

“Supervision as a Means of Grace”
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Introduction

This paper grows out of a need and a conviction. The *need* is for a clear articulation of a theology of supervision that informs the church’s practice; supervisory relationships that are exemplified by trust; and a shift in the paradigm of supervision from a form of management that is external to ministry to a practice that is integral to the continual formation of leaders who are growing in holiness of heart and life. The *conviction* is that these changes would emerge from a theology and practice of supervision that is consistent with a Wesleyan understanding of sanctifying grace. Supervision can be a way of “watching over one another in love.”

My purpose here is not to provide answers but to describe some of the current assumptions and realities in supervision, to identify key supervisory issues that must be confronted, and to lift up for the reader’s consideration what I see as possibilities for a practice of supervision that can enable the church to more fully, authentically, and joyfully serve the mission of God.

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), one of several agencies created by the General Conference, is charged with specific duties related to ministry and higher education. The 2004 General Conference commissioned the GBHEM to undertake a study of ministry to bring clarity to the denomination’s ordering of ministry

and shared life together.¹ A Ministry Study Commission was formed to assume this task and to report back at the 2008 General Conference.

In January 2007, a draft of the Study Commission's report was made available online with a survey inviting feedback on the Commission's proposed recommendations. One of those recommendations would make peer supervision a requirement for all deacons and itinerant elders. The recommendation reads as follows: "All deacons and itinerant elders shall be reviewed by a group of peers selected from within their respective annual conference orders in every fifth year under appointment. This review shall be included among the responsibilities of an elder in full connection as stated in ¶334.2, and among the responsibilities of a deacon in full connection as stated in ¶329."² The Commission's recommendation and the survey findings shed light on issues of supervision and are relevant to the purpose of this paper. I will share some of the survey findings below as a way of framing the issues.

The survey responses to this recommendation are revealing even if not surprising. The survey reports that a large percentage (44% or 355 of the 1020 respondents) thought this recommendation for peer review would strengthen the connection. (It is interesting to note that the laity responded most favorably to this recommendation.)³ Of the total number of respondents, 31% (311) made a comment about the recommendation for peer review.

¹ "Purpose Statement," Study of Ministry Commission, 2004-2008; available the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry website at www.gbhem.org.

² Michelle Fugate, "Final Survey Findings of the Study of Ministry Commission II Draft Report," (January 9, 2007-February 26, 2007), 68.

³ *Ibid.*, 71-72

With few exceptions those who commented did not view “peer review” as an opportunity to improve their own ministry. They saw peer review as a way to respond to problems with other clergy, not a way to increase their own effectiveness.⁴ Even while acknowledging that the Commission’s intent was not to *evaluate* performance, many respondents called for a way of “getting rid of” chronically ineffective pastors.⁵ Several respondents commented that peer review would not work because it does not have “teeth.” These respondents expressed the need for consequences to a “peer review.”

Many comments reflected a lack of trust. Great concern was expressed about the authority and power that would be granted to those involved in a peer review process. Fear of misuse of the peer review was widespread, and questions were raised about how the process would relate to appointment-making.⁶

Respondents also raised questions about the make-up of the review teams (some said laity should be included; others said persons in the same Order should review their peers; others said differences such as urban/rural and conservative/liberal should be taken into account,⁷ (lest one be subject to a reviewer who does not understand one’s context for ministry or appreciate one’s theological position).

⁴ Ibid., 71

⁵ Ibid., 71-72

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

A fairly commonly expressed concern was that a peer review process would take an inordinate amount of time from ministry.⁸ Other respondents stated that peer review should be voluntary and optional. Legislating or mandating such a process would be problematic.⁹

The survey noted that while some clergy responded positively to the recommendation for peer review, comments like the following were rare: “This is one of the most exciting suggestions of this commission. As an elder, I would appreciate the review of peers and their suggestions. I appreciate that this is not a performance review but a way of improving my effectiveness in ministry. I wish we could implement this recommendation tomorrow!”¹⁰

These survey findings represent a small sample of responses to a very specific recommendation about peer review, yet they seem to reflect assumptions that are consistent with those expressed in comments and reports from colleges of bishops, district superintendents, Boards of Ordained Ministry, and ministry candidates about supervision and accountability.

