

# Responsible Grace - the role of supervision in the renewal of vocation and ministry | J Leach

## Introduction

The context of this paper is the British Methodist Church's (MCB) commitment to the implementation of structured supervision for all its ordained ministers. The model of supervision adopted in 2017 was an exploratory one, intended to promote reflective practice as a contribution to the effective oversight of ministry and mission. Initial feedback from the pilot project (2015-2016) had already suggested that structured supervision was having an impact on the renewal of vocation and ministry for a significant number of pilot participants and in this piece of research amongst 9/31 District Chairs I was interested to explore the ways in which supervision might be renewing a sense of vocation as part of a wider investigation into the impacts of the implementation of the policy in the church I serve as an ordained presbyter and since 2017 as the Connexional Director of Supervision .

## The Context

The commitment to implement a system of mandatory supervision for ordained ministers was in immediate response to the publication of an independent past cases review (PCR) into instances of abuse and bullying in the life of the church (Methodist Church 2015). The rationale for the introduction of supervision was the perceived weakness in the life of the church in relation to support for accountable ministry. In particular it was recommended that supervision would help to address a culture of isolated and therefore vulnerable practice amongst ministers in which both ministers and those whom they serve were at risk.

The immediate aim of the draft policy that was introduced in October 2015 was to ensure the safer practice of ministry for the sake of those ministered amongst and to support the wellbeing of ministers themselves. It was also expected however to have a formative dimension through a balanced, three-legged stool of supervision, devised by Inskipp and Proctor<sup>i</sup> that attends to:

- 1 the normative: ensuring shared theological reflection on the practices and vocation of ministry within the horizon of God's mission and within the Methodist Church's code of conduct; and the shared identification of risks to self and others and the identification of steps to ameliorate those risks.
- 2 the formative: offering support for lifelong learning, formation and development in ministry through shared reflection;
- 3 the restorative: ensuring that the vocation and work of the minister is shared, valued and nurtured and that health and wellbeing issues for ministers are addressed.

Such a model was felt appropriate in part because of the wider mission context in which ministers are serving. In the UK patterns of church decline and social change are putting a strain on ministerial resilience and making some traditional ways of being church unworkable. There was a clearly perceived need to address staff development issues in this context as well as staff wellbeing.<sup>ii</sup>

After an 18 month pilot period conducted in 2 districts, an Interim Supervision Policy was adopted by the Conference of 2017. The 2017 Report that accompanied the Interim Supervision Policy (Section 4.2) expressed the hope that supervision would have a wide range of impacts in the life of the church including:

- 1 reduced symptoms of isolation and stress amongst its ordained ministers (such as sickness and vulnerable practice) through a realistic and regular structure of collegiality and accountability in which ministers are regularly sharing the detail of their practice and being listened to;
- 2 a more intentional use of ordained ministers' time through the opportunity that supervision provides for ministers to think theologically and practically about priorities;
- 3 a more robust handling of risks in church life, including those relating to safeguarding through explicit attention to risk identification and risk management in supervision;
- 4 more safety for everyone in church life through heightened awareness in supervision of boundaries, expected conduct, role clarity and the use of power;
- 5 more safety for everyone in church life through the opportunity in supervision to explore the unconscious factors that sometimes undermine best intentions;
- 6 better communication as those in oversight become more aware, through supervising others, of the challenges being faced on the ground;
- 7 less anxiety in the face of change as ministers share responsibility for risks, priorities and hard decisions with their supervisors;
- 8 clearer lines of accountability in which the responsibilities and roles of ministers in oversight are better understood and are routinely operated in practice.

There was not an explicit hope expressed that supervision would lead to vocational renewal for individuals but the training materials invited reflection on the vocation of the supervisee as a way of beginning the supervision relationship. Also the definition of the restorative dimension of supervision used in the policy referenced the importance of reconnecting with a sense of God's personal calling, whilst the normative dimension was expressed in terms of attending to the detail of ministerial practice within the horizon of God's vocation for the church and the world and in relation to the expectations of ordained ministers as expressed in the ordinals.

## Research methods

In June 2018, as the first step towards a review of the implementation of the Interim Supervision Policy, I conducted a focus group amongst 9/31 District Chairs. The method of data collection I chose was a focus group. I wanted to invite engagement at depth and considered that a group of peers who have shared something of the same journey into supervision was the best way to create both a safe and stimulating environment in which stories might be told as well as opinions shared and self-consciousness lost. The sample was purposive: I chose to work with District Chairs as those with the most experience of the implementation at this stage and I deliberately chose these 9 (2 women and 7 men) out of a possible 31 as those whose districts are furthest forward in the implementation schedule. All 9 chose to participate.

