

Pastoral Supervision.

A doorway to life giving ministry.

As soon many hear the word, 'Supervision' images of Sargent Shultz from Hogan's Heroes looking over one's shoulder could come to mind. Many cringe at the word! Others have an image of some Psychologist resplendent in white coat, sitting with clip board in hand and tickling us with an constant mantra of 'Ummmmmmmm!' or as if in meditation 'Ommmmmm!' Others still fear an endless cave where one's deepest, darkest secrets are laid bare to be sent by private courier to some Vatican Office where one's file grows ever larger under the label, "Never to be given a skull cap!"

Whatever which image above comes anywhere close to your perception, the reality is that all of them are far from the truth of pastoral mentoring, accompaniment or supervision. Increasingly within Church circles we are using the term pastoral supervision. Pastoral because the focus is primarily on our **PASTORAL PRACTICE** and secondly the role of the professional you are working with is to supervise you and to lead you to discover, own and celebrate your own pastoral wisdom. Supervise in this context is NOT a learning over one's shoulder but rather **a professional 'walking beside' or mentoring**. So for the purpose of this reflection we will use the term Pastoral Supervision.

What Pastoral Supervision (PS) is NOT

PS is NOT counselling. Counselling is a professional intervention that will assist someone engage with blocks in their life, past hurt, present trauma and a litany of other aspects that make up our shadow. While there may be times during PS when aspects of our shadow come into play the primary focus of PS is not these aspects but rather making our pastoral practice more effective and our lives more whole.

PS is NOT spiritual direction / accompaniment. We may be struggling with our prayer life (welcome to the human family), we may be doubting our vocational call, or we may be discerning a new appointment in our ministry. All of these are part of our lives as pastors but they are **NOT** the work of Pastoral Supervision – these issues are at home in Spiritual Direction.

PS is NOT coaching. Coaching is when, as part of our pastoral practice, we seek to gain or refine a professional skill. We may seek coaching around how to give a better homily, or run a parish planned giving campaign or gain skills in dealing with the stages of grief. All of these are wonderful aspects of our ministry and from time to time we need to grow our pastoral professional skills. This is where a coach may be very helpful. Again, in the Pastoral Supervision space the need for some coaching in a particular field may be identified but the actual 'coaching' of this skills is not part of PS.

So what is Pastoral Supervision?

There are many definitions as to what PS is. For the purpose of this reflection we will name it as;

“A space of professional walking with a pastor to enable and enhance more effective pastoral practice.”

So in this space:

- a) PS is a ‘walking with’ – it is accompanying the person on their pastoral journey. The role of the pastoral supervisor is that of a professional listener bringing their skills to help the ‘client’ identify patterns, gaps, reactions, blocks and more that are limiting your pastoral effectiveness.
- b) The key role of the supervisor is to work with the client in such a way that THEY tap into their already present wisdom as regards the pastoral issue they are identifying. Through open ended questions, the identification of patterns, examination of what ‘has worked’ and more, the real nature of the block or issue is identified.
- c) The PS space is confidential. What is shared is between the pastor and the professional accompanying them.

Pastoral Supervision is highly personal. When the pastor comes into this space they do so with their own unique personality, skills and context. The role of the professional is to create a space / forum where someone else is totally focussed on you and your pastoral professional story and situation. The role of the professional will often be to hold a mirror up to your pastoral experience to reflect what is happening to you. The professional helps you clear the image in your mirror and will do so in a supportive but sometimes challenging way. You know that PS is NOT working when the professional is doing all the talking.

One of the ‘skills’ that leads to effective pastoral supervision is the skill of becoming ‘aware’ during your daily pastoral practice of questions and issues that are arising. Everyone has their own practice here. One priest keeps a small notebook in the console between the drivers and passenger’s seat. Others have developed the skill of noting and then ‘filing’ the question / issue at the back of their heads. Whatever method is most effective for the pastor is what will work. But one cannot underestimate the power and the value of doing this homework – of bringing ‘real’ and relevant issues to this professional space. Our clergy are busy men with great pressures upon them. The last thing they need is to be turning up for pastoral supervision because they ‘have to’ and the issue they raise is not real.

The power and effectiveness of Pastoral Supervision is linked intimately to the reality of the issues that one brings into the PS professional space!

One image that comes to mind in an Australian context is that of a Cricket Snikko – that small infra-ray mark when the ball touches the bat or glove on its way through to the keeper. In our pastoral practice we become aware of those small ‘blips’ linked to our pastoral practice.

