

The Changing Face of Reflective Practice in the Church Today

Richard M. Trist*

Reflective practice as an aspect of ministerial formation is undergoing a seismic shift within the church today. As I look back on my own journey of formation, I have seen intentional reflective practice move from being something just on the periphery — an optional extra for those “into that sort of thing” — to become a key aspect of the continuing formation needed for those serving the church today as pastors, chaplains and theological educators.

Indicative of this, in my own part of the world, is the renaming of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Theological Field Education (ANZATFE) to the Association of Reflective Practice in Theological Education (ARPTE). This name change is a sign of the growth of the importance of reflective practice within theological education. It is no longer seen as something students are required to do just as part of their field education program but as something vital for their lifelong learning as ministry professionals.¹

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Let me share something of my own journey from theological student to ordained minister to theological educator and now in my semi-retirement to professional pastoral supervisor assisting others to reflect on their practice. The following words from former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams resonate with me as I consider this journey. The archbishop was asked about the nature of theological education, and his reply, as usual, was full of insight:

Theological education is learning more about the world that faith creates, or the world that faith trains you to inhabit. . . . It's not about a set of issues or problems; it's about a landscape you move into. . . . You inhabit this new set of relationships, this new set of perspectives. You see differently, you sense differently, you relate differently.²

In many ways this encapsulates my own story of reflective practice. New landscapes, new relationships, new perspectives.

For me, it began in the early 1980s when I left my career as a secondary science teacher to begin training for ordination through the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne. I decided to train at Ridley College, the more “low church” of the two colleges connected with the diocese. I discovered that alongside studies in biblical languages, Old and New Testament exegesis, church history, and systematic theology was a strange subject called theological reflection. The unit was led by the director of field education for the diocese, Dr Stephen Ames. Now, Stephen wasn't part of my tribe; yes, he was an Anglican, but he was one of those Anglicans from the nearby Anglo Catholic theological college.

* Richard Trist is Adjunct Lecturer in Professional Pastoral Supervision at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia. Email: {HYPERLINK "mailto:richard.trist@bigpond.com" \h}.

I quickly discovered, however, that theological reflection didn't fit into a particular theological box. God was bigger than that, and relationships with others from different perspectives — including students from “that college down the road” — were something to be valued as we were shaped and formed to serve as ministers in God's church. Stephen helped us to stretch past our labels and explore more deeply the impact of our placement experience on our theology and of our theology on our experience. New landscapes, new relationships, new perspectives.

Allied to this was my undertaking, in my final year, a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE). For some of “my tribe”, CPE was a bit theologically suspect, but I found it eminently worthwhile. It was challenging and at times confronting but it enabled me to understand who I was as a pastor in a clinical setting. In many ways it was reflective practice “on steroids” — 400 hours of hospital visiting, individual supervision, and group supervision — all compressed into 10 weeks. It gave me enhanced skills in becoming both a reflective and a reflexive practitioner.

After ordination came twenty years of church-based ministry in Melbourne and the United Kingdom. It was here that the rubber hit the road. Yes, I had learned about reflective practice at theological college and had been taught all the theories and various models. Although I did not always use the models in a formal way, somehow the seed of their importance grew within me. I was doing theological reflection *intuitively* and continuing to grow in self-awareness. As a pastor, I dutifully attended conferences and professional development courses and undertook some post-graduate study, but I knew that applying this knowledge was not just “plug and play”. I needed to adapt and contextualise my new learning to the new contexts in which I was called to serve. What did these particular people need in this particular place and time? New landscapes, new relationships, new perspectives.

Unfortunately, I didn't have an external reflective pastoral supervisor to help me with all this. Oh, if only I had known that such people existed! I did, however, engage with the other reflective disciplines — spiritual direction, coaching, mentoring and counselling. All were extremely useful and helped keep me afloat.

Then, in 2007 I came back to Ridley College as a part-time and then full-time theological educator. My initial job was to do what Stephen had done all those years ago — serve as director of field education. To help me in my new role, I was given two books. The first was a fat folder from my predecessor full of photocopied sheets on how to run a field education programme! This was helpful in a practical way but didn't really help me get to the heart of what supervised theological field education was all about. However, the second book hit the mark for me. It was a book published in 2006 titled *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: The Search for Integration in Theology*. A former lecturer had heard of my appointment and sent it to me to read. He inscribed it with these words:

Every blessing for your new ministry at the college. Theological Reflection is where a lot comes together for a student! John Paver, the author of this new book, is a wise and godly man — I'd strongly encourage you to meet him and learn!