I was aware of my presence in the group as an insider – someone who belongs within the same organisation and who has responsibility for the implementation and who has personally been

involved in the training and assessment of these people as supervisors. As such I knew there was a risk that my perceived investment would prevent honest responses— particularly if people wanted to share negative impacts. I was also aware that in another sense I am an outsider to the group. I am not a District Chair. In fact I am the supervisor of one of the group. Whilst for the wider research project I will not be the main researcher, the potential advantage of my facilitating this conversation was that we would not need to build a relationship in order to work at depth. That trust, in my judgement, was already present and could yield important data. I was careful to be clear with the group about the purposes of the research, to observe the conventions of research ethics and to make minimal interventions in the group as a way of ameliorating any tendency to filter responses in my presence. Participants have been anonymised and awarded a number 1-9 and a male/female designation, e.g. 1M, 8F. They have all seen and agreed to the use of their words in the context of the discussion below.

## Research Methodology

This was a piece of qualitative research. Qualitative methods allow in depth investigation into the meaning that is being made by small numbers of people. Articulating a small group's experience and elevating it for others to react to within the same organisation is an effective way of seeing whether or not there is resonance between their experiences and those of the larger group. The theological rationale for working in this way within a Methodist context is best articulated by the common Methodist preference for practical divinity. Whilst there might be other good theological arguments that can be made for supervision in the life of the church (biblical precedent; doctrinal understandings of responsible grace<sup>iii</sup>; ecclesial understandings of our corporate accountability in the body of Christ) a key Methodist theological instinct is to reflect on the corporate Christian experience, using reason and experience as sources of theology alongside tradition as we seek to understand what God is saying to us through our reading of the Scriptures in the present. Whilst the Scriptures might illuminate our practice, our experience is that reflection on our practices can also help us understand afresh the depths of truth to which we believe the Scriptures point and so enable the renewal of our faith and common life.

## The Conversation

I facilitated a two hour conversation between the 9 District Chairs during the Methodist Conference of 2018. I asked a series of questions about (1) the impact of being supervised upon them, their working relationships and upon the church as a whole; (2) their sense of the impact of the supervision they had offered to others; (3) anything they felt that they had learned on this journey into supervision about the Methodist Church as an organisation. I coded their contributions and organised these into the following categories:

1. What are we learning about the character of helpful supervisory space?
2. What are we learning about the skills of the supervisor?
3. What are we learning about the implementation of supervision in an organisational context?
4. What are we learning about the Methodist Church?
5. What is God doing through the introduction of supervision in the Methodist Church?

The conversation flowed easily with minimal intervention from me. There was instantly a depth of sharing that was self-aware and disclosive of personal vulnerability and growth both as ministry practitioners and as supervisors. Examples were readily offered and care was taken to preserve the confidentiality of others. There was a lot of laughter that felt humanising and inclusive. The tone and style of the conversation itself was interesting to the group which reflected at the end,

*It's been really good to hear from colleagues.. I've really appreciated that. (8F)*

*I think the very nature of supervision has changed the nature of the conversation itself. That's why it's been so good. (1M)*

## Findings and Discussion

In the course of the conversation participants provided examples of a wide range of impacts that supervision is having on those involved and upon the wider culture of ministry in all 8 areas referenced on page 2 above. What follows here is a presentation of the findings as they relate to the theme of renewal.

Each finding is headed by an *In Vivo* code, preserving some of the actual words used during the conversation. Whilst I expected most of the findings relating to renewal to represent the 'Restorative' dimension of supervision, in fact, there were connections with renewal made in each of the three dimensions. For this reason the findings are organised under the three headings, and 'Restorative', 'Formative' and 'Normative'.

### 1 Restorative

#### 1.1 'Holy Ground'

*I think when you are talking vocation and calling you're on holy ground. (1M)*

Both as supervisees and as supervisors at least half of the group had had explicit conversations about personal vocation or about what it means to be a Methodist minister today although one District Chair had not taken such conversations to supervision as he felt these belonged more naturally in his spiritual direction relationship.

Others said:

*I think, well I know, that I've found it (supervision) very supportive. And actually surprisingly broad.... I think the first two or three supervisions I had I was bringing complex issues with difficulties that were going on but then as we got further on that moved into vocational exploration. (7F)*

*I think for me also my conversation around vocational exploration I've found very helpful because having conversations around your vocation sounds to my ear exceedingly self-seeking and therefore being really able to wrestle with what's going on in a safe space has been helpful (2M)*

When asked what issues were most commonly brought to supervision by their supervisees, responses included:

- Vocational issues
- What does it mean to be a Methodist minister today?
- What kind of a Superintendent minister am I?

It was clear that those being supervised by all 9 District Chairs were using supervision to explore not only detailed practice issues, but also to ask difficult and broader questions about how to sustain a vocational identity in a changing environment or in new roles.

