to express their accumulative grief. The following represents a "Litany of Hope" that I wrote for one of those services.

Leader: O gracious God, we come to you because we recognize your love and care for us in the midst of this place that provides both safety and danger. It is painful to remember our loved ones and those who have cared for who have touched our lives and who have died. We remember not just their name now, but their face, their smile, and their story. At times we feel guilty in our helplessness—for not doing enough, for not knowing enough, for not stopping death. In our guilt and anger we come to you to be given comfort and to be reminded that you are with us in life and death. Gracious God, in your mercy... People: Hear our prayer.

Leader: O faithful God, we listened to our loved ones' and patients' hopes and prayers; we were pained by their suffering. There are times when we have blamed you for causing illness and we ask, "Why?" There are times we have bargained in our helplessness, promising to change. We know that not all of the news we hear or give is good, but we keep our hope and faith in you. Remind us that you do not take those we love as much as you receive them. We know that you are griefed with as when our family and friends have to suffer. O faithful God, in your mercy...

People: Hear our prayer.

Leader: O loving God, encourage us now as we come together remembering and celebrating the lives that have touched us. Bless our families represented here that we may be empowered by each other and that we may leave this place with a replenished spirit and determined will, but above all, that we may risk loving again as we give of ourselves to our friends, our families, and to our God. O loving God, in your mercy...

People: Hear our prayer.

There is something about "to risk loving again" that gets at the meaning of extending grace to others and ourselves when we experience what we sometimes define as failure. In pastoral care, death may not necessarily represent failure, but the pain involved in losing yet one more person to death with whom we have been in relationship. In pastoral supervision, grace in the face of failure is something we can experience as well as something experienced for those we are supervising.

CONFIDENCE IN THE LEARNER

I do, upon occasion, revisit my theory papers completed in the ACPE supervisory certification process, to evaluate how they have evolved or how I still operate within their perimeters.

Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning has been an ongoing helpful resource in my supervision of students. Knowles, Carl Jung, and Paul Tillich are great resources I utilize, particularly in trusting that the inward movement toward wholeness is God-given, whether the movement is conscious or unconscious. This inward movement is evidenced in Knowles' theory of a person's desire for wholeness and in their satisfaction concerning self-directed learning. This helps me understand how students learn and how any one of us participates in that learning. I'll briefly outline Knowles' primary components of adult learning that I still find helpful in my supervision of students: 1) Adults need to know why they need to know something before learning it because they become more self-invested, 2) Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their choices, 3) The role of the adult's life experience is the central resource. For example, the life experience and learning needs of a 24-year-old African American male who recently graduated from seminary will vary from the experience and expectations of a 50-year-old Caucasian female who never attended seminary, 4) The adult's orientation to learning is task-oriented or problem-centered,
meaning the arena of learning is how the adult perceives and responds to the problem affecting his/her life situation. 5) The most powerful motivating factor for adults is not external, but internal—that is, the desire for satisfaction, self esteem, and wholeness.\footnote{Malcolm Knowles, \textit{The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species} (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1990), 57-63.}

Students considering a CPE program, and even long after they have arrived, will say on some level of awareness, "I need experience in ministry to help me practically in my pastoral formation and identity." The process of their anxiety is seen in the kinds of content questions that are asked, which have to do with curriculum, on-call schedules, or patient/client/congregant encounters. Underlying these anxiety questions is the unasked question of trust. "Can I trust you or others with myself?" "Will you do me right?" The deeper, sometimes more pertinent, questions that may go unasked are, "Am I trustworthy in ministry?" "Am I up for this challenge?" "Am I out of my comfort zone and skill set?" Malcolm Knowles reported that mutual trust is essential for learning to take place, which, ultimately, helps them trust in God’s competence.