Sadly, I didn't get to meet John, but I did get to join the organisation that he founded — the Victorian Association for Theological Field Education (VATFE), which was later to become ANZATFE and is now ARPTE! Here, I made a very important discovery: I wasn't alone. In this new landscape in which God had placed me, with so much new learning to do, feeling at times like a fish out of water, an imposter in the world of academia, there were others like me who could support me. I attended my first field education conference in 2007 and haven't missed a conference since. These biannual gatherings have been like gold to me in my journey of learning to be a reflective practitioner and in teaching others to do the same.

And now in my semi-retirement the journey continues. With the mandating by every Australian church denomination of regular external professional supervision for clergy and church workers, I have undertaken further postgraduate study in supervision and now do some lecturing in this area as well as act as a reflective supervisor for a number of clergy and church workers. New landscapes, new relationships, new perspectives.

Time for Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on how you became a reflective practitioner. Where have you experienced new landscapes, new relationships, new perspectives?

WHAT IS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

What do we mean by the term “reflective practice”? In her book *The Reflective Practice Guide*, Barbara Bassot invites us to consider the meaning of the word “reflection.” She observes that most people use the word to refer either to a mirror image (“I saw my reflection in the mirror”) or a state of deep thinking (“I took some time for reflection on what occurred”). Bassot proposes that both senses of the word are found in the process of reflective practice. It is like looking into a mirror to see our practice more clearly and then giving serious thought and consideration to what we see. She suggests the following definition of reflective practice as a useful starting point: “a systematic enquiry to improve and deepen our understanding of practice”.³

Let's unpack this definition. Firstly, reflective practice is *systematic*. It is a process we engage in intentionally rather than something haphazard and spasmodic. Many of us have done this by following the four-fold stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. We start with something that has occurred to us (concrete experience). Then we analyse what has occurred (reflective observation). We begin to generalise from the specific to the general (abstract conceptualisation). Finally, we apply what have learned to new situations (active experimentation).⁴ Another systematic approach is that proposed by Richard Osmer in his book *Practical Theology*. Osmer suggests four tasks and four questions for the ministry practitioner to consider as they reflect on their work. First, a descriptive-empirical task (“What is going on?”). Then, an interpretive task (“Why is it going on?”). Thirdly, a normative task (“What ought to be going on?”). And lastly, a pragmatic task (“How might we

respond?”).⁵ Although most of us do not necessarily move from one stage to the next every time, there is still something systematic in our reflection.

Secondly, reflective practice is an *enquiry* rather than just a cursory glance. For those of us who are disciples of Christ, it is a practice that we take seriously in our calling to serve God, the church, and the world. We are called to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2 NIV). As Peter Francis observes, “Theological Reflection ought to be an integral part of our reflective practice, since a failure to allow our theological convictions to guide and shape our actions runs the serious risk of rendering us as little more than ministry pragmatists.”⁶

Thirdly, reflective practice is *purposeful*. It is not just navel gazing but something that leads to a deepening and refining of practice. It is meant to help us know what to do in order to help us do it better.

Undergirding much of the theory of reflective practice is the work of Donald Schön in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*.⁷ For those of us involved in theological education, Schön’s book is not the first book we might turn to. It is very much focused on unpacking how his engineering, architecture, management, and town planning students have learnt in their placements. However, his thesis is foundational. Schön argues that people learn not just through the technical knowledge they acquire through formal teaching, books, etc.; they learn mostly through the technical excellence that they acquire through reflection. Reflection in action, on action, for action. Reflection in action is when, amid a ministry experience, we recognise that things may not be going the way we had planned and we quickly make an adjustment on the spot. Reflection on action happens when we take time after the event to more thoughtfully consider the issue. Reflection for action is when we look ahead to future actions, informed by what we have learnt.

In his writings, Schön wanted to upend current notions of how people learn. His challenge to accepted norms is sharp:

I’ve become convinced that universities are not devoted to the production and distribution of fundamental knowledge in general. There are institutions committed, for the most part, to a particular epistemology, a view of knowledge that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry.⁸

The best illustration I can think of is that of an iceberg with 90 percent of its mass concealed under the water. The 10 percent we see above the water are the things that we have learned from books, conferences and lectures — our explicit knowledge or “know-what”. But underneath the surface is our “know-how”. This is the implicit knowledge we have been learning from birth, including our experiences, skills, intuitions, and emotions. Schön suggests that much of formal education pays “selective inattention” to these ways of learning. Reflective practice is designed to help us explore and learn from these deeper parts within us.

