

## **“Do Pastors Need Professional Supervision?”**

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### **I**

Due to family concerns, I retired from full-time ordained ministry in the CRC after twenty-seven years of being a pastor. Along with being a retired pastor, I am now a licensed clinical social worker in Cadillac, MI. One striking difference between pastoring and social work is the function and role of supervision. To become a fully licensed social worker I had to acquire four-thousand hours of social work practice under weekly professional supervision by another fully licensed social worker. This component of social work training for State licensure is non-negotiable and done with serious intentionality. In fact, while under supervision, the social work license of the supervisor is the actual provider license under which the supervisee works and is paid for services. That means that all the repercussions, from, say, any malpractice, fall upon the supervisor's license, not the supervisee. It is serious business!

Professional supervision consists of a candid review and empowering of both the social worker's practice and personhood in order to practice ethically and therapeutically and “do no harm” to the clients. I believe that pastors need a similar kind of supervision.

To illustrate why I believe in this premise, imagine a wartime scene in which a group of wounded soldiers must be brought cross-country through miles of mine fields to reach a hospital for care. And you, as a Lieutenant, have been commissioned to get them there. At first you tremble at the thought of how difficult it will be to reach the hospital without suffering casualties from hidden landmines that lay in your path. You also fear getting lost because you have never crossed this countryside before. But then, to your great relief, an experienced soldier who has crossed this terrain many times and who even knows how to locate and disarm landmines volunteers to guide you in this perilous journey. Suddenly, your hope shoots sky-high as you now follow your “marching orders” with much greater expectation of success. What a gift! What a blessing to have this kind of help!

Isn't a pastor on a similar perilous mission in leading his parishioners to the healing place where Gospel Grace does its work in and on them? And the pastor's journey is also laden with landmines, of a sort, which, if not discovered and handled delicately and wisely, can “dismember” many souls. So, like the Lieutenant, how grateful and relieved he should feel if someone who has clinical/pastoral expertise in handling relational landmines offers to guide him and help him disarm any explosive situations. Yet many pastors forge ahead into the war zones of spiritual battle both alone and insufficiently resourced to avoid and disarm ministry perils. Human souls are deep waters, full of unseen, diverging, interpersonal currents which, when a pastor gets caught up in them while pastoring his flock, can subtly pull him or her in a direction they didn't intend or desire. So why not give the pastor (and spouse) the blessing of solid guidance, particularly in the early years of ministry, so that they have a life-line of wisdom and guidance to get them and their congregation through that ministry minefield unharmed?

What are some of the “relational landmines” I refer to? **First** of all it is noteworthy to point out not only **the sheer number of relationships** that are thrust upon pastors, but also the **many kinds of relationships** within which pastors are expected to

operate. Each sphere requires different information, different skills and a different relationship. The main spheres of pastoral ministry are:

1. Personal relationships with family, friends and parishioners.
2. Pastoral relationships with parishioners.
3. Adversarial relationships with critics.
4. Therapeutic relationships with counselees.
5. Supervisory relationships with elders, deacons and subordinate staff.
6. Ecclesiological relationships with classical and denominational co-workers.
7. Professional relationships with other community leaders.
8. Ecumenical relationships with other community pastors.
9. Others?

This can all add up to literally hundreds of relationships of which a pastor must be mindful, giving heed to the expectations and responsibilities that each one brings. It is this great number and great diversity of relationships which itself creates the threat of emotional exhaustion stemming from the psychological task of absorbing so many others' needs and concerns and weighing in appropriately. And it is from this exhaustion that four relational detonators can emerge - interpersonal avoidance, passive aggressive anger, lack of empathy and ministerial superficiality – all maladies that can derail a pastor's ministry. But what about these relational landmines? I will discuss nine of them, although I suspect there are more.

**The first relational landmine is the tension of dual relationships.** When a pastor develops friends in her church because she needs friends and some of her parishioners feel like “kindred spirits” or share similar interests, both she and her “friend” must be able to live with the uncomfortable tension of mutually switching roles from friend to parishioner/pastor. Eventually, this tension can become troublesome when the pastor or parishioner either disagree or fail to meet the expectations of the other in church matters. At that time, the “speaking the truth in love” conversation that needs to happen may not for fear of creating hurt feelings. This dynamic becomes particularly difficult when a pastor's “friend” serves on the elder board and this tension keeps the elder from doing her job as an elder which, in part, is to help the pastor be a better pastor. The result of this avoidance of conflict is that everyone loses. The pastor questions the friendship because it proved itself conditional and the friend questions her role as an elder because she couldn't be honest or helpful in her elder role. Without resolution, both the personal and professional relationship diminishes.