In a different way, though, supervision had also contributed to vocational discernment amongst those learning to supervise:

*... one of my Alternates is doing quite a bit of supervising. I think he has a real gift. I think his work in that way is hugely appreciated. I think that at a significant stage in his life this opening for ministry to continue to be of use in terms in which is he gifted and enjoys beyond a transition moment in ministry so that's a blessing. (9M)*

*I think when you are talking vocation and calling you're on holy ground. And talking about grace that's about something profound that goes beyond process. And you find you're in a place you didn't expect to be and it helps refine and enrich your sense of the calling of God on people's lives. (1M)*

*...supervision is much more important than the policy. I think I want to talk about something spiritual happening... my experience of supervision is that it's about much more than the policy is about. It's a spiritual thing. It's about engagement with people at the very deepest parts of their self-revelation. And it's about privilege. (3M)*

In this way there was expressed amongst the participants a sense that the work they are doing in supervision was vocational for them in its opportunity to share holy ground with others and to experience a sense of God's presence in the interpersonal encounter that was restoring to their roles aspects of ministry that felt core but were not as central in their practice as once they had hoped. The group expressed hope for the renewal of vocation in and through supervision, even within the difficulties of a context in which one District Chair described as not being an easy one in which to be a Methodist minister and which one Supervisor of three District Chairs (at a meeting the day before) had described as the business of '*learning to dance in the rain.*'

## **1.2 'Wellbeing in the role'**

A second restorative dimension in which supervision is being experienced by these 9 District Chairs was in the area of energy levels and resilience to fulfil their calling:

*[In terms of the renewal of energy] for me there is to an extent because rather than debating in my mind for hours, I've actually slept better and so in my own personal wellbeing dealing with issues has improved significantly. (6M)*

*.. the supervisor throws just enough resource at you to help you without having actually held you by the hand and walked you through it. So just enough to help you feel like you're taking the initiative. And I think that helps my sense of wellbeing in the role. (1M)*

*I think I would say it has probably improved my mental health and my resilience, given my ability to fester. Because I am not festering so much. (laughter) and that has made a difference. (2M)*

How supervision is operating amongst this group and those they supervise in the renewal of personal energy for the work seems to have several facets which merit further elucidation.

### **1.2.1 'The gift of concentrated, unadulterated time'**

A number of contributors expressed the pure value of being listened to and the impact of that upon their ability to focus and sustain ministry:

*...there's something really significant there about stopping the clock. I'm not sure that space ever really existed before supervision. (1M)*

*I think it's the very fact that somebody has given them 100% attention for 90 minutes. And does not have another agenda. They have just felt so valued and have only been asked prompting questions. (6M)*

*The attentiveness. There's something theological about that. Not just 'you search me and you know me' but like the annunciation that is all about detailed attention. ... you have a sense that that's what happening.(9M)*

*What was even more helpful was the follow up afterwards – a card the day before and then the follow up afterwards, 'how did that go?' (7F)*

The view was also expressed and endorsed that the quality of the training experience had helped participants and their Superintendents to feel valued – not only by their peers and the trainers who had respectfully shared and shaped the experience – but by the Methodist Church for the investment in them that the training represented:

*It was the quality of the training. The fact that connexionally we value you as Superintendents... coming on top of the Superintendents courses... It's the connexion saying I invest in you. This coming on top of that is hugely affirming. (6M)*

*It's certainly a strong feeling. The investment. (7F)*

Coming through these contributions is a sense that renewal comes about through the gift of the attentive presence of another and that this makes possible a sense also of God's presence. The presence of another as an accompanist (even between supervisions) is experienced as a sign of the church's care and incarnates a sense of connectedness and life that is itself generative (as at the annunciation). In this sense supervision has been experienced by this group as reducing the isolation they have felt in ministry:

*I know there's a challenge in this, but I think that what supervision does actually is stop the clock for an hour and a half and say, 'Look. This is a key 90 minutes. And actually what may be the greatest gift of grace is the gift of concentrated unadulterated time. (2M)*

This sense of connection comes about not simply through the proximity of colleagues which can sometimes in itself be de-energising:

*... I recognise all we're saying about driven people, working very hard; when they're together as a cohort they have a massive capacity to moan; (5M)*

And participants had expected that perhaps the dynamic of competitiveness and complaint might pervade the training events:

*... so often when we get together as presbyters we're almost into a competitive ways of relating – who has done the most funerals? Who's worked the most hours? Made the most members? But actually this [training course]. There was none of that. (6M)*

*... that first [training]experience ... was a transformative experience. That was partly about being with a cohort of people where you did some honest open vulnerable stuff. You journeyed together. And we used language of means of grace earlier on and I think that was an experience of God's grace and I think particularly the experience around the triads. Most people go into that thinking this is going to be very hypothetical but actually it becomes something deeply, deeply real and I've heard superintendents say that and that does something to people. (5M)*

*I also think – as some of our Supers have said – it engaged them with each other. And although they may have known each other a long time they haven't engaged with that intensity and that changes the nature of relationships across the thing as well as through the thing. (9M)*

This last contribution reinforces the suggestion that supervision in the MCB (and the training for it) is not only having an effect on people's sense of value and connectedness through the supervision they receive (and offer) but through the changed patterns of relationship emerging. The amount and the quality of laughter in this group (referenced a number of times above) was indicative of a human and humanising, connected and inclusive, sense of shared vocation:

*I think the very nature of supervision has changed the nature of the conversation itself. That's why it's been so good. (1M)*

### **1.2.3 'Rather than it festering'**

Another way in which supervision is functioning amongst participants to renew energy is to help to remove blocks that are preventing them from tackling the tasks in front of them. This is particularly evident in relation to helping them deconstruct the complexity of issues and disentangle role confusion so that they can identify the one thing needful:

