



An Integrated Model of Supervision in Training Spiritual Directors by Janet K. Ruffing, RSM

The development of models and skills for training spiritual directors has gradually evolved over the past twenty-five years. The Center for Religious Development led the way in their original program in spiritual direction into which they took interns who had already completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education and who had been engaged in offering spiritual direction for some time. This approach relied on tools and skills initially developed for training pastoral counselors or chaplains. They employed the methods of process or case notes, taped interviews, and verbatims, as well as individual and group supervision which were all focused on the experience of directors giving spiritual direction.

Initially, they made a sharp distinction between consultation and supervision. Consultation referred to specialized information about the directee that a director might seek from an expert. This might be specific information about and approaches to a particular psychological situation such as issues faced by an adult child of an alcoholic or to spiritual matters such as the development into contemplative prayer by a directee. Supervision referred to issues and behaviors evoked in the spiritual director by particular directees. These included such things as recognizing and addressing countertransference toward the directee which inhibited the director's normally skilled responses to the directee, or psychological or spiritual issues of the director. The Center for Religious Development model of spiritual direction

also emphasized that the focus of direction itself is the religious experience of the directee and that one of the most important skills of a spiritual director is a contemplative attitude toward the religious experience of the directee (Barry and Connolly). Maureen Conroy, a graduate of this program, further developed the CRD model through her book, *Looking into The Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (1995) by writing descriptions of the supervision process, offering helpful models of verbatims, and by identifying five key areas of the director's experience that constitute the potential content of supervision sessions. She gives expanded treatment of each of these content areas in her book. Her model of supervision for spiritual direction strongly emphasizes a contemplative approach permeating the entire process of spiritual direction as well as of the supervisory process. She focuses on (1) the experience of interior movements in the director, (2) the development of the director's contemplative attitude and approach, as well as (3) the way a director's personal issues are stirred during sessions (countertransference), (4) moral, theological, or cultural differences between director and directee, and (5) the ongoing relationship between director and directee.

In addition to these two related models for supervision, I propose a third model which integrates the strengths of the models just described with several more variables in the supervisory relationship. In eighteen years of experience supervising spiritual directors, I have never been able to confine my explorations with intern directors to their experience as

directors alone, especially in the early stages of their experience as directors for the first time. In other words, I supervise differently depending on the level of skill and experience a director initially brings to the practicum and on the stage of the supervisory experience. At the beginning of the practicum, I am constantly monitoring the directors' understanding of their directees as well as the directors' appropriate application in the spiritual direction process with actual directees of the standard helping skills (Gerard Egan, *Skilled Helper* or Clara Hill and Karen O'Brien *Helping Skills*) learned and practiced during the pre-practicum courses. Finally, a psychologist is an integral part of the supervisory team. Supervisors are tracking the psychological issues intern directors are encountering in their directees, their transference-countertransference experiences with them, and the supervisors' own transference-countertransference experiences with supervisees. Supervisors also attend to the directors' contemplative attitude and presence, as well as the content areas Conroy so helpfully describes. In this expanded model, supervisors work for integration of the psychospiritual dynamics of both the intern directors as directors as well as in their approach to their directees.

Estadt's Model

The most helpful overall framework for individual supervision of spiritual directors upon which this third model is derived is Barry Estadt's description of supervision in the pastoral counseling context. ("The Core Process of Supervision" in *The Art of Clinical Supervision*). He describes the stages in the supervisory relationship as itself a parallel process for the director. The supervisory relationship has the same stages of development as the spiritual direction relationship (establishing the working relationship, the work of the established alliance, and concluding the supervisory alliance), and often models for the director the same skills and helping processes of exploration, insight, and action possibilities that the director is facilitating in spiritual direction. In addition, Estadt's schema better identifies several supervisory concerns with beginning directors. Estadt's complete chart (adapted