- How do I get a more effective power dynamic within the Parish Council?
- I seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time in meetings?

- What is going on that I appear to be 'blocked' out of the local parish primary school?

The PS Space

So what happens in a typical Pastoral Supervision session? The rhythm of this pastoral professional space is quite simple.

1. The session will begin with a **touching base** and to see how you have been since you last met.
2. Often there will be a **re-visiting of the issue** you shared about last time and seeing how the strategies you collectively came up with are going. This works on the premise that even if something does not appear to be working that in itself, is good data to refine your strategy.
3. Then the pastor raises their question / block / pastoral issue that they wish to explore.
4. The pastoral supervisor uses their skills to help the pastor **break open the issue** or question further. The aim is for the pastor to grow in insight. The dialogue is aimed at creating a clearer picture of what is going on and why. The hope is that the dialogue will lead the pastor to identify their own skills in this area and how they can more effectively engage.
5. Every professional pastoral supervisor will use their own techniques in this dynamic. I continually write notes, draw diagrams and identify key words and phrases shared. I continually show these notes to the pastor I am meeting with. I am professionally listening for the 'throwaway line', the instances of deeper energy in what is said, possible red herrings and more. At the end of the session I copy the notes and give my client the original and they often refer to them in-between sessions.
6. Once the real issue has been identified and **some ways of more effectively engaging** with it are identified the session begins to come towards a conclusion. The pastoral supervisor will help the pastor identify some **small practical steps** they might engage with over the coming weeks.
7. This material will then become the **homework** that the pastor will engage in and bring the result to the next session.
8. The session concludes with an identification of the date for the next session and the **expression of appreciation** and a checking in as to how they are feeling.

You know PS is working for you when you are feeling more empowered, more insightful, less reactive and better able to pastorally / professionally walk with the people of God.

Insights:

PS like all 'new' aspects of life requires the acquisition of some new skills. It may take two or three sessions before you feel 'at home' in the PS space, but you will. Many pastoral supervisors will, after the second or third session with you, re-negotiate as to whether you wish to continue the professional relationship. Not everybody is everybody's 'cup of tea'. You may just not feel 'at home' with this particular person. Some people like to work with a female pastoral supervisor, some people like to engage with someone who knows Church

life and mission while others like someone completely 'outside' of the faith community. All of these aspects, while important, are simply matters of personal preference and you need to claim your wisdom in this space.

Practicalities:

- a. **Frequency**: Ideally PS takes place once a month. Often if you go longer than a month you may lose touch with the presenting issue or you find you have too many issues to engage with. However – monthly is simply a guide. Some pastors I have worked with alternate Spiritual Direction one month and then PS the next. As with all the other aspects of PS identified above – the key is whatever works for you.
- b. **SKYPE / ZOOM**: You may be ministering in a faith community which is quite isolated. A ZOOM or SKYPE PS session can be quite effective with a professional somewhere else in Australia. While this can work quite well my own personal experience is that once or twice a year (when the pastor is 'in town') it is good to catch up for a face to face PS session.
- c. **Who to approach**: The key for Pastoral Supervision lays in the skill set of the supervisor – and their heart and mindset of wishing to be in this pastoral professional relationship. Most Pastoral Supervisors belong to a Professional Association. Social Workers, counsellors, psychologists and some other pastoral professionals are especially equipped to offer the needed professional skills.
- d. **Time and cost**: The PS session would normally go for one hour. The cost of the session will depend upon the professional status of the Pastoral Supervisor but would normally vary between \$90 and \$120 an hour. Some dioceses include this costing in their pastoral Professional Standards support for the pastors.

Like many 'new things' in our lives there will be an initial concern, awkwardness and perhaps level of anxiety associated with the PS space. This is quite natural and normal. While engagement with PS is becoming a professional requirement of those in helping professions it would be wonderful if we did not approach PS as something we 'had' to do. If you approach it with an open mind, bring 'real' issues to the space and trust yourself within the dynamic you will find that you are looking forward to your next visit.

Network:

More and more our pastors can feel isolated and alone in an ever increasingly complex ministry and world. Pastoral Supervision, Spiritual Direction, our confidants and the brotherhood of the priesthood are all ways to ensure that we know and feel that we are part of a vibrant community of faith and care walking 'in the footsteps of the master'!