Different Approaches to Reflective Practice

In order to explore the changing face of reflective practice within the church, it is useful to take a bird’s-eye view of the various ways that reflective practice is

approached. In a recent PhD thesis titled “Up Close and Professional: Integrative Reflection in Theory and in Practice”, Neil Millar suggests there are broadly four main approaches to reflective practice in the current literature. I find Millar’s categories very helpful, particularly in understanding the sort of reflective practice I was doing as a field education director and the sort of reflective practice I’m now doing as a professional pastoral supervisor.

Millar categorises the four broad approaches to reflective practice as instrumental, critical, imaginal, and ontological. His thesis is concerned to show how the integration of all these different approaches worked to improve the reflective capacity of a supervision group he was leading as a chaplain.⁹

Instrumental

The instrumental approaches to reflective practice are concerned with effectiveness in performance, placing an emphasis on problem solving by trying to link past action and effective future action. As such, they involve “single loop” learning leading to new technical and behavioural knowledge — the what, when, where, and how of action.¹⁰ The work of Kolb and Osmer are examples of this. Millar suggests that although such approaches are useful, they often fail to examine underlying personal frameworks of thinking and operating.

As I reflect on my work in field education, I recognize that I was primarily using this approach with my students. By the end of the semester, most had understood the process, but what happened when they left the seminary is an open question. Michael Paterson suggests that the reason some students flourish in reflective practice while others flounder — “why some make it while others fake it” — is partly because most students, as novice practitioners, “barely have the vocabulary, grammar, or syntax for the bi- if not trilingual conversations theological reflection demands and for which experienced practitioners are more equipped”.¹¹ They are like the Israelites in Egypt, building bricks without straw.¹²

Critical

The critical approaches are related to reflexivity and look at the “I” involved in an experience, not just the “it”. They involve “double loop” learning focussing on critical reflection on personal frameworks and hidden values and assumptions. It is important to know not just what we do and how we do it but also why we do what we do.

This was my experience during CPE. Its purpose was for me to dig deep within myself. Am I visiting this patient for them and their needs or am I more concerned with my own needs and discomforts? Millar suggests the challenge of this approach is that if used unwisely it can lead to undue inner dissonance and conflict.

Part of the rationale for the recent mandating of professional supervision for clergy and church workers in Australia is to help them engage in deeper, more critical reflexivity. In the light of historical cases of child sex abuse, the church has

affirmed the normative role of supervision to help church workers recognise their blind spots and develop greater ethical maturity.¹³

Imaginal

The imaginal approaches move beyond critical reflexivity and the rational to include the inner world of experience. They position the reflective practitioner within themselves and in the world of intuition, images, feelings, and memories. They explore what the inner voice might be saying through the use of embodied practices and work with metaphors and symbols. Such approaches often utilise the voices and intuitions of others. As Parker Palmer observed, “The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company”.¹⁴

I have a growing appreciation for these approaches, particularly in group supervision. I now use a mix of formats, including focussed discussions and traditional verbatims on critical incidents but also creative modalities that encourage people to express the issue using artwork or objects. I think of the Old Testament prophets’ use of symbols and Jesus’ use of parables to open up fresh understandings and get beneath the surface. I have seen new insights emerge by allowing the imagination to reveal deeper thoughts and intuitions.

Ontological

The ontological approaches focus on spiritual practices to help practitioners grow in practical wisdom and professional identity. They focus less on doing and more on being, on who we are rather than what we do. Most theological colleges recognise the importance of this sort of ministry formation and offer chapel services and prayer triplets to help shape their students. The challenge for many institutions is to know how to foster this for the growing number of part-time and online students.

Scottish writer Michael Paterson extends Millar’s categories and argues for reflective practice to be not just an event that happens in the classroom or in a supervision group but rather an attitudinal stance, a way of being in the world. He suggests a fifth approach called *missional* reflective practice: “Whatever the field of practice, the practitioner’s gifts have been entrusted to them, not for themselves but for the service of others. . . . How are the practitioner’s gifts being given away?”¹⁵

Time for Reflection

Consider your own ways of doing reflective practice. How do they relate to the categories above? Are there new approaches you might explore?

THE CHANGING FACE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In this final section, I want to outline briefly some changes that are impacting reflective practice in the church and in theological education. I am conscious that these are particularly pertinent to the Australian context, and I invite the reader to consider what they might look like in your own situation.