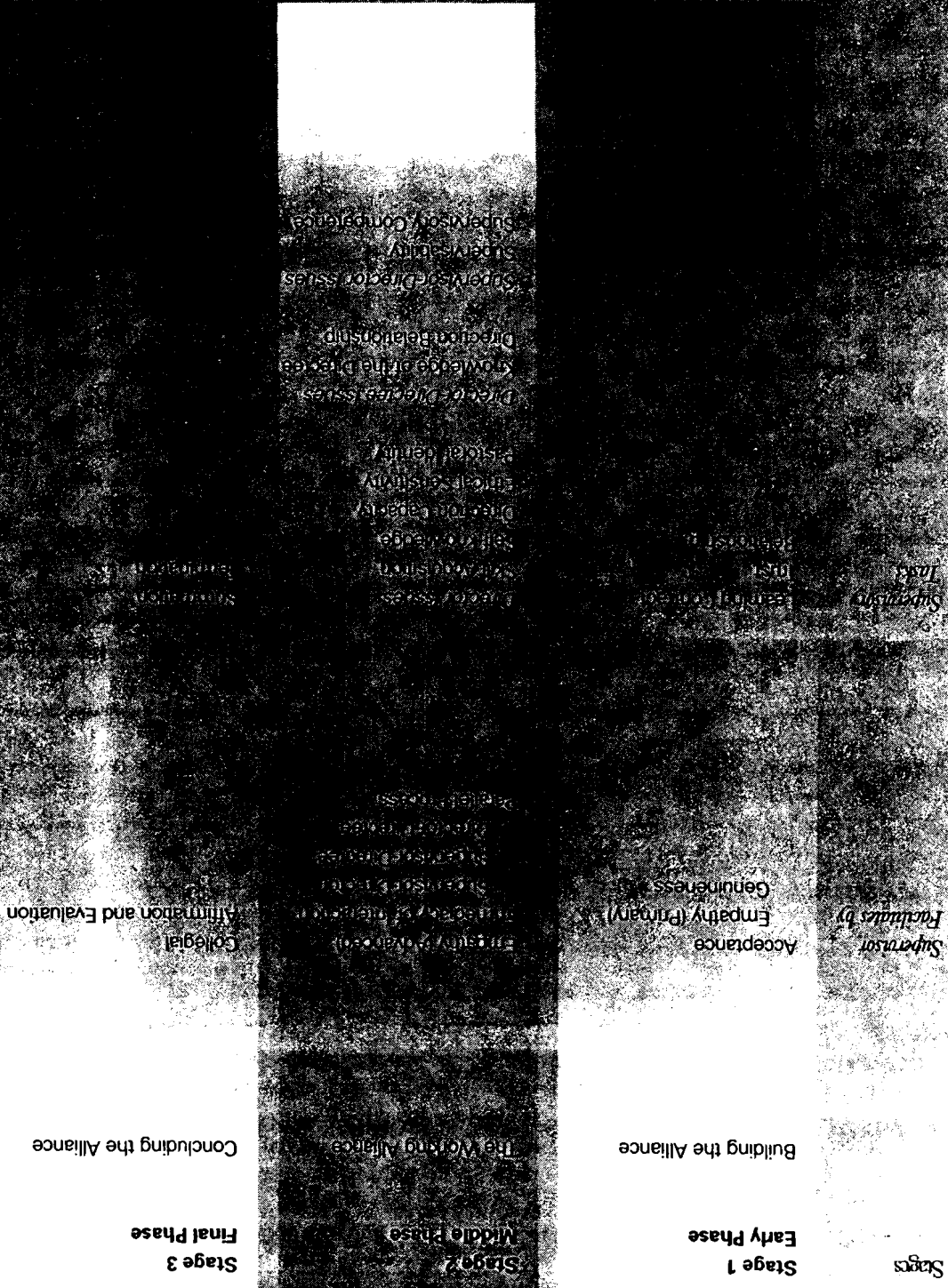
*"I supervise differently
depending on the level of
skill and experience a director
initially brings to the practicum
and on the stage of the
supervisory experience."*

to supervising inexperienced spiritual directors) appears on p. 26.