I also have the awareness that whatever lofty pursuit of wholeness the student is on, their resistance to change is equally great. We have witnessed the most motivated of students continue to resist their own movement toward more differentiated functioning because it means a change of behavior, paradigm, or a change of relationship with others. While in consultation with a more seasoned supervisor as I prepared to meet the Certification Commission for ACPE supervisor, a nagging theme of my tendency to over-teach continued to present itself. After several sessions of bringing student vignettes in for consultation, this experienced supervisor finally said, "You know, Mark, I trust that you will continue to do this behavior in one form or another. My hope is that you will be a little less satisfied with yourself the next time you do it!" I translated this to be his statement of trust in me that I would know the timing better than anyone else when my need to over-teach had reached its limit and I would begin to experiment with other methodologies in the moment.

The role in pastoral supervision is not too far from parenting, as we model for students our own passion for ministry, our ability to improvise in the face of impasse, extending grace in the face of failure, and confidence that in the final analysis it is the learner who will walk on his/her own two legs.

NOTES

Reflecting theologically is a way of living, a way of being. It is a way of ever being sensitive to the "Other" beyond which we can sometimes see, hear, taste, smell, or touch using our natural senses. It requires us to become aware of another element beyond ourselves that defines who we are and what we are. Reflecting theologically reminds us of our unique calling as pastors, chaplains, and spiritual caregivers—a claim that is unique to our calling and vocation. It is what separates us from the social worker and psychologist, in that reflecting theologically can be said to be innate to our profession and calling.

**Reflecting Theologically Defined**

Reflecting theologically can be defined as an effort to apply a theological understanding of our relationship to self, others, and God to any aspect of what it means to be a creature created in the image of God, *imago Dei*. It is the recognition that all of life is intertwined and one aspect of the story relates to and builds on the other.

The story of God in creation, the communal story, and its relationship to the individual all provide an understanding and definition of reflecting theologically. It raises questions such as "What does this situation have to do with God?" More fully, "How does the divine love of God permeate our relationships with one another?" It is using the resources at our disposal to understand what is going on in our relationships. It helps us to understand that there is a higher,
ontological dimension of our existence. It requires imagination and an understanding of storytelling.

Reflecting theologically can be applied to many areas of our existence. As an African-American woman, I have found it impossible to view myself as a human being without reflecting on God’s movement in history with regard to the Africans brought to the Americas in chains—slaves from which I am a descendant. That God story has been informed and reflected upon from a scriptural/biblical standpoint, including the story of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt and God’s movement in history toward liberation. This reflection upon a greater human story of our existence, as well as our current stories, can be used as a resource from many ethnic viewpoints.

One definition of theological reflection is as follows: “Theological reflection is a self-conscious, intentional act in which one seeks to know God and be known by God so that one can love God and others as God loves.”

Reflecting Theologically with Parishioners

Reflecting theologically occurs in churches and other ministry settings sometimes in a natural, spontaneous manner. What is proposed in this chapter is a greater need to be intentional about reflecting theologically in our churches and other ministry settings. Possibilities are inevitable and far ranging. How are we intentional about encouraging and teaching our youth, students, and others for whom we supervise and teach to reflect theologically? How do we make sure reflecting theologically provides an impetus to our pastoral care? This chapter will attempt to examine reflecting theologically as the core, the essence, even the soul of our ministries with youth groups, students, laypersons, professional chaplains, and other spiritual caregivers concerned about a holistic view of ministry and caring for the soul.

Reflecting theologically is an avenue for helping our parishioners and, in particular, our youth “be in the world, but not of the world.” It can provide an opportunity for youth who cannot hide from the outside influences of a pop culture that focuses much on self—a narcissistic culture. Reflecting theologically can help youth frame a right perspective from their religious standpoint by teaching them to reflect theologically on the aspects of our culture that do more harm than good when “love thy neighbor as thyself” seems not to exist from a communal, relational standpoint.

