

Ahead of the Wave: The Uniting Church in Australia's Ride on the Professional Supervision Tide

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INTRODUCTION

Christian ministry is grounded and founded in who Christ is and who he calls us to be; it is given structure in the relationships and accountabilities within the Uniting Church in Australia. This is expressed as mutual accountability between the church and its ministry agents. As part of its commitment to ministry agents, the church supports ministers, deacons, pastors and paid lay leaders to reflect on and understand their role, its nature and its function.

The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice 2009 (COEMP) contains a clear outline of the various aspects of the pastoral relationship, professional conduct and obligations that are expected of ministers within the Uniting Church. The code of ethics provides guidance and clear parameters around the various aspects of ministry in practice, faith commitment, pastoral activity, legal obligations and dealing with breaches of the code. Professional supervision was seen in the early days to be an essential foundation of establishing safe churches through safe ministry agents.

Whilst we may bemoan the fact that ministry today is tough post-COVID-19, people from many denominations have noted to me, as a Uniting Church minister, how far ahead the Uniting Church in Australia was in riding the tide of ministry when it required professional supervision of its leaders starting in 1999. It was only after a Royal Commission in 2016 into the way institutions had responded to the issue of sexual abuse allegations that all employed/paid religious leaders of all faith traditions were required to engage in regular professional supervision of their work. We were the first denomination to have this in place and were ahead of the wave that has now been rolling in over the Christian churches since 2016 to implement mandatory professional supervision of all clergy and paid lay leaders. This requirement affects people of all faiths.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION?

Supervision is part of the practice of many people today in the wider helping professions of counselling, psychology, psychotherapy and social work. It also plays a significant role in the developmental learning process for people training in education, nursing, medicine, social work and other fields. The latter is more specifically defined as clinical supervision because it deals with the learning stages

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of becoming a competent practitioner in those fields. Professional supervision implies that its focus is on the profession, the work in which people are engaged and what they experience as they perform that work and how it impacts them.

Professional supervision, according to the Uniting Church Assembly in 2011, is the relationship Ministers have with another professional whereby the Minister is assisted to maintain the boundaries of the pastoral relationship and the quality of ministry, including competencies, time management, priorities and any difficulties arising in ministry.¹

This ecclesial definition can be expanded through engaging commentators from other disciplines. Sheila Ryan, in her work on stories from the healing arts, describes it thus:

Supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing. When we are alive to what we are doing, we wake up to what is, instead of falling asleep in the comfort stories of our clinical routines and daily practice. The supervisory voice acts as an irritator, interrupting repetitive stories (comfort stories) and facilitating the creation of new stories.²

Peter Hawkins and Robin Shohet, based on their work amongst therapists and counsellors in the clinical world, define supervision as follows:

Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves, as part of their client/practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by so doing improves the quality of the work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession.³

In the context of pastoral ministry, Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, co-founders of the Association of Pastoral Supervision and Education (APSE-UK), offer this definition:

Supervision is a regular, planned, intentional and boundaried space in which a practitioner skilled in supervision, meets with one or more other practitioners to look together at the supervisee's practice. It is characterised by trust, confidentiality, support and openness that gives the supervisee freedom and safety to explore the issues arising in their work.⁴

Therefore, we can say that professional supervision is not therapy, counselling, mentoring or spiritual direction. It sometimes butts up alongside these other disciplines and is unique in its focus on the work and the impact of the work on others and the self.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION?

The Uniting Church Code of Ethics names supervision as useful to assist in maintaining the boundaries of the pastoral relationship ministers have with their congregants and other people that they serve. It is also important to maintain the quality of their ministry, including their competencies, time management, priorities and difficulties which arise in ministry. In any work with needy and vulnerable people, ministers need to be clear about their role and their capacity to fulfil that role, with clear and respectful boundaries.

This means that ministry leaders must know their role and seek to fulfil it with the best of intentions as well as the best actions. There is inherent positional power and authority in the ministry role, due to the church's affirmation of the call to ordination or commissioning, to serve people in their care. We must seek the good of others and prevent and minimize harm in all ministry activities.

In the church community, as in any other community of people, people do not behave perfectly or ideally, and therefore there is always room for things to go wrong or off course. When poor choices are made, unhelpful behaviour takes place or creates conflict, and much wisdom is needed to balance competing demands and step back. Supervision provides that space for stopping, stepping back and reflecting on what is going on and how it is affecting the minister. Is my relationship with that church leader healthy when we have disagreed? Did I neglect to prioritize that phone call to a sick member instead of reading my favourite commentary as I prepared for worship? I do not have time to take a day off because the parish needs me. How am I going to keep working with my colleagues when they are so opinionated and uninterested in what I am doing? These are the kinds of things that need thought and conversation to unpack and that become the nuts and bolts of what you might talk about with your supervisor.