The Commission’s recommendation is itself revealing. The recommendation appears to be an attempt to establish some kind of structure for support and accountability (albeit not a performance evaluation). Yet, the recommendation may unintentionally reflect a similar assumption to the one expressed by respondents— that the review process is a

⁸ Ibid., 72

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Ibid.

way of addressing problems with clergy. In any case, both the Commission's recommendation and the responses to it depict a community that is struggling with the need and desire to be accountable while at the same time expressing resistance and skepticism about engaging itself in such a process.

In light of this picture, the suggestion that supervision can function as a means of grace is a radical proposition indeed! Before I attempt to make that case, I will identify and describe what I see as three key underlying issues that contribute to the fear and resistance that surfaces when we speak about supervision (whether that be the supervision of a pastor by a district superintendent, the examination of a ministry candidate by the Board of Ordained Ministry, or peer review among colleagues). Acknowledging the legitimacy of these issues and the resulting tensions and identifying their source are necessary steps toward restoring supervision to its proper place within the church's community life and mission.

Key Issues for Supervision

Trust

The first issue, and perhaps the most obvious, is the mistrust that surrounds supervision for both those who are supervisors and those who are supervised. For many the word supervision conjures up feelings of defensiveness and resistance. It carries a connotation of being coerced by an outside authority to do something one would not do of one's own accord. It is associated with judgments and directives by observers or onlookers and with

relationships that are more adversarial than supportive in nature.¹¹ Persons holding this view point to supervisory experiences that have been disrespectful, harmful, and unsupportive.

On the other side, the perception of many clergy and laity is that supervision is a necessary but neglected practice in the church. Persons holding this view point to chronically ineffective clergy, guaranteed appointment, and evaluation processes that have no consequences as the problem. They view supervision as an underutilized means of managing ineffective clergy.

Issues of trust are apparent in the *tension* that manifests itself in both desiring and resisting supervision at the same time—of wanting the fruits of supervision on the one hand, but being suspicious of the practice on the other; of recognizing the need for accountability (even if only for others!) but resisting the discipline that accountability would require; of seeing the possibilities for an intentional practice of supervision, but being skeptical about the competencies of those who would carry it out; of wanting more “teeth” while appearing to be afraid of whatever “teeth” there are; of desiring trust yet being wary about the trust that is assumed in the supervisory relationship.

Acknowledging the legitimacy of these concerns and systematically and intentionally addressing the issues that have contributed to the creation of a culture in which mistrust is pervasive and deep, is crucial and urgent for the church’s identity, credibility, and mission.

¹¹ Kenneth H. Pohly, “The Purpose and Function of Supervision in Ministry” (paper presented to the DMin Intensive Seminar, United Theological Society, Dayton, Ohio, February 12, 1981; revised 2004), 1-2.

Authority

A second issue that surfaces regularly in the practice of supervision relates to the exercise of authority. The survey responses seem to point to a desire and a need for structures and relationships of support and accountability. At the same time there is skepticism reflected in the comments about the structures and the persons that hold power and authority. Who has authority? How is it to be exercised in supervisory relationships? What are its limits? What theological assumptions inform the supervisor's exercise of authority? What are our shared understandings about the goal and purpose of supervision? To what end does the church confer authority? What are our shared understandings about the different roles and responsibilities within the church and what authority is granted with these functions? These are just a few of the questions that lie below the surface of the apparent resistance to supervision.

These questions regarding authority cannot be addressed apart from a consideration of the church's theology and polity. The church's theology and polity have significant implications for how it confers and practices supervisory authority. Our Methodist polity creates supervisory relationships in which authority is asymmetrical. The exercise of authority in these asymmetrical relationships appears to be a major factor contributing to the suspicion and fear that characterizes current attitudes about supervision. Gaining clarity about the purpose of authority and the appropriate exercise of authority within a community that is both hierarchical and covenantal is critical for the church's ministry of supervision.

Status of Supervision

The third issue, and perhaps the one that is the least noticed, has to do with the status of supervision in the church's life and ministry. Comments from the survey and observation of current practices of supervision strongly suggest that supervision is viewed as ancillary to ministry. Whether persons think there is too much or too little supervision in the church, whether they judge it to be practiced well or poorly, our practice reflects an assumption that supervision has little to do with the continuing formation of persons or with growth in ministry effectiveness, rather it is something that has to be done either to satisfy an external requirement or to manage personnel. In either case, supervision is set over and against ministry. In other words, it is viewed not as ministry but as a way of getting real ministry done,¹² as a way of managing personnel.