Generalized Dynamic of Supervision

Most supervisors agree that the focus of spiritual direction supervision is the experience of the director in spiritual direction sessions. The purpose of supervision is to help directors explore their new experience—attending leading to awareness. This evocative, contemplative exploration leads to insight about what might have happened with the focus on the director's interior experiencing. In addition, the feelings arising from role-playing with the directee frequently yield insight about the directee's experience in the session. Finally, this insight or new perspective on the experience leads to personalizing and integration. The director takes the insight and projects potential new responses to a similar situation. Hence personalizing includes the director's arriving at new responses out of his/her own unique personality as well as embracing behavior change in the direction process, such as refraining from advice-giving, teaching, or inappropriate self-disclosure. These behaviors may then be replaced by ones that facilitate their directees' dynamic self-exploration, leading to their own insights and eventually personalizing or

The Stages of Supervision



behavior change. This cycle is repeated over and over again in supervision, modeling for the director the same skills needed in direction sessions.

Director's Issues

Estadt's categories under Director Issues clarify and specify some supervisory tasks not identified as sharply in the other frameworks for spiritual direction supervision. At the beginning of our practicum, supervisors personally interview all the potential directees interns will see during the practicum time. Potential directees are referred to other growth opportunities if the supervisor is unable to discover a positive and realistic motivation for spiritual direction and a sufficiently developed personal relationship with God. Supervisors have an ethical responsibility to insure that intern directors do no harm to their directees although mistakes are inevitable. Supervisors initially need to pay a great deal of attention to the way directors are interpreting the unfolding content their directees disclose. Are the directors reasonably accurate, focused on spiritual direction content while aware of their directees' entire life context in a holistic way? Are they patient enough to discover their directees' internal and external resources or do they assume they don't have many? Do the directors have the necessary knowledge to respond to their directees' issues? Is this knowledge about prayer or normal dynamics of growth in the spiritual life? Is this knowledge psychological—recognizing serious depression or suicidal thoughts, for instance? Do they have sufficient facility with Scripture to be able to support their directees' scripturally-based prayer?

Initial Stages of Supervision

The first supervision session usually focuses on the experience the intern directors are having in their initial interviews with their directees, reassuring them in order to reduce anxiety in the new role, and discovering whether or not directors have been able to elicit and respond to some aspect of their directees' religious experience. Supervisors encourage the director to make their initial connection with their directees through contemplative presence and response to some present moment aspect of the directees' spiritual expe-

rience. Even in this initial stage when anxiety is normally high and surprise is often the order of the day, some directors report being deeply moved by and drawn into the directees' experience of God. They are beginning to feel their innate responses to the sacred mystery their directees experience and are calmed and consoled by that. In addition, as supervisors, they look for some resemblance between the directors' assessment of their directees and their own sense of the same directees. All of this entails working with the directors' perceptions and initial understandings of their directees. Supervisors look for the interns' developing knowledge of their directees' characteristic religious experience and personality styles. They assess how well they are able to appropriately draw on the helping skills they learned prior to the practicum. Some interns have unique ways of responding to their directees. One new director spontaneously expressed his felt response to his directee's spiritual narrative with lovely metaphors which exactly captured the felt tone and content of the directee's statements without actually naming the feeling. It was as if metaphor spoke directly to metaphor. Supervisors notice and affirm such creativity and delicacy, helping directors recognize and appreciate these natural gifts.

Directors in the Fordham program have had forty-two hours of a helping skills class which typically covers the skills of reflective listening, exploration of feelings, concreteness, genuineness, both basic and advanced empathy, and sometimes focusing. They usually work so hard at learning to reflect feelings and content back to their directees that the result is they have only just begun to connect information from session to session and to offer tentative beginning interpretations leading to insight. They have usually not yet learned how to invite the directee to move from insight to behavior change or another form of personalizing the insight. Thus, at the beginning of the practicum, intern directors need to consolidate these helping skills and apply them in the service of spiritual direction—choosing to explore the feelings which lead to discovering their directees' religious experience or exploring the feelings and reactions of the directees in response to their consoling experiences. Supervisors probe why directors focus on the contents

“The directors’ ability . . . unfolds throughout the entire practicum. For some it is highly apparent from the beginning; for others it will take the whole practicum really to grasp what the process is about . . .”