*I was able to say (in supervision) what I really felt... But I think it was really being able to wrestle with what I was feeling and clarify how I would want to reply if my better angels were winning at that moment. ... and actually just working through that continuum really. So that by the time supervision was at an end I was literally able just to go and write the letter and I think the right letter, not the fire and brimstone it would have been an hour and a half before. (2M)*

*I very quickly realised that I regretted that I'd not had this kind of facility for the first 19 years of my ministry (yes... yes) and partly because I'm the kind of person that festers things and therefore having the ability therefore pretty quickly to be able to engage with that (in supervision) rather than it just festering away has been enormously helpful. (2M)*

*I found it particularly helpful to articulate the complex situations. Rather than simply to let them run riot in my brain. (Laughter. Over and over and over... ummm) The very act of articulating them was profoundly helpful (umm) it didn't necessarily resolve them but it did clarify sometimes what are the key issues and what are the things that its drawn to it or the accretions to it that really are nothing to do with the main issue but have got tied up with it and that I found particularly helpful (umm, umm). (6M)*

Repeatedly the view was expressed and endorsed in the group that a lot of their energy has been wasted in ministry through festering on their own and worrying about how to respond to challenging situations without the benefit of being able to articulate and detangle them with an attentive other. This festering has in fact obscured the core issues and left ministers struggling to respond at all or respond well. The word 'overwhelmed' was not used by the group and yet there was a clear articulation of the tendency, when left alone, to get stuck in complexity and to avoid tasks, leave situations too long so that they deteriorated, or of struggling to focus because they were contending with the difficult feelings associated with particular tasks. Another dimension of this entanglement has been role confusion:

*There is one area where it is especially helpful and that's detangling my roles... especially as chair and superintendent particularly obviously my colleagues in the same circuit. I think that's been really helpful because we've spent time in supervision de-cluttering that -- not least is this a superintendent conversation is this a chair of district conversation or something else? It's been very helpful to own up and to try to be as clear as possible about which role is being inhabited in the course of which conversation. (2M)*

*I had to go and give a significant piece of input somewhere and that was looming quite large ... what the supervisor was able to do there was to help me stand back from it and to see who I was in that situation so that rather than thinking about a lot of peripheral things to actually think 'who am I and why am I there?' and therefore focus my contribution that was immensely helpful. It actually made the preparation quicker and easier in a very practical sense. (7F)*

One member of the group felt that not only is supervision having an impact on his availability for the work of ministry, it is also having an impact on his emotional availability for his vocation as a husband and parent:

*I think I recognise as I look back over circuit ministry that sometimes things have bled out into the family in ways that have not been happy. And I suspect I have been emotionally unavailable. The difference I think now is that in the role of chair those situations obviously come thick and fast but it feels as though there is a very safe, contained space in which I can speak very very honestly about those things and I know that we'll come back to those there. You'll have to ask my family though but I think I've enough awareness to know that this feels like a really positive development. And I think that's due to supervision. Because it's a*

*different kind of space to where I might have rehearsed those kinds of conversations before.*  
(5M)

### 1.3 Summary

In these ways which I am classifying as 'Restorative' - supervision is being experienced by these 9 District Chairs as renewing energy, confidence and vocational identity. What supervision is doing is providing a quality of attention through its disciplined and structured approach to intentional time; a quality of care on behalf of the organisation that is helping ministers to feel more connected with others at a deep level, and offering a skilled place in which complexity and difficult feelings can be borne and disentangled to allow ministers to find and exercise their agency.

## 2 Formative

I shall now turn to those findings that connect the theme of renewal with Inskipp and Proctor's 'Formative' dimension of supervision.

### 2.1 'More skill and wisdom'

Clear evidence for the renewal of ministry practice through supervision and the training for it was offered by this group of District Chairs in the sense of providing new tools for the work of ministry:

*I think our superintendents... in casual conversation around they are saying that the training and the supervision since has given them tools for other conversations at other times – pastoral conversations; line management conversations; they feel as though their toolkit is much bigger.* (3M)

*But I feel that as well. (Others - yes.. mm Yes)* (6M)

*Yes. I feel very grateful for what I've experience with my supervisor because of the skills I'm able to learn from her. So as I'm supervising I've got more skill and wisdom as I engage in that.*  
(2M)

There was a range of examples of this in practice and the observation was made that although theoretical training is useful in terms of presenting new approaches, these need embedding through the kind of support in practice that supervision provides:

*I think supervision has helped me on some occasions to be more direct in dealing with situations and people and on occasions more directive than I would naturally do because the conversation has enabled me to see it's legitimate to be more direct sometimes. I've come away thinking 'you could do this' unlike in the past.* (4M)