Although it may not have been intended, the Ministry Study Commission's recommendation for peer review every *five* years reflects an assumption that supervision is ancillary to ministry. Peer review, every five years, without an intentional program of supervision during the years prior to the review, implies a "problem solving" approach to supervision. A recommendation for an ongoing process of peer supervision would convey an understanding of supervision that is integral to a continual process of formation.

Do the Commission members view supervision *as ministry*? Do they see it as integral and formative for those called to serve as elders and deacons? Or does their recommendation,

¹² Kenneth Pohly, *Transforming the Rough Places: The Ministry of Supervision* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2001), 108.

insofar as it calls for peer review every five years, reflect assumptions similar to those expressed by the survey respondents? The distinction is a very important one not only for the purposes of the specific recommendation but also for the way supervision is viewed and practiced in the church.

Need for Theological Reflection

Theological reflection on the church's practice of supervision is urgently needed to address the issues of trust, authority and the status of supervision in the church's life and ministry. A faithful and effective ministry of supervision must be grounded in our beliefs about God, the mission of the church, and the nature of ministry. The suspicion and confusion that surround supervision in the church is due in large part to a lack of theological grounding of our practice. Without a clear articulation of our theology of supervision there is no basis upon which to establish a direction and purpose for our practice; there is no standard for examining our faithfulness and effectiveness. Without a sense of purpose it is not possible to have shared priorities and goals or to establish trusting relationships for accountability and support.

Wesley's understanding of sanctification is a place to begin theological reflection on the practice of supervision. What would a practice of supervision look like if it were aligned with a theology of sanctification? How might such a practice enable persons and communities to embody more fully the image of God?

The following is an invitation to the reader to think with me further about how an understanding of supervision rooted in a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification might change current perceptions and practices. It is an attempt to provoke a conversation about an area of theology and practice that must be engaged thoughtfully and systematically if the church is to move beyond attempts at “quick fixes” (legislation, exit procedures that truncated from ongoing processes of supervision, number goals that are set apart from serious reflection about God’s mission, etc.). As a way of beginning this conversation I will identify theological assumptions that I understand to be consistent with a Wesleyan understanding of sanctifying grace and invite us to consider what implications these might have for new thinking and new practices in supervision. What new possibilities open up to us when supervision is built on this theological premise?

A Journey into Perfect Love

Wesley spoke about salvation as a continual and progressive process of transformation brought about through God’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. The *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* describes our Wesleyan belief in sanctification and perfection: “We hold that the wonder of God’s acceptance and pardon does not end God’s saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.”¹³ Theodore Runyon captures the purpose and goal of this dynamic process when he says, “God not only justifies, thereby providing the foundation for the new life, but opens up hitherto unimaginable possibilities for *growth* in

¹³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church—2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), ¶101, 47.

grace. God's goal is to *create us anew, to transform us, to restore us to health and to our role as the image of God.*"¹⁴

The dynamic nature of God's saving work is an important concept for rethinking the practice of supervision in the church. According to Wesley, sanctification is a process of growth in love; The New Testament term "perfection" is *teleios*; the word implies continuing growth toward completeness. The Romans used the word *finis* which carries the more static connotation of an "ended" state. "The qualitative distinction between *teleios* and *finis* is particularly important for discerning Wesley's conception of Christian perfection; a *finis* concept of perfection would make it a final attainment, not subject to further improvement, while *teleios* (the New Testament concept of perfection) makes continued growth an aspect of perfection. For the Wesleys to speak of perfection in the New Testament sense was not to claim perfect performance or "having arrived" as spotless believers . . . Completeness in the sense of *teleios* is not a static conception; it is completeness with reference to a specific goal (e.g., restitution of the *imago Dei* or being filled with *agape*)".¹⁵

Sanctification is a gradual process of growth in love brought about through God's transforming and saving work in us and our response to God's gracious action in our lives. In speaking about Wesley's understanding of the role of the means of grace in nurturing persons in the way of salvation, Randy Maddox states: "Wesley considered

¹⁴ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 83-84.