Digitized version of a photo featuring Aug Starr and Roger Hadden, OF.

they did? Are they problem-centered or God-centered? Are they able to inhabit the contemplative attitude as described by Barry and Connolly, (*The Art of Spiritual Direction*, chapter 4) or by Tilden Edwards as “Immediate Givenness to God”? Do they have a feel for where to look for God in their directees’ experience and how to support response to it when discovered? Can they use their skills of attending and exploring in this sensitive area? Are they beginning to embody a contemplative approach to spiritual direction?

Most of the interns in the Fordham program already have a pastoral or professional identity other than that of spiritual director. They grow in self-knowledge as they begin to recognize that they are more comfortable with another role which has attuned them to want to teach, give advice, mother, reconcile, or catechize. Throughout the supervisory process the director’s self-knowledge deepens and grows. Directors are referred back to their own spiritual direction to explore and resolve their spiritual issues which are triggered in their role as director and uncovered in supervision. Some become envious of their directees’ flourishing prayer life and are invited to deepen their own. Others move away from their directees’ consoling experiences because they are currently experiencing God’s absence instead of closeness. Intern directors are referred to counseling or therapeutic relationships if their own existential issues

are impairing or complicating their work in direction. Some directors tend to emphasize the exploration of feelings in their work with directees as their principal skill. Others who are more cognitive in orientation tend to emphasize insight. As directors grow to understand their tendency of special interest, they can more consciously integrate a balance between the two skills and phases of the helping process. Those who rush to insight, offering it ready-made for their directees, can learn to slow down and spend enough time in the exploration phase so that directees can arrive at insight about themselves through facilitation rather than through announcement. Those who are more adept at lifting up the feelings can learn from the insight specialists that feelings lead shifts in relationships and changes of behavior. Every feeling does not necessarily need to be explored. These directors can begin to move toward interpretation and awareness leading to insight. Once both phases are integrated, directors are free to shift their focus to explore possible behavior changes and offer the appropriate support directees need to implement and consolidate those changes in their lives.

The directors’ ability to function helpfully unfolds through out the entire practicum. For some it is highly apparent from the beginning; for others it will take the whole practicum really to grasp what the process is about and how to participate in it. In both pre-practicum courses and in the practicum, supervisors

encourage directors to recognize not only moral issues as they emerge in their own or their directees' experience but also to recognize societal or systemic forms of injustice which contribute to the concrete suffering of their directees. We hope they discover how to accompany their directees through exploration and insight so that directees are empowered to make their own moral judgments and respond to possibilities of addressing situations of injustice.

Finally, by the end of the practicum, supervisors test to see if directors have a fairly clear new identity as a spiritual director distinct from other pastoral or professional ones. Are they still attracted to this ministry? Has this been affirmed through the experience with their directees and in supervision? Supervisors also do careful work with boundaries and with professional pastoral ethics related to this new role as a spiritual director for the intern. Throughout the practicum, this new identity is slowly or rapidly unfolding and is received with ambivalence, tentativeness, and often welcome.

Director-Directee Issues

In Estadt's framework, the director-directee issues category has only two subdivisions: knowledge of the client, and the direction relationship itself. This first category, knowledge of the client, easily encompasses Maureen Conroy's attention to interior movements in both the directee and director and the whole process of discernment *vis-a-vis* directees' experience. To these dynamics, Fordham supervisors add a holistic assessment which takes into account physical, situational, psychological, and systemic realities which affect the spirituality and religious experience of the directee. Thus, directors keep the contexts of their directees in awareness, yielding a more realistic interpretation of their directees' spiritual dimension.

The category of the direction relationship includes Conroy's primary content of how directors' issues are affecting their responses to their directee, namely, directors' personal issues, their experience of interior movements; moral, theological, or cultural differences; development of contemplative attitude; and overall quality of the relationship with the directee.