*I think it's something that crystallised in supervision that I learnt on the Bridge Builders course and that is to face conflict head on rather than running away and hoping it won't catch you up. (laughter). And supervision has crystallised in my mind the wisdom of that but also its provided a context in which to wrestle with the conflict and to test out how I might engage with it in a hopefully more creative way that perhaps would have been the case otherwise. So, yes, I think it's crystallised the wisdom of what Bridge Builders were advising, contrary to my natural inclinations, and material interests probably... (laughter) but actually also providing a*

*context to work it through to provide other avenues of engagement so again a place of preparation and not just avoiding it. (2M)*

## **2.2 'a real learning moment'**

Indirect evidence was also supplied that the skills and tools offered in the supervision training are becoming embedded in a way that is renewing people's practice. There were, for example, references to the Greenwich Foot Tunnel<sup>iv</sup>, to the three legged stool of supervision, to the facilitative role of the supervisor, to the need for supervisees to learn how to use the space of supervision, to risk assessment, to the drama triangle<sup>v</sup> and to the use of creative supervision methods:

*So it did feel like a real learning moment. Partly because we managed to make good use of the time. It was the first time I'd done small world with him. And I think he went away with some very clear next steps. So after he left I thought, 'That is the Greenwich Tunnel!' It was done to perfection and the timing was spot on! I wish it was always like this!! (5M)*

*... a supervisee brought an issue – a risk assessment – and a colleague was very, very reluctant to do this risk assessment and wanted to be spontaneous and just get on with it and we unpacked a lot and then out of nowhere in my head came this notion which I shared with a supervisee, 'Do you think the temptations in the wilderness was Jesus doing some kind of risk assessment?' (much laughter). (8F)*

*In a conversation outside supervision actually. And it was the supervisee who has now been trained in supervision who said to me, 'Well it's the drama triangle isn't it?' (much laughter) (7F)*

*I did a supervision on Tuesday. And my supervisee said to me, 'Stop being a supervisor for a moment and tell me what to do! What would you do!! '(much laughter...) (6M)*

This evidence of learning taking place is heartening for those involved in the training (!) but it is also interesting in terms of the link between learning and energy levels for vocation and supports a sense of purposeful engagement and thus sustainable ministry<sup>vi</sup>.

*I've been always energised at the end of a supervision session even if it's been something really difficult. When we obviously haven't come to a solution but its felt there are possibilities to explore and that energises me and I think that's what energises me when I work as a supervisor. (1M)*

*... I've come away from supervision with a big smile on my face sometimes and even when we've done it over Skype because yeah.. Umm, I feel I know something about the situation and I almost feel in control (laughter). (3M)*

## **2.3 Summary**

What the evidence presented in this section shows is the relationship between the renewal of ministry and the support for learning and growth. Frustration was expressed by participants over the lack of training opportunities for ministers and the often theoretical and rushed nature of those opportunities. By contrast supervision is a means of learning support that allows insight to become embedded practice. The delight that was expressed in discovering new skills and that learning put

into practice could be effective in itself evidences a connection between learning and the renewal of vocation that others have also found.

### 3 Normative

If it was surprising to find connections between Inskipp and Proctor's 'Formative' dimension of supervision and a sense of vocational renewal amongst these 9 District Chairs and their colleagues it was more surprising to find them linking the 'Normative' dimension with personal/vocational renewal as well as with a sense of hope for renewal for the life of the wider church.

One of the issues in the policy that is consistently pointed out to the implementation team is a felt tension between support and accountability. Evident in this group of 9, however, were some changing attitudes towards this relationship.

#### 3.1 'It's not an 'Oh no are you checking up on me?' kind of accountability'

*I had mixed messages about what the policy was supposed to achieve. One of which I had great fears about. I feared the policy was about protecting our backs on the back of the PCR. My experience has been actually it's not been about that. It's enabled us to be a safer place and enabled safer practice but my fear was that would be the driver; it's not been the driver; so its achieved – I think that was the stated aim – I think its achieved that in a way that's taken me by surprise. (6M)*

*I think something it (supervision) has highlighted which had been my perception over years of ministry is that ministers want to run away from or deny any sense of accountability. And to some degree I think that's where the perception is particularly before people have been on the (supervision) course. Resistance is against the sense of being accountable... but we're actually saying that this (supervision) is something about our accountability whereas (previously) we have thrived on our non-conformity as if that means no accountability. (2M)*

*I recognise this for myself as part of the accountability thing. To take more care of those things. (9M)*

Part of the new norm that supervision is establishing for these ministers is an incarnate sense that God is for us as human beings; that the quality of ministers' lives matter. Part of the wisdom that is emerging is that the doctrine of self-care is atheistic. In fact what the Scriptures recommend is 'other care'. 'We love because God first loved us'.<sup>vii</sup> Love is not self-generated. In practice taking care of yourself without the regular valuing of yourself as a person by others is a near impossibility. Part of the normative dimension of supervision is regularly to be asked how you are and have someone listen to the answer and even challenge your self-perception:

*I had a colleague and it seemed to be entirely possible they were sinking into depression. And I was worried about that in the supervision and when I saw my colleague 2 weeks later but not in supervision it was evident that that person was less well than they had been when I'd seen them and I strongly recommended that they went to the doctor to get an assessment. Which they did. And in fact their doctor was grateful that their colleague would even have noticed. (2M)*