¹⁵ John Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification: a Biographical Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 165.

present human salvation to be fundamentally a gradual therapeutic process that grows out of our responsive participation in God’s forgiving and empowering grace. In its most normative sense, salvation appears neither unilaterally nor spontaneously in our lives: it must be progressively empowered and responsibly nurtured along the Way of Salvation.”¹⁶

If sanctification is a gradual and life-long process in which we are being continually transformed into the likeness of Christ, then supervision rooted in this theological assumption would be characterized by attentiveness to identity formation, patience with the process of growth, and intentional relationships, structures, and disciplines that support this process.

In his paper entitled “The Soul of Pastoral Supervision”, Kenneth Pohly reminds us that “Simon did not become Peter in one isolated encounter with his pastoral mentor and guide. Jesus’ way of working with this raw material so that it might become shaped into a gem is a good model for us.”¹⁷ Pohly reflects in more detail on what I will briefly describe here as Simon Peter’s gradual formation. It is a way of illustrating how Jesus helped Simon to see, to learn, and to grow in love through a gradual process. It provides a model for our practice of supervision as a means of sanctifying grace.

First Jesus called Simon by name: “So you are Simon, son of John.” (Jn.1:42a) In his first encounter with him, Jesus acknowledged Simon’s individual identity and directed

¹⁶ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 192.

¹⁷ Kenneth H. Pohly, “The Soul of Supervision” addressed to the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy, (March 20, 2003), 14.

his complete attention to him. Jesus took the first step in developing a relationship with Simon by reaching out to him. Jesus *saw* Simon!

Then Jesus gave Simon a new name: “You are to be called ‘Cephas’ which is translated ‘Peter.’” (Jn.1:42b) In this act of naming, Jesus called forth something more from Simon Peter. He expanded his self identity and opened up new possibilities that Simon didn’t know existed. Simon Peter did not immediately comprehend the meaning of his new name, but he would come to know more and more as lived and learned with Jesus.

The journey continued as Jesus called Simon from his familiar occupation and surroundings. Simon responded by leaving his nets and following Jesus (Mk 1:18) into uncharted waters. “This, of course, was just the beginning; that’s what conversions are: beginnings. Out ahead of Simon were many other awakenings as Simon Peter came under the influence of this strong mentor and a small group of peers.”¹⁸

“Conversions are sometimes sudden, sometimes gradual. Simon awakened slowly, and it came partly through the hard learning of negative life experience marked by frequent correction. It was with such confrontations that Jesus tapped the inner character that helped this person find strength in the midst of weakness, to rise up each time he fell, to learn the meaning of discipleship in the face of failure, and to come finally to spiritual identity. Of course, concurrent with these events, Simon also sat at Jesus’ feet for instruction, benefited from his preaching, shared times of prayer, and enjoyed the exhilaration of being trusted with responsibility. . . He had not arrived at perfection. Some of the experiences of awakening were still ahead of him, but the identity shift was on.”¹⁹

A model of supervision informed by Jesus’ supervisory relationship with Peter would be characterized by care for whole persons and by patience with the process of growth. It

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

would shift the goal from the more static notion of *finis*, which focuses primarily on outcomes or on “getting it right”, to an ever deepening love of God and neighbor that is expressed through an ever increasing capacity to reflect God’s image. Supervisor and supervisee would see themselves as co-participants with God in a continual process of transformation in which God’s image is being perfected in them. Supervision would take place within the realm of God’s saving grace in which God “watches over us” (supervises us!) as we watch over one another in love.

Growth in Holiness is Expressed in Real Change

For Wesley love is visible, incarnated, embodied. Growth in love implies real change in our thinking and acting. “The experience of God’s saving grace results in a life of holy living, a life in which the believer grows into the likeness of Christ. In other words, *faith is inherently fruit bearing.*”²⁰ According to Wesley, true faith is expressed in love of God and neighbor. “...as strongly as he stressed faith as the foundation of the Christian life, he was equally intent upon love as the fruition of that life. Faith is not an end in itself, but rather a necessary means. Faith is in order to love.... The genius of the gospel in [Wesley’s] eyes is its power to generate a faith that impels the believer to the quality of love that *works* for righteousness.”²¹

For Wesley, salvation does not consist of giving mental or verbal assent to a set of doctrines or beliefs. Rather, it is a process of transformation that leads to outward expressions of love. A pervasive feature of Wesley’s thought is that “love must be

²⁰ Gwen Purushotham, *Watching Over One Another in Love: A Wesleyan Model for Ministry Assessment* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2007), 6.

