

Supervision In The Local Church

Some Preliminary Thoughts

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For 28 years I have been a pastor in charge of a local church. For most of that time I have 'done my own thing', without any real regard to others in the church. True, for the last 15 years I have enjoyed an annual 'appraisal'^[1]; but for most of that time I have not had to give a regular account of my ministry to anybody. I have never experienced formal 'supervision'.

For the first seven years or so of my ministry I was a solo pastor, but after those seven years I began to have 'staff'. My first member of staff was a pastoral assistant, then I had an 'assistant' minister. In addition I enjoyed the services of three young 'interns'. Since moving to my present church I have had 'assistants' and 'associates'^[2]. Currently I have a staff team made up of four ministers (including myself), an 'intern', a half-time children's worker, and three support staff. Over the years I have almost always enjoyed good relationships with my staff. I would have said that I have managed my staff well - and yet, it has not until the last couple of years that, at the prompting of my lay leaders, I have begun to engage in meaningful 'supervision'.

It is therefore within the context of being still very much a 'learner' that I offer this article, which first explores the issue of supervision within a staff team, which is my current situation, and then explores the possibility of supervision within solo ministry. I look forward to some feedback, either within the pages of Ministry Today or in personal e-mails which may be sent to pbeasleymurray@centralbaptist.f9.co.uk!

Supervision in a staff team

One of the key roles of senior pastors is exercising oversight of the members of their staff team. This is an essential part of being a senior pastor. For, to my way of thinking, the position of senior pastor is one of role, and not of status. The senior pastor is the 'team leader'^[3] and as such has oversight of the staff who form the church staff team. The purpose of this oversight is to ensure that the team members are clear about their role in implementing the vision and strategy of the church, to give them encouragement and support in that role, and to hold them accountable for implementing the vision and the agreed strategy. Technically, this oversight is known as 'supervision'. Supervision has long been a reality of life in many other professions. However, supervision is relatively new in church life, not least because the development of staff teams is relatively new.

Supervision is not always welcome in the life of a larger church. In the first place, the responsibility of oversight is not always welcomed by senior pastors. The fact is that regular 'supervision' is time-consuming, especially where there are perhaps several members of staff - the temptation is simply to allow colleagues to get on with the job. But the reality is that colleagues will not always get on with the tasks which are required of them. It is not that they are lazy, but rather that they may well be side-tracked, with the result that they end up putting time and effort into activities which are not part of the church's agreed agenda. Indeed, this sometimes is precisely why team members are not keen on supervision, for supervision holds them accountable for their ministry. Such accountability is not welcome to those of an independent spirit! However, the fact is that accountability is intrinsic to ministry. In the words of one Anglican report: "Clergy can never consider themselves in private practice. All are under authority and accountable to one another as independent members of the body of Christ"[\[4\]](#). That accountability involves more than the acceptance of a 'common rule of life': it needs to be expressed in supervision.

Supervision, rightly handled, can, however, be a very positive experience. Supervision is about providing support and encouragement to colleagues. Supervision provides an opportunity for senior pastors to take an informed interest in the ministry of their colleagues - to give recognition and praise where it is due.

It is important to emphasise that supervision is not about micro-management. It is not about telling others what to do. To use supervision as an opportunity to tell others how to do their work is to stifle creativity. Supervision is not about control, but rather is an encouragement to others to own and take responsibility for their role. Susan Beaumont points out that "the appropriate object of supervision is a verb, not a noun"[\[5\]](#). A person is a noun - their work is a verb. "What is being supervised is the performance of the staff member as he or she works toward identified outcomes"[\[6\]](#) .

Supervision is about encouraging individual team members to learn from their experience. In the context of the church, such learning can be very practical and can concern the nuts and bolts of church life. On the other hand, the learning can involve theological reflection on church life.

Supervision involves reviewing the past. In the first instance an opportunity is given to staff to report back on actions they have taken in the light of their previous meeting, and to review what they have achieved both in terms of those actions, as indeed of other actions taken. Second, this review of the past gives an opportunity to staff to give an account of what they have learned since the past meeting. Such learning might be formal or informal. It might involve what they have learned from attending a course or reading a book, or it might involve what they have learned about people or indeed about God as a result of their ministry. Supervision in a church context is an opportunity for theological reflection.