For example, in focusing on morality, reflecting theologically has been used with youth who love to listen to rap music. As a youth superintendent in Sunday school, I invited youth to reflect theologically after listening to a rap song that had negative lyrics. With seminary youth (parents enrolled in seminary) several sessions were held, inviting the youth to reflect theologically on a popular movie. It is apparent that reflecting theologically can occur in an intentional way in many venues. Being intentional about reflecting theologically is akin to the philosophical concept of “habit taking.”

My experience of being intentional about reflecting theologically occurred during my seminary years in which I asked a youth group whose parents were seminarians to reflect theologically on the movie entitled Dirty Dancing. I selected this movie because I discovered that the youth were having a contest as to who could watch it the most. One young man boasted 20 times.

In order to explain reflecting theologically to a group between the ages of 12 and 14, I started with the explanation that all stories are about God, whether God is mentioned or not. I used the biblical story of the prodigal son as an example of a story that is about God, yet God is not mentioned. We applied this same concept to the movie. Students were shown selected portions of the movie and were asked to complete a simple form with the headings: What in the story draws the characters closer to God? and What in the story draws the characters away from God? Interestingly enough, most of the youth made notes regarding the relationships of the characters and the characters behavior toward each other. Genuine friendship and authentic caring of others were named as those things that draw the characters closer to God. Of course, those behaviors in the story in which people did harm to one another either emotionally or physically were noted as the things that drew us away from God. The youth had a lively discussion while making some connections to what they had learned in church and the Bible about loving one another. Youth were then asked to go home and use the same form while watching their favorite sitcom or television show. All of the young people did the assignment using shows such as Star Trek: The Next Generation. This appeared to be a very simple elementary way to teach reflecting theologically, yet it was effective. Of course, as with many approaches, there is a downside. For example, a church deacon that worked with me and our church youth group stated, “Mildred, you make me sick. Ever since you taught the youth about reflecting theologically, I cannot enjoy a decent movie without asking myself during the movie, ‘What does this have to do with God?’”

Reflecting Theologically on Contemporary Themes

Barth once said that doing theology is the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I found this approach helpful when asked in a class to reflect theologically on articles from the Wall Street Journal. One such article that caught my attention, for example, had to do with the cheap wines that were being sold sometimes under different labels by reputable fine wine companies. The article acknowledged that these cheap wines with higher sugar content were more addictive and caused more damage to the physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals, especially those who were prone to the disease of alcoholism. From a theological standpoint, this was a justice theme and a lack of concern for the least of these. This brings me to resources for doing theological reflection.
Reflecting Theologically and Clinical Pastoral Education

Reflecting theologically is the essence of what we do in Clinical Pastoral Education. It clearly distinguishes us from other helping professions. As clinical pastoral educators and supervisors, it keeps us from losing our soul in terms of our unique contribution to the helping professions from pastoral and spiritual perspectives. I find that in my work, incorporating theological reflection is an important element in the CPE model. Reflecting theologically becomes a significant component of pastoral formation, pastoral competence, and pastoral reflection.

In a didactic on theological reflection, students are encouraged to develop their own working definition of theological reflection as a group. From there, the focus is on resources for theological reflection and a final activity in which these resources are applied to a short narrative for level I CPE students.

The didactic on theological reflection for level II CPE students is a two-part presentation. In session one, students are asked to read the article titled The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection as preparation. Students explore the definition of theological reflection and ascertain how reflecting theologically is similar to and yet different from analysis and meditation. Lastly, a typology is used as the group explores resources for doing theological reflection. Resources include scripture and other sacred text, various theologies such as narrative, liberation, womanist or feminist, and orthodox theology to mention a few.

In session two, students are asked to bring a verbatim (dialogue only) that has been presented and critiqued previously. In this session, students reflect on the encounter strictly from theological perspectives using resources developed and articulated from the previous didactic. Other students are asked not to critique the verbatim a second time, but dialogue about the theology based upon their own theological perspective or applying some of the resources for theological reflection. In this respect, three steps for reflecting theologically are introduced to the students which are as follows: 1) What is theology? 2) What is reflection? and 3) What is theological reflection? In addition, a process for theological reflection is provided with steps and guiding questions. The eight steps are as follows: 1) Select the encounter, 2) Narrate the encounter, 3) Select a theological approach for the reflection, 4) Analyze the encounter in terms of the chosen approach, 5) Note surprises, 6) Make a theological statement, 7) Design a pastoral care plan, and 8) Articulate in an oral presentation, written statement, or prayer (preferably to a peer group) what happened between you and God in the theological reflection.