²¹ Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1964), 221.

active; it is something which is done. There can be no “inward” love without a corresponding change in one’s active relationship with God and neighbor.”²²

Making love visible and concrete is the means and the end of supervision. But how is this change brought about? Growth in the Spirit and in ministry competence does not happen automatically. Formation is an ongoing process which requires an intentional approach to reflecting on how God is present in the people and events of life. “Simply wanting to love does not make it happen. We cannot simply decide that from now on we will be loving. Our growth in love is a life-long learning process of developing new ways of listening and acting.”²³

Supervision consists of a discipline and a relationship in which persons engage in order to increase in ministry competence and to grow into the likeness of Christ. It assumes that growth and faithfulness and competence do not happen automatically or accidentally but require intentional and regular reflection on their action in light of the gospel.

Supervision assists persons in moving from simply wanting to love to acting in ways that reflect the image of God by asking them to make connections between theology and practice. Supervision creates a gracious space for learning and growth and helps us to see with the help of others where we have acted in ways that are congruent or incongruent with a life of love.

²² Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: scarecrow Press, 1992), 4.

²³ Roberta Bondi, *To Love and To Pray: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 98.

Authority to Increase Love

Issues of authority are inseparably connected to the issue of trust in supervision.

Authority is at the root of questions such as “Who will supervise me?” “For what purpose or to what end will I be supervised?” “How will what is revealed in supervision be used?” These and other questions must be engaged honestly and thoroughly if supervision is to take its proper place and accomplish its divine purpose in our communal life and practice of ministry. A serious engagement of such questions is necessary if the ministry of supervision is to be embraced as a means of grace. The task will require that the church clearly articulate theological assumptions about the purpose of authority, how authority is conferred, and how it is to be exercised within supervisory relationships.

The question of *what kind of authority* is to be exercised within our connectional covenant must be addressed. Jackson Carroll rightly points out that the question for the church is not “Whether authority?” but “What kind of authority?” He asserts, “Authority is no enemy of the community, as we sometimes suppose. Rather, its enemies are tyranny, which coerces obedience without legitimacy; various forms of authoritarianism, which abuse authority; and anarchy, in which each individual is an authority unto him or herself.”²⁴

A look at origins of the words “authority” and “superintend” shed light on what I believe holds the key to rethinking and re-forming supervision in the church. The root meanings are strikingly congruent with a theology of sanctification. The word “authority” is

²⁴ Jackson W. Carroll, *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 35.

derived from *autor* from the Latin *auctorem* which means “enlarger” or “one who causes to grow.” It is closely related to *augere* which means “to increase, make big, enlarge, enrich.”²⁵ The word “superintendent” comes from the combination of two words: *super* and *intendere*. The meaning of *super* is “first-rate, excellent” or “above, over, beyond”; the meaning of *intendere* (intend) is “to direct one’s attention to” literally “stretch out, extend,” from *in-* “toward” + *tendere* “to stretch.”²⁶

The root meanings of these words give us a glimpse of how a notion of supervision based upon these assumptions would radically change current perceptions and practices.

Understood in the original sense of the words, the purpose of supervision would be “to cause to grow;” “to direct our attention” to the other. These definitions are compatible with an understanding and practice of supervision as a means of sanctifying grace.

Conceived in this way, supervisory authority would be understood as power derived from God. It would be exercised for the purpose of cooperating with the redemptive work of God who is continually moving us toward perfection in love. It would assume that God is actively present, transforming persons and communities into the likeness of Christ through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. It would not only release us from our pre-occupation with credentials and status but would free us for relationships of support and accountability in our commitments to God and our neighbor.

