

'Teach Me Your Ways' - Theological Reflection in Supervision

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Psalm 25: 1-2, 4-5 (HCSB)

Lord, I turn to You. My God, I trust in You.
Do not let me be disgraced ...
Make Your ways known to me, Lord; teach me Your paths.
Guide me in Your truth and teach me,
for You are the God of my salvation;

Supervision is a professional relationship of safe space that fosters the skills and insights that enable people to flourish in their work. When both supervisor and supervisee have a Christian faith there is the wonderful opportunity to deepen supervision with theological reflection. This article discusses the process of explicitly bringing God into the conversation. I suggest that this might involve a movement during the supervision session as the supervisee describes an experience and reflects on it, connects it with insights about God, and gains clarity about professional practice.

First, a little about myself. My ancestors hail from England and Denmark. My father was a High School teacher who spent most of his career in Māori and Pacific communities. My mother would have made an excellent counsellor and supervisor; she just does it naturally, creating warm curious space in which others feel warmly appreciated. They brought me up in an environment rich with faith and culture and the natural world. As a teenager I committed my life to Jesus, and have never regretted that decision. My journey has included youth ministry, counselling and ordination, and now professional supervision is a significant component of my work.

Psalm 25 came to mind as I was preparing this topic. It begins with a turning towards, a choosing to trust in God. The Psalmist is in a bad space; verses 16 to 19 reveal a person familiar with *mamae*, pain, stress, worry, who feels under attack. But this is not a Psalm of complaint, but of turning towards God as the way through. The attitude is one of learning; in a supervision context we might call this 'personal and professional development'. Teach me, show me, guide me; *whakaakona, whakakitea, ārahina*.

Psalm 25 starts by addressing God directly, then shifts to talking about God, then back to 'first person' prayer. The Psalms often do this and it confuses me. Looking at it through a supervision lens makes me wonder if there is another person present, witnessing the prayer to God, talking with the Psalmist about the character and work of God, then stepping back out of way. But it is clear that the cry 'teach me your ways' is directed at God, not at another person. If I am present with this person as supervisor, it is not me

who is teaching my ways. I see it as my job to affirm, as in verses 12 and 14, that God is speaking directly, that you (the supervisee) can trust what you hear and what you know and act on that with confidence.

The question is: how? How does God teach us and train us, and how can supervision be a place where this happens reliably, truthfully and ethically? Or maybe the question is: what is our job in this process? The answer is to pay attention; to keep our eyes on God (v15) and to “wait” for God (v21). My starting conviction is that God is a dynamic conversation partner – in our lives, in our work, and in the supervision hour. Theological reflection is deliberately paying attention to God’s communication in human experience. It hopes to reveal the presence, nature and action of God – not just in theory but in practice, not just long ago but here and now.

I would like to propose a four-part process; not to be prescriptive, but because this is what I see happening. This is what comes naturally to me. It has a beginning and an end in a purposeful movement towards integration and insight. It is a method of personal and professional development. My clients say that it is a relief to bring spirituality into conversations about work, because this process honours all of who they are. It is enriching to know that Wairua Tapu is in it with us.

1. Notice the experience

We begin with something that the supervisee is experiencing; probably but not necessarily in their work. As with every supervision session the invitation is to ‘tell me more about that’. The situation will be outlined, together with the supervisee’s thoughts, responses and emotions. (It’s clunky to keep using those titles so from now on I’ll talk about “me” as the supervisor and “you” as the supervisee.)

I reflect back to you what I hear to check that I heard accurately. And I pay particular attention to points of tension for you. I summarise the things that pull you in different directions, or the dilemma you are facing. Together we notice what you are experiencing.

2. Inhabit the experience

Then we are ready to go deeper. There are two practices I use. The first is body awareness. I am curious about your embodied experience. I may ask you to put your feet on the floor and breathe for a moment, and tell me what you are feeling in your body. Where are the points of pain or tension, tiredness or energy? What does it feel like?

To me this is a form of prayer, though not a conscious one. To breathe and to notice your body slows you down, creates a quietness within. I trust Holy Spirit to reveal the truth that our bodies know but our minds ignore.

I am not content with one answer: what else do you notice? And what else? People are complex creatures and there are always layers.

The other practice is the language of metaphor. Once you have shared your situation I ask, “How might you describe this experience? If we could see it here in the room with us, what would it look like?” Sometimes I invite my clients to draw it with crayons on a page. It helps to keep it playful. Not all people naturally think in images, but most people can have a go at “It’s like ...”. The lived experience undergoes a translation into spirit experience, with a God-given creative spark. And then we have a shared brand-new thing in-between us that we can play with.

3. Orient to God's perspective

Once we have noticed the experience and inhabited it more fully, then we can shift our point of view and invite God more explicitly into the conversation. Here we have (at least) two wonderful resources.

First, scripture. "What in the Bible does this remind you of?" I find that Bible words and images are hugely powerful and transformative. It's a challenge to continually be enlarging our biblical literacy, so that we have more and more biblical truth to draw on. I generally don't open the Bible; I don't even keep one in my counselling room. I trust God to remind both of us of the truth we already know and apply it to this situation. I love the 'a-ha!' moments as my clients connect with scripture in fresh ways.

Second, doing theology means grappling with hard questions. As we identify points of pain and struggle I might ask, "Can I invite you to sit with that for a moment?" Sit and wait. Hold the difficult stuff. "Consider my affliction and trouble." (Psalm 25:18) Good theology is brave theology. Why? Because it has the crucifixion at the centre. Nothing is more courageous than the cross. And so nothing is beyond God's loving concern. Nowhere is outside of God's covenant with us.

We are good at practicing the presence of God in each other's loss, sadness or fatigue, but less good at recognising God at work in anger, embarrassment, shame or failure. We are quick to jump in to reassure: "It's not that bad. It wasn't really a failure." Theological reflection gently pushes past any and every emotion towards discerning the teaching voice of Christ.

The task of supervision is to bring a fresh external point of view and so to uphold high standards of ethical practice. This must mean asking hard questions or offering challenges with a kindly wondering; "May integrity and what is right watch over me." (21a) Supervisors must not collude with the blind spots of their supervisees. God's teaching and guiding is always gracious but not always easy.

Sometimes, just quiet is enough. Just breathing in and out. Just waiting and trusting. "E tūmanako ana hoki ahau ki a koe." (21b)

4. Back to work

Often my supervision clients head straight back to work after their session with me (though some like to plan supervision for the end of the day so they don't have to). Theological reflection should generate relevant learnings that enrich and support this person's work. It often helps to round off the process with a focus on expressing insights, in ways that enable you to carry them with you. If we have used paper and pens I will invite you to choose a colour for God and write what God is saying to you. I encourage people to make their own notes, journal or poetry, when they get home.

As well as faith insights, this process will also produce clarity about work issues. I ensure there is time at the end of the session to talk about practical implications: "When you are living from this truth, what difference will it make to how you function in your role?" "What will others notice about you?"

No one supervision session would cover all these aspects of theological reflection. And your practice will look quite different to mine. I hope that this description of professional process helps bring to mind for you what you know about how God communicates with us and forms us, and how our work roles can benefit from body awareness, spiritual connections and the resources of scripture and theology.