During the early part of 2020 to the end of 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, ministers were learning how to record worship services, live stream worship, and meet via online platforms, and they felt distant from their people. This raised questions of identity. Who am I now as a minister? How do I continue to pastorally care for people when I can't visit people and we can't gather? I didn't get trained at theological college to do this type of thing. How can the church expect me to be a theologian, creative liturgist, administrator, preacher, pastoral carer and lead the church in its mission when I am so depressed and anxious? This is the purpose of supervision – to provide a safe space to reflect on ministry, to see what is happening, improve self-awareness, improve one's understanding of circumstances, explore different viewpoints, and clarify ministry actions going forward.

What could be changed in my behaviour? Which direction could I take that might bring hope or relieve stress? Supervision may also enable you to find some resources that allow new steps to be taken, identify other ideas to be explored and obtain ongoing support for your ministry journey. Supervision may provide some direction about the continuing education courses or professional development that ministers engage with to improve their skills, grow in knowledge and refresh their spiritual lives.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING IN PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION?
Christian ministry is demanding work and continues to become more complex and challenging than the earlier role of ministers as predominantly pastors or preachers. Ministers must be highly skilled and trained, formed spiritually, theologically, emotionally, psychologically, academically and practically for this work. The whole

church needs to be so, and the Uniting Church has been ahead of the wave in terms of setting clearer expectations for its leaders in a code of ethics, requiring exacting standards of personal and professional conduct in ministry and accountability.

The Uniting Church has blazed the trail by requiring professional supervision since 1999. There is a clear framework for discipline- and misconduct-related matters and processes for dealing with ethical breaches when they arise. This has been in place for the past twenty-six years, before most other denominations had such guidelines in place. They are expressed in each synod with a variety of Committees for Counselling, Discipline and Sexual Misconduct complaints. In addition to these, since 2013 an Ethical Ministry Foundations Training programme and a half-day Ethical Ministry Refresher programme are run twice per year which are compulsory for all paid ministry leaders. These involve case study work, group reflection time and collegial discussion. They continue to provide safe spaces for reflection on ministry practice, collegial support and case study work to support people's knowledge of the demands of ministry in these postmodern times.

With the growing demand for the professionalization of Christian ministry, further ethical, personal and professional demands are made on ministers. Therefore, the importance of regular participation in professional supervision by all ministers and pastors is a requirement (minimum eight hours per year) that provides the space to develop healthy, self-aware and spiritually mature practitioners for upholding the integrity of the church.

I remember working with exiting candidates for ministry in their formation programme some years ago. In discussing the Code of Ethics and working with some in supervision during their final year of formation, I learned that they saw supervision as a positive thing, a no-brainer. Why wouldn't you want to have supervision? What a terrific opportunity to engage and have the benefit of having a professional supervisor to walk alongside you in your ministry journey! It is a gift, not a burden.

HOW DID SUPERVISION BECOME PART OF MINISTRY PRACTICE?

During ministry training, field education based on the action/ reflection model that was developed in the clinical pastoral education (CPE) space was mandatory in the Uniting Church in Australia. Weekly classes in which verbatim and critical incidents were presented in small group class settings were foundational. Students worked predominantly in urban settings in field education placements, not specifically in a clinical hospital setting, where most CPE programmes are based. Local church settings or, more recently, community settings and agencies provide the backbone of field education experiences, so theological reflection, social analysis and ministry identity and insight can grow through intentional reflection on practice. These integration sessions are a cornerstone of theological education and ministry formation within the Uniting Church. I had the opportunity to engage in an urban CPE in my first parish as part of study leave, and it was very powerful, ongoing learning. In 2017–2019 I facilitated the urban CPE programme that had become part

of the Urban Ministry Movement and master's programmes within the Catholic Broken Bay Institute in Sydney. Based on the CPE model but adapted to be broader in terms of social analysis, professional supervision, group process and theological reflection, the Transformative Pastoral Practice course was an important cornerstone for ministerial formation of Uniting Church in Australia candidates.

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND PROTECTION IN VULNERABILITY

Supervision is essential because pastoral ministry has become more demanding over time. The world has changed, and the church has changed too, so ministers need to be alert and tuned in to the changing context. Professional supervision is meant to assist ministers to do their work well and to keep them doing their work well. It is there as a place of debriefing, of learning, of reflection, of decision making, of challenge, and as a mirror or a quiet place to be refreshed. It is a place to unpack situations of conflict when they arise. To be able to talk things through, to look at themselves, and to seek wisdom and insight into themselves and others is necessary in all helping professions. This can enable clarity in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, their biases and world views. It can allow theological reflection to arise as they serve Christ, resolve conflict and build peace and Christian community.