The Mandating of Professional Supervision

In 2017 the Australian Federal Government released a report on the responses of various institutions, including churches, to child sexual abuse. The report recommended that, to be effective and faithful to their calling, ministers of religion needed oversight “with a trained professional or pastoral supervisor who has a degree of independence from the institution within which the person is in ministry”.¹⁶ Such accountability was not meant to be to the person’s boss, such as a bishop or board of management, but rather to the ethical and theological frameworks in which the work or ministry was being undertaken.

Rather than reflective practice being undertaken haphazardly or occasionally, it is now to be intentional and conducted on a regular basis. Most denominations have accepted this, and although it is only a recommendation, not a requirement, they have seen its value from an ethical as well as a missional perspective. The discipline of spending structured, intentional time reflecting on experiences past for the sake of a better future has always been seen as essential in Christian ministry. Likewise, the idea of doing such reflecting with another is not new. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17 NIV). However, professional supervision is increasingly being recognised as beneficial, particularly its ability to bring clarity and focus from different viewpoints.

Professional supervision for church workers is fast becoming the norm. Although there has been some resistance, it has been largely welcomed by clergy as a necessary support for their ministry. A survey of clergy undertaken in the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle included the following responses regarding professional supervision:

[It] has helped me to ‘stand back’, see the big picture; [it] has helped me to deal with difficult situations and people . . . provided a sounding board and reassurance I am doing OK!

[It has] given me tools for a different approach. Helped me to grow personally and professionally. One cannot harbor self-delusions, arrogance, theological infallibility . . . when one allows oneself to be subject to the insightful scrutiny of another.¹⁷

Growth in the Accreditation of Professional Supervisors

As a result of denominations across the country mandating professional supervision, the need for external professional supervisors has exploded. This has led to a growth in accredited training courses at a graduate level. When I did my formal training in 2015, there were two options for pastoral supervision training: St Mark’s National Theological Centre and an organisation called Transforming Practices. Now, in addition to these, programs are being offered at the University of Divinity, Australian University of Theology, Alphacrucis University College, Heart of Life Centre for Pastoral and Spiritual Formation, Sydney College of Divinity, and the UK-based Institute of Pastoral Supervision & Reflective Practice. In New Zealand, where a royal commission has made a similar recommendation as that in Australia, Laidlaw College is running a program. Courses range from a graduate certificate to a

master's degree. Training in supervision has moved from a niche offering to mainstream.

Growth in the Number of Professional Supervisors

All this has led to a rapid growth in the number of trained and accredited supervisors. In 2021, the main accrediting body, the Australian Association of Supervisors (AAOS), had 191 members. In 2024, this had doubled to 382. The Professional Pastoral Supervision Network with which I am involved commenced in 2020 as a group of ten people wanting to focus on pastoral rather than clinical supervision. It now has over 230 members, with 55 people joining in 2024. All this is good news for the church due to further opportunities for reflective practice for pastors. It also means that there are more trained pastoral supervisors able to offer good reflective supervision to theological students when they go into placements.

Growth in the Location of Reflective Practice within Christian Theology

As reflective practice matures as a discipline and way of being within the church, there has been an increased desire to locate its theoretical underpinnings not in secular understandings but in Christian theology and church tradition.

In the Australian context, we can give credit to St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra for its pioneering work in this regard. Geoff Broughton's groundbreaking book *A Practical Christology for Pastoral Supervision* has added theological depth for those training to be reflective supervisors. He calls for a rigorous grounding of reflective practice particularly the role of the pastoral supervisor, within the story of faith:

The faithful practice of clergy and church workers is secured and shaped by an identity in Christ — not out of sight, out of mind. The light and love of God-in-Christ redeems the isolation of busy clergy and the insecurity of burnt-out church workers. The telos (faithful practice) of church workers and clergy is found in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

Increasing Recognition of the Importance of Reflective Practice for Mental Health

We live in challenging times. It has been suggested that there are at least five dangers facing Christian leaders today: burning out (busyness and overcommitment), dropping out (it all gets too hard), levelling out (plateauing in faith and ceasing to grow), falling out (the leader succumbs to moral failure and has to leave the ministry), and spreading out (lack of focus and forgetting their original calling).¹⁹

I would estimate that about half of my reflective supervision sessions focus on these issues, especially on clergy overworking and trying to do too much. Many are in danger of losing their souls within their roles. A recent study from Macquarie University of 277 ministry workers indicated a positive relationship between self-insight and well-being and resilience.