*My colleague who went to the GP wasn't diagnosed as depressed but as physically and emotionally exhausted so we did quite a lot of work once they were rested about what all that meant for their work-life imbalance. Because it certainly was at that time. And in a sense because they'd gone through that process of facing it – by going to the doctor's – we were able to work through that some more in supervision. And now they're in a massively different place from where they've been. Remarkably so really. (2M)*

What is being expressed above is the learned sense that the normative need not be against us. Even the process of record keeping – a much contested means of accountability – was being found to be supportive:

*On the (supervision record) form there's a bit about risk and I've never just used that for safeguarding and the one that comes up most is burnout, ill health, exhaustion. That's the risk. (8F)*

*It's the accountability that's been really important – that you know that there's the written record; there's the things that you've named – so when you revisit supervision again, there is that follow up conversation – you said you were going to have that difficult conversation with this colleague; we were rehearsing it, how did it go? And I think in terms of recognising that yes we live with a lot of unresolvable situations we're still coming back to those and yes, it's still quite difficult isn't it, but you're sticking with it and I think that's a significant difference between other conversations that we might have had with other people at other times. It's not an 'Oh no are you checking up on me?' kind of accountability. (laughter. Others: 'Yes.'. 'Not that kind of accountability!') It's a positive accountability that I think has the capacity to engender positive feelings of confidence. (5M)*

This contribution draws out the reassurance and confidence that comes to ministers when they are supported by the institution of the church in a realistic way so that whilst it remains their responsibility to follow up important conversations and make difficult interventions, they have a companion to help them stay attached to the reasons they are doing this and to carry out what they have resolved, not only for their own sake, but for the sake of others. It is not only that supervision is supportive in the sense that it represents care by the Conference supervision is also being experienced as supportive through the holding to account that it offers.

The suggestion of participants that there is something new happening here that is potentially transformative of the culture of the MCB is interesting. What is emerging is an experienced sense that being held accountable by those who are attached to our good as well as the good of those we serve can be life giving. Being held and being held accountable go together. Whilst this may be a deeply counter-cultural notion in societies that value individual freedom and choice and reject meta-narratives and institutional forms of life, in fact, to be allowed to go our own way in ministry has been experienced as a form of neglect. A biblical model of care, whilst it allows humanity our freedom, does not in fact leave us to our own devices but seeks us out, again and again and calls us to our better selves; to the future God has in mind for us. This does not imply that any behaviour or practice is okay. In fact it implies the opposite. When God recalls us to life it is to a renewed life (not just the old one resuscitated) and it often comes about through a challenge and a pruning that always bears in mind the deep good of the individual person and of the whole community. The experience of this group of District Chairs suggests two discoveries. First that holding and holding

accountable belong together: to be let off is also to be let go and let down. Second, that for the holding and holding accountable that God does to be experienced it needs to be incarnate within the body of the Christ. As Wesley knew in the realm of discipleship for which purpose he provided band meetings, holding and holding accountable need bodily form. They are part of the way in which the 'sinews and ligaments' hold us together as a body and allow us to be nourished by the head (Colossians 2.19). In the context of ministry a similarly disciplined holding and holding accountable is also needed for the Spirit to be able to save us from the 'devices and desires' of our own hearts.

### 3.2 'It's the drama triangle'

Further, what is apparent from the evidence of these 9 District Chairs is that their experience of being held and held accountable in supervision is helping them to inhabit their roles and to help others inhabit their roles in ways that promote adult freedom and responsibility. Concerns have been expressed during policy discussion about the degree to which dual roles have to be held in order for the policy to be implemented particularly where the supervisor and the minister in oversight are the same person, and the degree to which the trust that realistic supervision requires relies upon the appropriate handling of confidentiality and reporting – something the MCB was demonstrated by the PCR to be weak in.

There is evidence though, amongst this group, that the role clarity and attention to the boundaries of relationships that supervision is requiring is helping the church to be a safer and a more grown up place for everyone in which vulnerability is respected without creating victims but also in which authority is properly held rather than being abrogated or used to persecute:

*...there's been something that we talked about in supervision come up in another conversation. I talked that through with my supervisor and it was clear at the end that I need to be transparent that when something comes up that we've talked about in supervision we either stack it for supervision or we set something up so that we can talk about it outside supervision otherwise things just go by the by and I felt after that (this was with one of the Alternates) that we needed a contract conversation, that we might trespass onto other areas, and how were we going to deal with that?(1M)*

One of the issues raised about the introduction of supervision that has often been expressed during the discussion of policy issues has been the fear that supervising one's colleagues would mean a changed relationship between Superintendents and their circuit colleagues. At the same time views are often expressed that what the Church lacks is the courage, skills and processes to address ministerial behaviours and patterns of being church that put the mission of the Church at risk. Whilst superficially it might seem that the loneliness of an oversight role can be ameliorated by encouraging friendships with those we serve<sup>viii</sup>, what these contributions highlight is the way in which supervision ameliorates loneliness without compromising the minister in oversight's ability to exercise their proper authority:

*...I think by being supervised its removed some of the isolation of still being part of the circuit staff but having a role that is completely removed from my circuit staff colleagues because there's part of me that simply cannot be around that room (not that it would have been, for the*

*record, but its identifying the part of what my fairly complicated roles are). That's been enormously helpful. (2M)*

The clarity about roles, boundaries and power that supervision is requiring was experienced by participants as liberating because it has helped them focus on their realistic agency rather than assuming that their role in ministry is to resolve all problems:

*I'm conscious of people talking about resolution but I'm conscious that a lot of the things I'm dealing with are not in anyone's power to resolve. Part of my thing is how you live with, manage the things that are not resolvable and you live with yourself in that and it's not an answer sort of thing and that's part of it. (9M)*

*Yes... that liberating sense that I am not there to sort it out. Actually just by noticing and asking questions and by observing you're enabling the Spirit to do the work rather than the supervisor. (2M)*

The opportunity to bring difficult issues into supervision has also helped to clarify roles:

*I've been dealing with a conflict situation in one of my circuits. Discussing it in supervision enabled me to see that what I was trying to accomplish weren't necessarily things that I should be trying to accomplish but enabling others to accomplish. (3M)*

*I had some very simply normative stuff. A superintendent discovered she has the right to suspend someone who is behaving extraordinarily badly and she didn't even know. (4M)*

In turn this has been enabling the participants to empower their supervisees:

*I work with a supervisee who I think began to realise she could take responsibility for her own work-life balance and move away from 'I am so overworked because the church overworks me.' And maybe realise that 'I overwork for other reasons'. (4M)*

And supervisees to empower their supervisors:

*And it was the supervisee who has now been trained in supervision who said to me, 'Well it's the drama triangle isn't it?' (much laughter) (7F)*

What is being renewed here is a sense of appropriate authority and agency, not only for ordained ministers but for others in the life of the Church. It comes with an increased awareness of how much of the time ministers stray into what the drama triangle calls the rescuer, persecutor or victim modes. Life lived in the drama triangle is a morass of projection in which none of us can bear either our vulnerability or our power, or both. What Jesus offers time and again in the gospels (see the story of the woman caught in adultery for example<sup>ix</sup>) is the opportunity for human beings to own their own power and to reconnect with their compassion for self and other. As ministers are held and held accountable in supervision by supervisors who will not split their concern for the supervisee from their concern for those amongst whom the supervisee works, so a possibility is being glimpsed in this group that a renewed sense of authority and agency might create an ecclesial space in which God might be able to work.

### **3.3 'Enabling the Spirit to do the work'**

Finally, the connection between holding and holding accountable arose in part from the group's observation that the most commonly raised issue in supervision by Superintendents is workload and that a very common objection to the introduction of supervision by ministers is that they are already overloaded. However, the view was expressed that by requiring ministers to stop doing for the time it takes to travel and engage, supervision is beginning to change the culture of ministry from an isolated drivenness and anxious need to fix things to a more relaxed and intentional attentiveness to self and other and God:

*One of the things that's come home to me is how often the choices that people are making come out of a place of anxiety and fear. Fear of what other people will think. Fear for the future of the church. (9M)*

*I've only just started to notice this but over the two years I'm becoming much more relaxed about things. I would have always said I was very relaxed about things. So I don't fester... I'll ignore (laughter) and when people are talking about resilience I think I do stoic and there's a real difference between stoicism and resilience and over the two years I think I've shifted into a place where actually I don't have to fix this, and that's fine and actually what's more interesting is not how can this be fixed but how can we live with the brokenness we encounter? Whatever that might be and I'm curious about that... and I've not really thought this through but I think that might be the product of a supervision over a sustained period of time, that I don't feel I have to fix things and that actually I don't even feel they have to be fixed.(8F)*

*I find it very interesting that I've had no sessions that have been diaried that have been cancelled. I think I anticipated, 'I've been very busy this week...' there's been none of that and yet I recognise all we're saying about driven people, working very hard; when they're together as a cohort they have a massive capacity to moan; and yet faithfully they are turning out to supervision. They are stopping. They are attending. They are listening. (5M)*

*Actually just by noticing and asking questions and by observing you're enabling the Spirit to do the work rather than the supervisor. (2M)*

The value to individual ministers of stopping the clock has been explored above, here value is attached to ministers being required to stop as a new norm of ministerial practice that enshrines some of the wisdom of Sabbath that an anxious church, driven by a decline agenda, desperately needs to recover if it is to become routinely attentive to God's presence and purpose and allow the Spirit to do the work.

### **3.4 Summary**

In this section evidence has been presented and explored that suggests that the renewing power of exploratory supervision is not only in its restorative and formative dimensions but also in its normative mode. Despite the disparagement of rules and norms in the popular imagination and in informal Methodist discourse as being restrictive and uncreative what this group have experienced is that some norms at least can be benevolent and that the process of being held to account, whilst challenging, can also provide a secure base from which courageous and risk-taking ministry can be exercised.