²⁵ “Author,” Online Etymology Dictionary (November 2001), available at www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=author

²⁶ “Superintendent,” Online Etymology Dictionary (November 2001), available at www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=superintendent

Hierarchical Authority and Covenant

Theology and polity are wedded in the unique way Methodists organize themselves for mission and ministry. Our connectional way of life, which is both hierarchical and covenantal, has significant implications for the way the church carries out its mission and for how it confers and exercises authority.

From its beginning the Methodist movement was organized in order to assist persons in the progressive journey of growth in holiness, the fruits of which were evidenced by a life of love and compassion among the poor and marginalized. Our connectional polity is a visible expression of our beliefs about the nature and the mission of the church. “Polity is how we order the common life of our sub-community (*politieuma*; denomination) in the *polis* (city) of God. This ordering reflects what we think the church is. So, polity is the practical side of ecclesiology (*logos* and *ecclesia*). . . . **Polity is practical divinity.**”²⁷

In their book *Faith and Form: A Unity of Theology and Polity in the United Methodist Tradition*, Robert Wilson and Steve Harper make this point: “The United Methodist people perceive their church as being a connectional system. This is a theological concept that is manifest in the way the denomination is structured and functions. It assumes that Methodists share a common understanding of the nature and mission of the church and the ways they as individuals relate to the various parts of the denomination.

²⁷ Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., “The United Methodist Church as a Connectional Covenant Community” (n.d.), 2.

Connectionalism is one of the unique ways in which theology and polity are inseparable in Methodism.”²⁸

These assumptions have significant implications for our understanding and practice of supervision and the exercise of authority within our common life. Concerns that have surfaced with regard to current perceptions and practices of supervision have led some to conclude that covenant and hierarchical authority are not compatible. They see this incompatibility as the cause for abuse and mistrust in supervisory relationships. Those who hold this view could point to many examples of the abusive use of authority that might lead them to this conclusion. I maintain that while they have correctly identified real problems, they have not correctly identified the cause. The mistrust that surrounds supervision is due not to the inherent incompatibility of hierarchical authority and covenantal relationships but rather from a misunderstanding and misuse of both.

It’s an old problem. It involves a misinterpretation of the Giver and the gifts. Paul encountered this problem in the conflicted Corinthian church. In response he articulated a theology of the church (which I suspect the Christians at Corinth would have espoused even if they found it difficult to practice), and then he urged them to consider their practice in light of this understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ. “Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that

²⁸ Robert L. Wilson and Steve Harper, *Faith and Form: A Unity of theology and Polity in the United Methodist Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1988), 79.

there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” (I Corinthians 12: 4-7, 24b-25)

To say that there are serious issues with regard to the way we understand and practice authority within the hierarchical structures of the Methodist church today is, in my view, indisputable. To say that the hierarchical structures are themselves the cause for mistrust within the covenant is not only to draw an incorrect cause-effect relationship between the two, it is to fail to place the conversation within a proper theological framework. It misses the fundamental truth that our covenantal life is possible only through the grace of God, and our accountability (those who are supervised *and* those who are supervisors) is ultimately to God.

Overcoming the issues of mistrust will begin with a clear understanding about the divine purpose and exercise of authority. Such an understanding will make it possible to identify and to address the real issues that prevent us from being all that God calls us to be. It will enable us to move from blaming “the system” (of positing the problem “out there”) to taking responsibility for our shared life in Christ and our growth in holiness.

Asymmetrical relationships are built into our connectional structures. “The task of superintending in The United Methodist Church resides in the office of bishop and extends to the district superintendent . . .”²⁹ There are undeniably different functions and different kinds of authority assigned to these special ministries. These different functions and kinds of authority have implications for supervisory relationships.

²⁹ Book of Discipline, ¶401, 285

Thomas W. Klink describes the structure of supervisory relationships in this way: “The supervisory relationship has several important structural characteristics. It is asymmetrical; that is, it does not involve, at least functionally, the relation of equals. To say this is to make clear that any simple, democratic or egalitarian idealism is alien to the supervisory relation. The asymmetrical character of the relation derives in part, and on most occasions, from the greater knowledge and experience of the supervisor. It derives also from the readiness of the supervisor to attend to the learner’s problems to the exclusion of his [or her] own similar dilemmas.”³⁰

Supervision is given by the church to perform a service. A denial or abdication of the authority and power that comes with the role of superintending does more harm than good. Exercising authority in order to increase love requires that supervisors be clear with themselves and others about the responsibilities and limitations of their authority. The different functions and the different kinds of authority accorded to each do not make one more important than the other, and they should not preclude mutuality in relationships. Unfortunately, they too often do.