Supervision can reveal blind spots in self-awareness related to ethical and professional issues. It can enable a place to measure the minister's effectiveness and its impact on their personal life and identify personal reactions and needs within the work health and safety system. Professional supervision, whilst being a private and confidential space, is a place of accountability for the work that ministers provide. It allows time to understand the systems at play, to step back and see the big picture and the various competing interests and responsibilities that must be weighed. It can be a place of learning that can transform ministers' practice. Ethical dilemmas arise regularly in ministry, and having a safe place to reflect and formulate thoughtful responses is critical for the quality of ministry offered. Without this, some people become isolated, inward-looking, closed to receiving critique or affirmation. This can have a damaging effect on their self-esteem and spiritual vitality and lead to boundary violations and poor ministry practice that puts themselves and the people that they serve at risk of harm.

Michael Carroll, a chartered counselling psychologist, executive coach, supervisor of executive coaches and supervisor-trainer, has written extensively on the supervision space across the helping professions. As director of the Centre for Supervision Training in Oxford, he has been a prolific teacher around the world on professional supervision and the ethical dimensions of work practice. In his foundational work back in 2014 on effective supervision, he named the importance of supervision at its best, if it is engaged in with openness and integrity. He said, "Learning in supervision is ultimately transformative and not just transmissive: that is, it results in a change of mind-set or behaviour rather than simply being the transfer of ideas or knowledge."⁵

The hope is that learning in supervision is transformative for the ministers who engage in it so that they can see more clearly and not be overwhelmed by the heaviness of pastoral tasks and issues. The challenges of seeking to grow inclusive Christian communities in the highly cynical climate of Australian society towards organised religion and the Christian church is a tough call. When I undertook research in 2021 and 2022 with ordained women ministers within the Uniting Church in New South Wales / the Australian Capital Territory, supervision rated very highly in their ministry experience. In surveying 50 women about the spiritual resources that enabled them to develop resilience to fulfil their call, 95% indicated professional supervision was the most significant resource, alongside strong collegial relationships with other women. These were key to sustaining their ministry. This came before prayer (72%), Bible reading (63%), retreats and study (54%), journalling (36%) and other things not specified (31%).⁶

As a professional and pastoral supervisor for the last fourteen years, I have been connected with and a member the Australasian Association of Supervision (AAOS) and Transforming Practices (TP Inc). This is an ecumenical pastoral supervision association founded in 2007 and a training organisation for professional pastoral supervision as well as a community of practice. During that time, there has been a huge wave of change. Many supervision training organisations have begun to train people as supervisors to provide supervision for people in pastoral ministry. The Uniting Church in New South Wales / the Australian Capital Territory has been ahead of the wave in requiring professional supervision and is catching up on the provision of training programmes to train more professional supervisors, drawing on our theological colleges and other organisations. Transforming Practices Inc, St Mark's National Theological Centre and University of Divinity continue to provide supervision training courses, and United Theological College linked to Charles Sturt University began providing a Graduate Certificate in Professional Supervision in 2024. In the past two years, most other Christian denominations around Australia have now developed supervision training programmes to train more supervisors for this important work.

Professional supervision promotes holistic ministry and spiritual vitality so that ministry leaders thrive rather than just survive or, sadly, burn out. As I look back over my twenty-eight years of being an ordained minister, I realize I would not have continued beyond my first parish without the benefit of professional supervision. The level of challenge and stress I experienced as a younger ordained woman in the late 1990s would not have been bearable without the gift of supervision. It was the greatest gift to me and my continued ministry, and my passion for supervision continues as I supervise, train and form others in this work. Participating in regular professional supervision is an important means of maintaining resilience and longevity in ministry. My hope is that people in ministry will encourage one another to engage and experience the benefits of professional supervision in terms of self-care, clarity of perspectives and professional reflection.

Let's continue to be part of the tide of giving and receiving supervision for the benefit of all the people served through our work.

NOTES

¹ Uniting Church in Australia Ministerial Education Commission, *Professional Supervision: A Process of Reflection on Ministry Experience* (2011), 6.

² Sheila Ryan, *Vital Practice: Stories from the Healing Arts* (Portland OR: Sea Change, 2004), 44.

³ Peter Hawkins and Robin Shohet, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, 4th ed. (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 5.

⁴ Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2015), 10.

⁵ Michael Carroll, *Effective Supervision for the Helping Professions* (London: Sage, 2014), 19.

⁶ Jan Reeve, *Feminist Reflections on Mission & Leadership: A Uniting Church Minister's Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2022), 68.