Supervisor-Director Issues

Estadt's third set of supervisory tasks revolves around supervisor-director issues. After many practicums, supervisors learn to screen potential directors for their capacity to participate in and benefit from the supervision experience as well as for their capacity to accompany directees. Pre-practicum case work is aimed at helping the potential director to notice and become aware of spontaneous reactions to directees' personal narratives, as well as to identify key aspects of the person's spiritual journey and present growing edges. Twenty potential directors will have twenty different responses and interpretations of this case material which serves as a flashpoint for their reflections and reactions. In both this exercise and the pastoral counseling and spiritual direction skills course, supervisors look for the director's openness to influence from peers and teachers. Are they able to go deeper in noticing their own reactions and wondering what the roots are? Are they aware of their own inner process and can they begin to articulate it? Can they receive both negative and positive feedback? In both the pre-practicum courses and the practicum, usually the most spiritually and pastorally experienced interns (the most naturally gifted directors) are the most open to reflecting on their experience and the most amenable to influence in the supervisory process. The least naturally gifted and the most psychologically distressed are frequently the least able to receive a clear recommendation that their gifts lie elsewhere and that they should not continue to offer spiritual direction to others for various individual reasons.

Those directors who exhibit a high level of supervisability develop supervisory competence. They learn from everything—successes and mistakes. They know when they need help and ask for it. They reflect deeply on their experience with directees and become increasingly able to internalize the supervisory process. Just making notes in preparation for supervision often reveals a great deal of initial insight for them and they recognize where and how they might have made better responses. They recognize when the complexity of a given situation requires consultation and more specific knowledge. They are usually the

most able to explore their own reactions deeply enough to be able with help to recognize their countertransferential reactions and learn from them.

The Middle Phase of Supervision

Estadt emphasizes that advanced empathy and immediacy are the principal skills used by the supervisor in the middle phase of the supervisory process. The supervisor's ability to receive directors just as they are, gifted or struggling, easy or difficult to be with, is expressed through advanced empathic responses to the directors' feelings about their experience. Since supervisors never know what is going to come up in a session, the process—just as in spiritual direction itself—is often intuitive and immediate. Supervisors can help directors who are unable to name complex feelings stirred up by their directees through sharing what the supervisor might feel with this particular directee. The supervisor may role play with the director to get a more fully embodied sense of what might be going on. The supervisor's spontaneity, flexibility, and perhaps broader repertoire of responses to the director often models the way it feels when directors are free both to be entirely themselves and also to serve their directees' growth. Each supervisor will have her or his own unique style and emphasis, as will directors.

Ending Phase of Supervision

Concluding the supervisory relationship provides wonderful opportunities to understand consciously the feelings associated with the termination phase of both the spiritual direction relationship and the supervisory relationship. The supervisory process allows space and time to reflect on endings and how to summarize, affirm, and potentially ease intern directors in both processes. If the parallel process between supervision and spiritual direction are not experientially clear earlier in the process, they surely are by the end.

Conclusion

In an effort to expand the way supervisors understand their work with spiritual directors, especially in the practicum phase of a spiritual direction program,

I have proposed an integrated model of supervision. It integrates the original insights of The Center for Spiritual Development Model of supervision, Maureen Conroy's elaboration of that basic model, and Barry Estadt's unifying framework of supervision with pastoral counselors. This framework includes the structured approach to helping skills development that is part of some pastoral counseling programs. This more all-encompassing model enables supervisors to integrate more easily within the supervisory process attention to both the spiritual dimensions and contemplative approaches required for spiritual direction, with significant attention to helping skills and psychological dynamics. It advances a theoretical model of supervision that recognizes different stages in the supervisory process itself and takes into account the differences between inexperienced and more experienced spiritual directors. ■

Bibliography

- Barry, William, and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Chapter 4. New York: Seabury, 1982.
- Cleary, Miriam, "Societal Context for Supervision," *Presence* 4.3, 12ff. The "Experience Cycle" is used during the pre-practicum course.
- Conroy, Maureen, *Looking Into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995.
- Edwards, Tilden, "Immediate Givenness to God in the Spiritual Direction Relationship," *Presence* 1.2, 5-12.
- Egan, Gerard, *The Skilled Helper: A Systemic Approach to Effective Helping*. Monterey Brooks/Cole, 1986.
- Estadt, Barry, "The Core Process of Supervision" in *The Art of Clinical Supervision: A Pastoral Counseling Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Fitchett, George, *Assessing Spiritual Needs: A Guide for Caregivers*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. I have developed a spiritual assessment section in greater detail for spiritual directors. This tool is used in the pre-practicum course.
- Hill, Clara E., and Karen M. O'Brien, *Helping Skills: Facilitating Exploration, Insight, and Action*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999.