A document prepared by the British Methodist Church puts this issue into perspective: “The Methodist Church supports the view that all members share equally in the ministry and mission of God. . . . This does not mean that everyone does everything. The church’s life needs to be ordered, and therefore different orders and roles exist within the one

³⁰ Thomas A. Klink. “Supervision as Routine Process I Professional Education in Ministry” (Duke Divinity School), 1968.

ministry of Christ dispersed throughout the whole people of God. But no ‘ranks’ with status, are created as a result. If orders and roles become ‘ranks’ then human fallibility has merely caused further fractures to the broken body of Christ. Instead, the ordering of the church’s life is more to do with missionary effectiveness as a consequence of responding to the call of God to diverse ministries as God’ people in the world.”³¹

Our church’s structure, rather than being an impediment to trust and growth, can be the container which gracefully holds together our need for mutual support and accountability. Again the “Nature of Oversight expresses the point well: Connexionalism is the Methodist way of being the Church. Methodists recognize that . . . it is not the only way of being Church, but cherish connexionalism as part of the tradition and gift which they have inherited and which has brought them to the present day. . . . [It is] a way of relating in which individual people and individual groups do not exist by and for themselves but with and for others. This is not just a matter of co-existence but of shared existence. . . . it is of their essence that they are inter-dependent and discover their true identity and develop their true potential only in and through mutual relationships in which they are constantly sharing resources, both spiritually and materially.”³²

“Watching Over One Another in Love”

A practice of supervision rooted in sanctification holds together care for the ministry and care for the person. At least two things are implied in this assumption. First, supervision

³¹ “The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church in Great Britain”, 109; available online at www.methodist.org.uk/static/conf2005/co_05

³² “The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management, and Governance in the Methodist Church of Great Britain”, 73.

is integral to our life and work; second, supervision is a communal enterprise of “watching over in love.”

Supervision as Ministry

A practice of supervision rooted in a theology of sanctification would not permit it to function as a process outside of ministry. It would not be viewed simply as a means of *getting ministry done*; rather, supervision would be a way of *doing ministry* or, in Wesley’s words, a way of “watching over one another in love”³³ in order to nurture growth in holiness. As such, supervision would not be reduced to a way of managing ministry or dealing with ineffective clergy (although exiting ministry might be the result of a grace-filled process of supervision). Rather, it would be a way of caring for one another and assisting one another in increasing inward and outward holiness.

Kenneth Pohly pinpoints this issue and opens the way for a new way of thinking and acting that is more consistent with a Wesleyan theology of sanctifying grace: “. . . to speak of supervision as a way of doing ministry, is to declare that supervision is both integral to and formative for ministry. There has been a tendency, at least in practice if not also, in theory, to see it as something external to ministry, occurring somewhere outside of ministry and in control of it. Much of the baggage that is brought to supervision is the fear that some person or institution ‘out there’ is in charge.”³⁴

³³ John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United societies,” in the works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 9:69.

³⁴ Pohly, *Transforming the Rough Places*, 88.

The ancillary status of supervision is at the root of the fear and resistance that surround supervision. The operative assumption in current practice is that supervision is “a way of getting ministry done.” This assumption permits the church to assign ancillary status to supervision because it views it as external to real ministry. Supervision is what we do to ministry (to “it”); it is not considered ministry itself. This ancillary status perpetuates the perception and the practice of supervision as something which stands over and against ministry. It contributes to a notion that supervisors have no need to be supervised. Supervision cannot function as a means of grace as long as it is an “add on” to real ministry.

As long as supervision has ancillary status in our communal life, it cannot provide the kind of ongoing care and oversight that Wesley desired for himself. Nor can it engender the level of trust that will enable persons to welcome the kind accountability that Wesley invites in his sermon “Catholic Spirit:” “. . . first love me. . . . ‘If thine heart be right, as mine with thy heart’, then love me with a very tender affection . . . secondly, commend me to God in all thy prayers; wrestle with him in my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is wanting in me . . . thirdly, provoke me to love and to good works. . . . Oh speak and spare not, whatever thou believest may conduce either to the amending of my faults, the strengthening my weaknesses, the building me up in love, or the making me more fit, in any kind, for the Master’s use!”³⁵

³⁵ John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 306-07.