**Secondly,** every pastor, if he seeks to be obedient to the *Great Commission*, is a **change agent toward the *status quo*** of a fallen human nature that resists God's transforming work on our beings. The pastor's job is to help the church become a “body” that the Spirit uses to transform people from spiritual orphans into children of God, who then go forth to transform the culture. This task brings a pastor to addressing the congregational culture and shaping it into one that fits the mission and the vision of the *Great Commission*. He is a change agent sent by God and he is usually willing to suffer for that calling. And, unfortunately, most congregations will usually insure that the pastor does, indeed, suffer some in fulfilling that calling when they painfully experience

some of the changes that their “change-agent pastor” attempts to bring about. A unique irony of pastoral work is that the pastor leads those who, in fact, by order of the Church Order, lead him by his accountability to the elders. Therefore, church leadership is, in a way, a subversive work. In other words, the pastor brings about change, not through dictation, but through humble servant hood, influence, inspiration, modeling and building pastoral credibility. This counter-intuitive approach to leadership is a Holy Spirit led art, not a science of method.

**Thirdly, a pastor must wear many and, what sometimes feels like, opposite professional hats in her work.** She must be both a dignified professional on Sunday and the “crazy, fun pastor” at the church picnic. She must be an “angel of mercy” at the bedside of the sick and dying as well as the confrontational voice of God from the pulpit. She must submit to the authority of the elders and then insist on submission from her subordinate staff. She must be a bold defender of the faith in the public forum as well as the non-judgmental listener to the one who curses God for what feels like God’s injustice. She must be the likable, well-imaged public church figurehead out in the community as well as one who can retreat into solitude of personal repentance to clean and refresh her soul. She must lead the family of God as well as lead her own family. She must publicly hold up high standards of faith as well as agonize over her own confusing doubts. Very few people can adequately be such a chameleon of change and personalities. But it is expected of pastors, nevertheless, and part of the gift mix needed for ministry.

**Fourthly, a pastor, particularly if he is married with children, must keep the “church as mistress” at a safe distance in order to preserve marital faithfulness and parental responsibility.** When your work is your life and your life is your work, as it can be in parish ministry, the pastor’s family life will necessarily be absorbed into congregational life. In part this feels good because the pastor’s family also needs interpersonal connections and they may have moved to the church’s location from a far away place, leaving behind friends and family. But there is a potential threat in this communal need; it happens when a spouse or a pastor’s children come to realize that they must share their father/husband with a jealous mistress (the congregation), who also wants the pastor’s love and attention. Both wife and children can come to feel cheated by this dual loyalty and become resentful toward both the congregation and their father/husband, feeling betrayed and abandoned as he attends to his “mistress.” An angry, rejected family may increasingly alienate themselves from the congregation. This dynamic and the conflict it can create in a pastor’s household can shut down a pastor’s passion to lead and serve his flock. Too many “preacher’s kids” and spouses have reported that their dad and husband was more of a parent/husband to the congregation than he was to them. This creates stressful tensions in the pastoral family which can be lived out painfully even in following generations.

**Landmine number five is the unrealistic expectation of a responsibility for the pastor to be available to the congregation 24/7/365 days of the year.** No doubt, it is a joy and privilege of pastoral ministry to “*hatch, match and dispatch*” people you have grown to love and care for, even at all hours of the day and on all days of the year. It is a great to celebrate so many human triumphs and to cry with so many human tragedies.

When pastor and congregation do this together in union with Christ, they communally soak in the Good News that nothing can separate them from Christ's love. The problems come when pastors don't set boundaries on this expectation, and also when they do set boundaries. If a pastor doesn't set boundaries, he can get emotionally used up, unfairly interrupted or imposed upon. If he does set boundaries, he may be accused of not caring enough or not doing his job. It can be a no-win situation and requires open, gracious communication with the congregation about conflicting needs.

**Number six relates to clinical dynamics of a therapeutic or pastoral relationship.** More specifically, a pastor needs to have clarity about *transference and counter-transference* when acting in a pastoral role. Professional skills are required to wade these muddy waters. *Transference* is an unconscious process where attitudes, feelings and desires of our early significant relationships get transferred onto another person in the present moment. One begins to experience the person in the pastoral encounter in much the same way one experienced a significant person from one's past. Those feelings can be either positive or negative. In other words, a parishioner who "falls in love" with the pastor or who feels irritation toward him may be experiencing feelings which have little to do with the pastor, but are, in fact, transferred feelings from unmet needs or unresolved conflicts with people from the past. Such perceptions and the resulting responses can blindsides a pastor. Meanwhile, the parishioner may have no idea how much distortion is occurring in their view of their pastor as a result of this transference. The pastor is vulnerable to the same transference toward his parishioners. Such scenarios, when played out while being unaware of the source of one's feelings, can lead to disastrous personal encounters.