Pastoral Identity

Focus on pastoral identity, with a focus on narrative and the importance of story—personal story, communal story, and the story of the relationship with God—is essential.

To be a person is to have a story. Without my story, I have no identity. I do not know who I am, or what I am about. If you have no story, how do you know where you’re going; and if you’re going somewhere, how will you know when you get there?

In a seminar on the topic of pastoral formation and identity, the above quote is used to set the stage to dialogue about our personal narrative. The question that Jesus asked one of the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” is used at the beginning of a dialogue among the group on the influences in their personal narratives. On the board, columns are placed with the names of each participant listed vertically. This usually is done in a small group. Horizontal columns consist of the following questions: 1) What messages did you receive from your family of origin about who you are? 2) What messages did you receive from your church or community of faith about who you are? 3) Who do you say that you are? 4) What scriptures and/or sacred readings inform who you are? and 5) What metaphors come to mind that shape your pastoral identity and who you are as a pastor? Questions are asked one at a time and each person is given an opportunity to respond. The presenter writes the responses in the appropriate columns.

CPF students have found this to be a helpful exercise, especially at level I. The peer group also comments on patterns and theological threads they gather from snippets of their personal stories for all to see. This is but a small example of how reflecting theologically can be applied to personal narratives as they inform pastoral identity and formation.

One way of reflecting theologically is to ask students to select a spiritual assessment tool that resonates with them. However, before using this tool as an instrument in pastoral care, they are asked to first use a tool such as Pruyser’s, Fitchett’s, Ramsay’s, or others’ and write a spiritual self-assessment. This results in students finding another avenue of reflecting theologically in terms of pastoral identity and formation.

A resource for Clinical Pastoral Education level II students is the theological integration paper. This idea was a result of my experience in writing the CPE theory papers. The purpose is to begin the initial phase of helping students to integrate their theology in this pastoral care context as informed by their personal narrative.
Reflecting Theologically in the Cultural Context

When helping students to prepare the theological integration paper, I use my own story to discuss my pastoral theology of way making that informs my supervision, my pastoral care, and my life's view of how I experience God in my personal narrative and the communal narrative. For example, I am aware that African-American folk religion has greatly shaped my religious heritage, which is prevalent in black religion. Dwight Hopkins explored the image of God as Way Maker in his book, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*. These images include God as Creator Way Maker, Co-Laboring Way Maker, and Way Maker Deliver. The image of God as Way Maker is consistent with my pastoral theology of shepherding. God as Creator Way Maker, for me, was an indicator of the equality of human beings. It was in the Baptist church as a child that I was first introduced to the image of God as Way Maker in an often heard phrase during testimony services: “God can make a way out of no way. God is a Way Maker.”

Cultural context with regards to reflecting theologically is important in supervising students. One student I supervised from a war-torn country was well aware that the war in her country informed her theology and her understanding of pastoral care. Family members had died or were either under persecution as such. To leave out this experience while reflecting theologically would be to ignore what has shaped her so profoundly and has enabled her to understand the role of use of self in pastoral care.

Conclusion

Remembering all that shapes who and what we are, as influenced by our theological understandings in a familial and cultural context, is one way in which theological reflection can truly become a habit and a discipline. It is recognizing our individuality, but also the sociopolitical nature of the larger community and the ways God moves in our current history making. Martin Luther King once said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the inter-related structure of reality.” Reflecting theologically keeps us honest and thoughtful as to the interrelatedness of all creatures, creation, and the Creator.

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