The review of the past should also include the question: “What new partnerships have you made?” Ministry is not a solo act, but is about developing relationships and strengthening partnerships with others, both within and without the church.

Supervision is also about the future. It gives an opportunity for staff to share their plans for the immediate future, what their primary goals will be over the next few weeks.

Supervision involves preparation on the part of staff members. It is they who in the first instance provide the agenda for the meeting. Ideally they come with written notes for the senior pastor, in which they outline their reflections on the past and their hopes for the future. Such preparation takes time, but it makes the supervision session so much more worthwhile. It is also helpful if there could be a written note of the outcomes of the supervision session. This could be the responsibility of the person being supervised; on the other hand Rendle and Beaumont suggest that the senior pastor “drafts a brief (one page) written response memo within 48 hours, noting issues of agreement from the conversation, as well as topics that should be revisited in the subsequent performance management conversation”[\[7\]](#).

Where there are good relationships between senior pastors and their staff, in any given week there will be frequent opportunity for informal personal conversation and reporting back. However, such conversation is not supervision. Supervision involves a degree of formality. Supervision is probably best conducted on a monthly basis.

Senior pastors need supervision too!

Needless to say, senior pastors are not exempt from accountability. Accountability is an essential part of all ministry. In the Church of England, for instance, such ministers are accountable to the bishop. Working as I do in a Baptist church, I am accountable ultimately to the ‘church meeting’ [\[8\]](#) through our sixteen-strong ‘leadership team’[\[9\]](#). I am in the first place accountable to a small ‘support and personnel group’ which meets with me on a monthly basis. As part of my accountability, I normally submit to this group a weekly written report, which includes my diary for the coming week. In addition I have recently agreed that every four months I will prepare for our leadership team a written account of how I have sought to implement the agreed vision and strategy of the church. As an experiment I have also agreed to participate every six months in a performance management review!

Supervision where there is no staff team

In my book *Power for God’s Sake: The use and abuse of power in the local church*[\[10\]](#), which was based on a survey of 141 ministers and 112 church ‘officials’, I looked at the issue of ministerial accountability, and concluded:

“Generally speaking, accountability appears to be a myth. Ministers by and large have few restrictions placed upon them. Put crudely, provided they ‘pay the rent’ by conducting the services and by visiting some of the key members of the

church, they can often get away with 'blue murder' if they wish... This lack of accountability is tantamount to an abuse of power"[\[11\]](#).

I discovered that 77% of ministers had no formal job description. Although 36% of ministers claimed to undergo regular appraisal, in fact only 18% underwent annual appraisal. For the most part ministers are on their own as far as their job is concerned. I do not believe that this is at all healthy, either for the church or indeed for the minister.

In *Power for God's Sake*, I advocated the use of external supports such as 'supervisors', therapists, spiritual directors, and work consultants. However, at that stage in my thinking I only applied the term 'supervision' to counselling. I wrote:

"In the counselling profession people are not recognised as qualified nor are they allowed to work with 'clients' unless they are in supervision. Yet ministers are able to counsel people haphazardly. Although supervision is no guarantee that abuse of one kind or another will not take place, it does provide regular opportunities for carers to reflect on their handling of their 'clients'. In turn this enables them to become more aware, both of themselves and also of the dynamics of the relationship involved. Where there is supervision, the risks of abuse are lessened" [\[12\]](#).

However, the supervision which I now advocate is much broader than the supervision I earlier advocated - and includes all of a minister's work. I believe that for the well-being of both the church and the individual, supervision in terms of exercising oversight over a person's ministry has much to commend it. Needless to say, such oversight should not be regarded as controlling, but rather as a form of support.