*Counter-transference* is when the pastor finds himself having feelings and thoughts about a parishioner that are independent of, yet triggered by, the pastoral encounter. They may be of a nature that it would be harmful to share with the parishioner, such as "*I really don't like the sound of his whining. He is making a mountain out of a mole hill. What a complainer he is!*" A pastor must allow for such authentic feelings and thoughts within himself, but obviously not share them or act on them which would disrupt the pastoral relationship. The pastor must be able to set those feelings and thoughts aside and later reflect on their source and deal with them outside of the pastoral encounter. This counter-transference may stem from some of the pastor's own "baggage" which brings to the surface unmet needs or unresolved conflicts from deep within himself. Without training, which usually includes personal therapy or Clinical Pastoral Education, pastors are vulnerable to a host of mixed messages from both the parishioners or from within themselves which, if they remain unknown or not understood but are acted on, can lead one into complicated relational landmines which will sabotage pastoral relationships.

**Next in line is church politics.** Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions to collectively run or direct social matters. Relationships, power and authority are part of the mix of politics. This definition hints at the complexity of politics and most church members have experienced how it can sometimes bring out the worst in people. That is one reason that it is not wise to select a new Christian to a church board because the "church politics" they may experience there can

potentially disillusion or discourage them in their new-found faith. Something is wrong with that picture.

Why are church politics so potentially distasteful? First of all, the very need for “politicking” feels out of place in a church because Jesus Christ is the real leader of a church and what congregation would want to compromise His directives? But in the course of collective efforts to follow God, “people are still (fallen) people” and conflict or cross purposes will always arise out of diverse beliefs and values. That is why Paul, the Apostle, exhorts the Ephesian church to “*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.*”

My purpose here is not to discuss the topic of church politics at great depth but to simply point out that it is an important part of a pastor’s work to wisely navigate these turbulent seas and be aware of that which can make the waters of ministry dangerously choppy. One example of choppiness is not differentiating diversity from division when people disagree on church matters. One is to be celebrated, the other reconciled. Secondly, most policy struggles are to some degree based on unwritten or nebulous “church rules” which come out of bias, preference or hidden convictions more than Biblical teaching. Unfortunately, they usually carry as much political weight as the Church Order in church decisions. Thirdly, anyone attending the church is given the right to “play” church politics. It is not limited to the appointed or elected leaders. If you have a conviction, a voice and a willingness to raise it; if you show up, you can influence. Finally, most pastors’ tenure in a church is, simply, just a short chapter in the longer story of this congregations history and it is presumptuous and even offensive to the congregation if the pastor attempts to lead them without taking the time to learn and appreciate their unique story. I have seen many pastors zeal filed down to a maintenance mode by the church battles that erupted when he interjected a vision that didn’t assimilate that congregation’s unique story with his own.

**Number eight is that criticism and opposition to a pastor’s leadership is usually passive-aggressive in its delivery.** So often pastors ask, “*Why am I the last one to hear about what I supposedly did wrong?*” By the time it reaches the pastor’s attention, most of the congregation already knows and has already discussed the concern. As we all know, being the last stop on the rumor mill about yourself hurts and one feels uncared for. One reason for passive-aggressive delivery of criticism is that parishioners, as previously mentioned, are usually in a dual relationship with the pastor – she is both comforter in times of trouble and confronter in times of failure. She brings the two-edged sword of the Word which cuts people free of pain and cuts people off into pain. This tension in dual relationships creates some degree of uneasiness which causes a reluctance to speak openly and honestly with the pastor. As a result, most churches have one or two elders picked out upon whom the congregation unloads their concerns about the pastor. This creates a triangle through which the criticism flows but which, because it is a dysfunctional process, seldom brings about its desired effect.

Secondly, church life usually strives to be a “feel-good process” because it is legitimately based upon a “feel-good Gospel of good news.” It is assumed that congregational life should be a haven of rest and care in a stress-filled world, energizing the members around a Gospel mission which validates people in giftedness and servant hearts. This is true and so dealing with criticism of the church leadership must also be

built into that positive approach by having a “win-win” attitude toward failure, using conflict as an opportunity to grow. But this takes mature elder-leadership to pull off and if this is lacking, members will tend to either deny negativity or shelve it, allowing a concern to fester and grow into more than what it was ever intended it to mean. If criticism remains the boogey-man of congregational life, it will always scare us and come back to bite us.