According to Wesley's approach the steps are: Love me, pray for me, evaluate me; assist me in my growth for the sake of Christ and the gospel.³⁶ Wesley's words express a deep yearning within the church today. John Wesley affirmed the need for accountability in ministry; he had a method for supporting it; and he held fast to the belief that it was nurtured in the community of believers. Supervision that is fully integrated into the community's life and work holds the promise for deepening trust and increasing the church's ability to reflect the image of God.

Supervision: A Communal Practice of Accountability

Supervision is based upon a Wesleyan belief that we cannot tend to our own growth without the support of community; we grow in love through mutual support and care. "Christian discipleship requires being held in love and being held accountable. We simply cannot follow Christ apart from a community that holds us in compassion and calls us to accountability. Solitary discipleship is a misnomer. We cannot be Christian alone. Only with the support, corrections, and help of other disciples can we follow Christ . . . Christian discipleship is a journey toward maturity in Christ, requiring a lifetime of discipline and accountability."³⁷

In a paper addressed to the pastors of the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Rueben Job, now retired, described his experience immediately following his election to the episcopacy in 1984. Before he had unpacked his books, he was confronted with the first of many cases of character failure on the part of a clergy.

³⁶ Richard Yeager, ed., *Developing and Evaluating an Effective Ministry: A Manual for Pastors and Diaconal Ministers* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, n.d.), 1.

³⁷ Carder, 76-77.

He goes on to say, “As the years went by and I dealt with pastoral failure that ranged from ineffectiveness to charges against clergy ranging from embezzlement, sexual abuse, and tax evasion, and congregations that were beyond dysfunctional *I began to see that these failures had some things in common.* In almost every case individual failure reflected community failure. And in almost every case community failure was preceded by a failure of practice of the disciplines of discipleship.”³⁸

This powerful testimony raises important questions. What can sustain relationships of support and accountability in our communal life? What communal practices will enable us “to watch over one another in love”? I believe that supervisory relationships bound together by covenant-making and covenant-keeping is a way to meet this urgent need. A covenant is God’s act of inviting us into a grace-filled relationship in which we are continually being transformed by the love of God. It is a sign of our acceptance of God’s grace and an expression of our desire and our intention to be accountable to God and to each other for living a life of personal and social holiness.

A covenant is the church’s way of saying, “We will intentionally create the environment and establish the conditions to support our growth in love of God and neighbor. A covenant communicates the intent to care for one another. It acknowledges that we all need to be supported and nurtured as we seek to be faithful to the ministries to which we have been called and sent.

³⁸ Rueben Job, “Mutual Support and Accountability: The Disciplines of Discipleship” (A paper addressed to the pastors of the Tennessee Annual Conference, United Methodist Church, February, 26, 2007), 2-3.

A covenant sets priorities, establishes structures, provides boundaries, and identifies procedures around which ministry can be examined. A covenant saves persons from the isolation that undermines support and accountability. It binds us in community for our own sake and for the sake of the gospel.³⁹ Covenant-based supervisory relationships can function as a means of grace for those who are supervised and those who supervise.

Conclusion

What would it look like if we were to establish a practice of supervision rooted in a theology of sanctifying grace that is integral to our communal life and ministry? What would be different about the candidacy process? What kind of leaders would the church *want* to form? How would the way it goes about forming leaders change? How would we define “effectiveness” in ministry, and how would we engage with one another in assessing “effectiveness”? In what ways would our perceptions and practices of “exiting clergy” be different? What would expectations for continuing education look like? How might the church’s expectations and priorities for district superintendents be changed?

These are just a few of the questions that the church will consider if supervision is to be conceived and practiced in a way that is congruent with a theology of sanctification.

There is much to overcome, yet the prospect of rethinking and reforming the ministry of supervision holds great promise for the church’s ability to bear witness to the love of God, to be for the world, the body of Christ. May we be open to the transforming grace of God whose desire is to create us anew.

³⁹ Purushotham, 18-19.