Those who engage in less self-reflection report lower well-being in conditions of high stress frequency. Ministry workers, who are frequently under high levels of stress, are expected to benefit from developing self-reflection skills, be that individually or supported by others, such as coaching or supervision arrangements. Beyond the training they might currently receive at theological institutions on ministry practice, training specific to self-reflection and self-insight to gain greater sophistication in their use of coping methods is expected to strengthen resilience and build well-being.²⁰

As I reflect on my own theological training, as well as my early years of ministry, I notice there was much attention given to training us in church growth and outreach but little on the self-care needed to help accomplish it. It was burn out or rust out. With so much clergy attrition, recognising the importance of good mental health and the role of reflective practice in greater resilience is vital.

Joys and Challenges in the Use of Technology

The Covid-19 pandemic turned our worlds upside down and accelerated the use of technology in most professions, certainly in the world of reflective practice. There was a time when I would have thought that of all the units in our theological colleges that ought to be taught face to face, it would have to be reflective practice. Yet in my current work at Ridley College assisting with the graduate certificate in professional pastoral supervision, I have seen how valuable it can be to use Zoom alongside face-to-face teaching. In my own reflective supervision practice, most of my meetings are done on Zoom, and although the experience is different from meeting face to face, we can still achieve our goal of having a “systematic enquiry to improve and deepen our understanding of practice”.

Yet still there are questions to be explored as technology continues to develop. Broughton asks:

How can supervisors and supervisees weave a conversation rather than simply taking turns? If what is visible is only what the supervisee presents (or allows to be seen), will Zoom be ‘enough’ over the long term? What will be the ‘unintended consequences’ of supervising online? . . . As technology allows for different ways of communication and connection, what needs to evolve in us? Who are supervisors and supervisees becoming in this new space?²¹

As great as the joys of technology may be, there are challenges to consider as well.

Time for Reflection

What I have tried to explore in this article are some of the new horizons and changing landscapes of reflective practice in the church today. I wonder what role you might play in the development of reflective practice in the church into the future. What new things are you noticing? What excites you about this work? What could be your next step?

NOTES

¹ This article is based on an address given at the first conference of the Association for Reflective Practice in Theological Education held in Adelaide, Australia, in November 2024. The conference organisers asked that each speaker include time for reflective practice within the talk itself. Readers of this article are encouraged to pause after each section for a time of personal reflection.

² Benjamin Wayman, "Rowan Williams: Theological Education Is for Everyone," *Christianity Today*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2020/08/rowan-williams-theological-education-for-everyone/>.

³ Barbara Bassot, *The Reflective Practice Guide: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Critical Reflection* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

⁴ See Bassot, *Reflective Practice Guide*, 43–44.

⁵ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). Ian Hussey commends a fifth task which he calls the correlative ("Where is the common ground?") to ensure effective dialogue between all the different stages. See Ian Hussey, "What Is Theological Reflection and How Is It Done?" in *Ministry in Context: A Guide to Theological Field Education and Ministry Internships in Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Richard Trist (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 138–54.

⁶ Peter Francis, "Developing Genuinely Reflective Ministry Practitioners", in *Theological Education: Foundations, Practices, and Future Directions*, ed. Andrew M. Bain and Ian Hussey (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 94.

⁷ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 1991).

⁸ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, vii.

⁹ Neil Roderick Millar, "Up Close and Professional: Integrative Reflection in Theory and in Practice" (PhD thesis, University of Canberra, 2018).

¹⁰ For a useful description of single and double loop learning, see Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill, *Facilitating Reflective Learning through Mentoring and Coaching* (London: Kogan Page, 2006), 33–36.

¹¹ Michael Paterson, "Discipled by Praxis: Soul and Role in Context", *Practical Theology* 12, no. 1 (2019), 13.

¹² See Stephen Pattison, "Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection," *Practical Theology* 99, no. 1 (1989), 2–9.

¹³ For a discussion of pastoral supervision in Australia, see Geoff Broughton, *A Practical Christology for Pastoral Supervision* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 7–18.

¹⁴ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 26.

¹⁵ Michael Paterson, "Discipled by Praxis", 7–19.

¹⁶ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions, Volume 16, Book 1* (Barton: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), recommendation 16.45.

¹⁷ Personal correspondence of the author with the Diocese of Newcastle concerning the Professional Supervision and Spiritual Direction Survey of 39 clergy undertaken in 2013.

¹⁸ Broughton, *A Practical Christology*, 15.

¹⁹ James Lawrence, *Growing Leaders: Reflections on Leadership, Life and Jesus* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2004), 48–49.

²⁰ Kirsty Bucknell, “The Roles of Self-Reflection, Self-Insight, and Religious Coping in the Resilience and Well-Being of Australian Protestant Ministry Workers”, unpublished report, Macquarie University, 2019, 4.

²¹ Broughton, *A Practical Christology*, 139.