Pastors resent passive-aggressive communication. It doesn't feel fair, especially to a pastor's spouse who usually never gets all the facts nor the opportunity or permission to fairly “fight back.” It adds to the burden a pastor bears in leading his flock and since most pastors don't have genuinely thick skins, good supervision could bring the first-aid kit their souls often require.

**Finally, there is the challenge of spiritual warfare.** Until and unless a pastor learns and believes that real, evil, spiritual forces will oppose him, he will be vulnerable to unexpected, hellish attacks that will frustrate his ministry and cause him to question his calling. There is more in doing Christian ministry than what meets the eye. If you were trying to grow a retail business of selling your famous home-made peach pies and you failed, you could simply conclude that some mistakes must have been made in implementing the principles of free enterprise. But, when a truly, biblical church fails to reach its community with Gospel ministry or implodes upon itself, we can biblically assume that there could be more to this failure than what meets the eye. We can, from what the Bible teaches, fairly assume that spiritual forces targeted this ministry, found a foothold and went in for the kill. If a pastor is unaware, in denial or ill-equipped to fight this kind of battle with entities of evil, these spirits can ravage personal lives and disperse congregations. Unfortunately, too many pastors in the Reformed tradition receive neither the Biblical teaching nor the hands-on training to fight and win the battles against Satan's evil forces.

## II

So what is to be done for pastors to aid them in the potentially perilous journey of leading churches? I suggest a formal process of pastoral-clinical supervision, especially the first five years of his ordained ministry. Officially, according to our church polity, the elders already have the task of supervising the pastor, in doctrine and in life. But, it is indeed rare that a collective body of elders is adequately equipped for the task of supervising the day to day pastoral work, especially if the landmines mentioned above become the issues of supervision. CRC church polity and how it structures churches has not kept up with the growing complexity of pastoral ministry, especially in regard to insuring adequate supervision of pastors. But the Church Order is a tough bird to chew. The resulting void has spawned a variety of unofficial mentoring experiments to meet the needs of struggling pastors. Some are consistory initiated and others are clinician-pastor initiated. And others are inadequate, token attempts to give the false appearance that “matters are in hand.”

One denominational attempt created in the 1980's was something called the “Pastoral Relations Committee.” Its intention was to give the pastor (and spouse) a “safe” place (or group of people) with whom they could let down their hair, vent and

receive some confidential TLC and guidance. Although this can be very helpful, the fault of this kind of “supervision” is that it consists of members of the congregation and, again, creates dual roles for both the committee’s members and the pastoral couple. It doesn’t take long before people start to squirm in the midst of conflicts of interest. This happens because most congregational members are not able to love their pastors unconditionally. Their “love” is always conditioned by the pastor’s performance in caring for the congregation which will always fall short in some area of ministry.

The rules of social work insist on supervision. Every social worker has a supervisor, even the ones at the top of the professional ladder. The reason is that everyone needs to be under authority. “No man (or woman) is an island unto himself.” We all need mirrors to reflect back to us an accurate image of ourselves and we all need “magic mirrors” to compassionately speak truth into us to help us make right decisions and create right behavior in our care of our constituents.

I believe that professional pastoral-clinical supervision should be mandated by official CRC Church Polity. Secondly, the responsibility of professional supervision of a local pastor should move from the Classis level to the local church level where each local church council contracts with a “pastoral-clinical supervisor” person to give professional supervision to its pastor(s). Thirdly, the relationship between the pastoral supervisor and the elders needs further contemplation with our current church order in mind which gives only elders and denominational assemblies authority to “disciple” a pastor. Returning to the military metaphor from the introduction, should the soldier guiding the Lieutenant have authority to take control of the mission if he sees the Lieutenant making a fatal mistake? Is he left only with his power of persuasion to avert disaster? In other words, can the pastoral supervisor become more than a mentor/coach to the pastor and have some recourse other than persuasion should he and the pastor reach an impasse on an issue which has serious ramifications for the health of both the pastor and the church? A suggestion is that the supervisor would be given the authority to convene the elders and pastor(s) should such an impasse requiring resolution arise. Then the supervisor’s concern becomes the elder’s concern and final authority to disciple the pastor remains with the elders, as our Church Order currently dictates.

A social worker can’t legally practice social work without a professional license and I believe a pastor should not be allowed to practice ordained pastoral ministry without the “license” of elder guided, professional supervision. There is too much risk and too much at stake in getting your walking wounded to the *Hospital of Gospel Grace* safely to disregard this assistance.