How might supervision work within traditional solo ministry? It could possibly take the form of a monthly meeting with one of the church's lay leaders, in which there was reflection on the past month and a looking forward to the next month. Alternatively such a monthly meeting could take place with an outside 'consultant' or with a senior minister from a neighbouring church, who might act as a 'mentor'. Indeed, it might be possible for 'peers' to supervise one another. To gain the most of such supervision, it would need to involve more than the opening of a diary and a casual chat. It would involve a degree of formality, in which the minister addressed the kind of questions which have been suggested for a meeting between a staff member and the senior minister. It would assume that the church had drawn up a job description for the minister and had agreed a series of objectives within the context of a church development plan. For ministry is more than a round of activities such as preaching, visiting, counselling, and representing the church in the community. Ministry involves leading a church forward in its ministry and mission, which in turn necessitates an agreed direction together with an agreed use of resources. Leadership involves management, and management entails strategies and objectives. Supervision is there to ensure that ministers are not just busily engaged, but effectively engaged too.

Supervision in my book is about being a good steward of one's call. Supervision is not to be regarded as a 'stick', but rather as a 'carrot' - it provides an opportunity to break out of that isolation which so many solo ministers experience. It promotes good ministry.

Supervision has a biblical basis

To some ministers supervision, along with appraisal and ministerial review, is theologically anathema. They argue that first and foremost they are accountable to God, and not to their people. There is, of course, much support for this position from the New Testament. For instance, the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that leaders of the flock of God are accountable to the Lord (Hebrews 13.17). Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, emphasises that he is the first place a servant of God, and not of men (Galatians 1.10: see also 1 Corinthians 4.2,5). In Ephesians 4.11, it is Christ who 'gives' pastor-teachers to his church, which in turn means that it is from Christ that pastor-teachers derive their authority, and it is to Christ that they owe their allegiance.

But this is not the whole story. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, depicts leaders being accountable to the church which has recognised their calling and set them apart for service (Acts 13.1-3; 14.27). Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ makes it clear that individual members exercise their own roles, but for the good of all (1 Corinthians 12.12-26), which in turn implies "accountability to one another for exercising our part for the good of the whole"[\[13\]](#). The teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel would suggest that, at least in questions of church discipline, ultimate authority lies with the church (Matthew 18.15-20).

The fact is that the exercise of one's God-given ministry independent of the church and its authority has no place in Scripture. I sometimes wonder whether those who argue for the ministry's independency are using theology as a smoke screen for their sense of insecurity.

[\[1\]](#) I tend to use to use the terms 'appraisal' and 'review' interchangeably. However, a distinction has been made in some quarters between an 'appraisal', which is a review of past performance and is often related to pay and promotion, and a ministerial 'review' which is future orientated and looking at development needs. Clearly in a church setting, where ministers receive 'stipends', appraisals are not linked to pay. However, any ministerial review must include some evaluation of past performance.

[\[2\]](#) In Baptist churches 'assistant' ministers are akin to Anglican curates, and come to the church straight from theological college: although they have been ordained, as 'newly accredited ministers' of the Baptist Union of Great Britain they have to serve a probationary period of three years if they were trained in a Baptist college, and four years if they were trained in another theological institution. 'Associate' ministers have already served their probationary period.

[3] In some Baptist churches the term 'team leader' is used as the title for the senior pastor.

[4] *Ministerial Review: Its Purpose and Practice* (ABM Ministry Paper No.6) quoted with approved in *Servants and Shepherds: Developments in the Theology and Practice of Ministerial Review* (ABM Ministry Paper No.19 Paragraph 25)

[5] Gil Rendle & Susan Beaumont, *When Moses meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations* (Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia, 2007) 93

[6] *When Moses meets Aaron* 94

[7] *When Moses meets Aaron* 102

[8] In a Baptist church the 'church meeting' is made up of all the members of the church who gather together regularly to 'discern the mind of Christ'.

[9] Our 'leadership team' is made up of twelve 'deacons' and the four ministers.

[10] Paul Beasley-Murray, *Power for God's Sake: Power and Abuse in the Local Church* (Paternoster, Carlisle 1998).

[11] *Power for God's Sake* 57,58

[12] *Power for God's Sake* 61

[13] See the section entitled 'Gift and Responsibility' in *Ministerial Review: Its Purpose and Practice* (ABM Ministry Paper No.6)