## Conclusion

The evidence presented here in relation to the renewal of individual ministers is rich but it is only on the basis of a conversation with 9 people all of whom are at the forefront of the implementation of the Methodist Church's supervision policy and who are therefore not in any sense representative at this stage of Methodist ministers as a whole. Further research will be needed as the policy is implemented into the experience of ministers who hold other roles in the life of the church and all this evidence will be needed in order to review the policy for the future.

The evidence that supervision is renewing the wider life of the church is similarly tentative and yet as a vision for a Church that needs to learn to dance in the rain of a post-Christian cultural context there are some tantalising possibilities to be tested in future research that supervision might help us to be less anxious and to let God's Spirit do God's share of the work, clearer about what our roles in that work might be.

*I wonder then how that intentionally spreads out into other areas of the life of the church. A fascinating challenge. (5M)*

## Referenced Works

- Inskipp, F & B, Proctor, *Making the Most of Supervision Part I: The Art, Craft and Tasks of Counselling Supervision*, Bend: OR: Cascade Publications (1993) 1995
- Leach, J & M S Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A handbook 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, London SCM Press 2015
- Methodist Church 2015: Report to the Methodist Conference: Courage Cost and Hope: Report of the Past Cases Review: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/safeguarding/courage-cost-and-hope-past-cases-review/>
- Methodist Council 2015: Draft Supervision Policy: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1676/counc-mc15-86-draft-supervision-policy-october-2015.pdf>
- Methodist Church 2017: Report to the Methodist Conference: Interim Supervision Policy: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1848/supervision-policy-290617.pdf>

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<sup>i</sup> Inskipp & Proctor 1995

<sup>ii</sup> The desirability of pastoral supervision for the sake of ministerial wellbeing and effectiveness had already been expressed in a series of Conference Reports over the preceding 20 years but this had not produced the resources to make it organisationally possible.

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<sup>iii</sup> The term ‘responsible grace’ was coined by Randy Maddox and refers to John Wesley’s understanding of grace as both gift and invitation to collaborate with God and others within the body of Christ in the working out of one’s salvation. By extension, a call to ministry might be considered both gift (charism) and an invitation to collaborate with God and others within the body of Christ to exercise that ministry responsibly.

<sup>iv</sup> Unpublished model supervision devised by Jane Leach that presents visually Leach & Paterson’s process model of supervision (Leach & Paterson 2015)

<sup>v</sup> The drama triangle was devised by Stephen Karpman and was first published in 1968. It points to a common unconscious script played out between people in which one person adopts or is invited to adopt the victim role by letting go of their own agency and being aware only of their own vulnerability. Someone in the victim role feels powerless, often identifies their woes as being due to the work of an all-powerful persecutor (who may indeed be oppressing them but often is being allowed more power by the victim than necessary) who has lost touch with their own sense of vulnerability. The victim will then look for (or be vulnerable to) a rescuer who thinks they are using their power for good, but actually is actually unaware of the ways in which their rescue attempts keep the person in the victim role from claiming their power. The challenge of the drama triangle is to spot it happening and to resist the roles it offers by holding onto one’s own power and vulnerability - refusing to be the victim by claiming one’s power or the persecutor by remembering one’s own vulnerability or the rescuer by holding onto one’s own power and vulnerability. An account of the drama triangle and its uses in supervision is offered in Leach & Paterson 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Research into ministerial flourishing in the USA by the Flourishing in Ministry Project published in 2013

([http://wellbeing.nd.edu/assets/198819/emerging\\_insights\\_2\\_1\\_.pdf](http://wellbeing.nd.edu/assets/198819/emerging_insights_2_1_.pdf)) suggests that,

‘Pastors who thrive feel that they are able to grow, develop, and strive towards higher levels of excellence in their work. Feeling stagnant erodes our sense of thriving, and over time, it saps our happiness. Being stuck in the same place becomes boring, then frustrating, and can even lead to more serious outcomes such as depression.’

<sup>vii</sup> Baptismal liturgy of the MCB, *The Methodist Worship Book*, MCH 1999

<sup>viii</sup> Research into ministerial flourishing in the USA by the Flourishing in Ministry Project published in 2013

([http://wellbeing.nd.edu/assets/198819/emerging\\_insights\\_2\\_1\\_.pdf](http://wellbeing.nd.edu/assets/198819/emerging_insights_2_1_.pdf))

highlights the importance of good relationships with local congregations and with colleagues. Although at it is mentioned that relationships with congregations require boundaries the authors say, ‘Many pastors tell us that, during their education and training for the pastorate, they were discouraged from forming friendships with members of their congregation. From a social science perspective, this is not good advice.’ (26). The evidence of this research amongst senior Methodist leaders in the UK suggests that good relationships with local colleagues are not best described as friendship nor should clergy be seeking affirmation from their congregations. Rather, from an ecclesiological point of view solid support is more appropriately sought in other places- like supervision - thus preserving the possibility of an appropriate exercise of authority. Something which is also needed for effective ministry.

<sup>ix</sup> Leach & Paterson 2015: 105-106