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Field Training and the Theological Goal of Supervision

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Ordination training, as a whole, comprises three stages. Stage one is normally spent at college or in some other pre-ordination training course. Stage two is the period of the first supervised appointment, hopefully as an assistant or in the fellowship of a small team. Stage three lasts throughout a man's ministry and may include sabbatical leave, mid-term training courses, and a variety of other in-service research or training projects. At each stage, field training can make an important contribution. This article, however, concerns itself with the stage one pre-ordination years.

The contribution of field training within the whole discipline of pastoral education may best be seen as the provision of that element which explores the context and practice of the Christian mission, challenges theological presuppositions, and provides a valuable opportunity for the student to grow in the ability to express himself both as a Christian and as a minister. In accomplishing this task the importance of good supervision is paramount. The supervisor is one who enables the other person to reflect critically upon his experience and to grow in understanding and effectiveness as he engages in ministry. During recent years, supervised field training has become part and parcel of ministerial training programmes. In outlining the goals of field training, the purpose of this article is to underline the prime educational target, which is to equip the student to reflect critically upon the relationship between his theological understanding and his practical experience. I shall conclude with a consideration of two points at which the supervisor may facilitate this process, which lies at the heart of any pastoral training designed to equip an ordinand with a helpful *approach* to his future ministry.

Six goals of field training

1) The student gains a high degree of self-awareness and sensitivity. Once ordained, ministers receive very little supervision unless they choose to seek it.

2) A note of realism is added to the whole enterprise of theologi-

cal education, which provides a healthy corrective to the idealistic fantasies of many students.

3) The existing experience of the student is broadened and challenged as he confronts ideas and situations which do not respond to traditional or hitherto satisfactory formulae.

4) The student finds the opportunity to express himself as a Christian. This takes into account the high motivation with which the ordinand approaches his training and aids theological articulation.

5) A vocation is tested and hopefully confirmed. Field training brings the man himself into a public focus, which sharply highlights his call and competence—or lack of it.

6) The student reflects critically upon the relationship between his theological understanding and his practice.

This last goal is at once the most important and the hardest to achieve. There are several reasons for this. First, even in recent years, when the importance of pastoral training has been recognized, the tendency in the colleges has been to concentrate upon the teaching of pastoral skills rather than upon theological reflection. Secondly, the way theology is taught, part academically and part practically, means that the student does not gain from his teachers sufficient clues to enable him to relate theory to practice. Thirdly, the double context within which the subject is taught, the lecture-room and the field situation, makes it hard for the student not to switch off one part of his theological understanding when he moves to a totally different context using a totally different approach. The typical ordinand easily becomes a schizophrenic being, commuting between theory and practice. He needs help to bring a genuinely scientific and theological critique to bear upon the practice of Christian life and mission as he knows it, and as he participates in it, on the ground.

The role of the supervisor

To clarify the work of the supervisor in promoting a reflective approach to ministry, it will help to establish a number of negative definitions. He is *not* a teacher. He may have much to teach about ministry and the student will do well to learn it but, as a supervisor, it is not a primary responsibility to teach the tricks of the trade. The goal is longer term and includes the creation of a life-long learner. He is *not* a pastor. Students need pastors, spiritual directors, confessors and therapists during their training. Naturally they will often look to a supervisor, who frequently has the added advantage of standing outside the educational institution. The supervisor is not, however, in the first instance a personal problem-solver. He is aiming to create a minister who is, in his own deep self-awareness, able to respond sensitively to the needs of others. The supervisor is certainly *not* an examiner. The college is tempted sometimes to look in his direction

for a second opinion about a candidate's fitness for ministry. Valuable as this may be, the supervisor is not engaged to report on a man's deficiencies but rather to encourage the student to establish his own criteria for self-evaluation. Lastly, the supervisor is *not* an employer. Like anyone else, he can no doubt benefit from the help of an extra pair of hands. Students in turn have much to contribute in terms of enthusiasm and the skills which may be missing in the local churches or secular agencies in which they are placed. The primary concern of the supervisor, however, is that the student will reflect upon the context of his ministry as well as upon his own personal part within it. The supervisor faces the student with realistic questions about his priorities and strategy arising within the field-training situation.

In working towards his prime goal—the development of the student in his ability to reflect critically upon both himself and his practice—the supervisor will find that there are two points with growth potential. First, the provision of cross-grained experiences promotes a healthy questioning of previously held assumptions. Secondly, the wise exploration of the critical moment in field-training experience makes for creative change in the student's personal and theological perceptions.

The cross-grained experience

Cross-grained experiences are those where the student's natural responses, based upon background and training, will prove inadequate and inappropriate and will thus force the student into new ways of thought and action. For example, a team of students was assigned to a ministry in the small daughter church of a mining community. The team included one abrasive and highly independent member. The students, all in their first year of training, initially carried out their work with initiative and enthusiasm. They soon became aware, however, that the one angular member was upsetting the villagers as well as trying the patience of the team. Motivation declined rapidly and the day came when, following an experimental service, the incumbent informed the college that he no longer required the services of the student team. It is not hard to imagine the heart-searching which went on in the individual team members, who had set out with such high hopes only to discover that they had not only lost face but a good deal more besides. The unity of the team was in shreds. At a very early stage in their training, failure stared them in the face and two temptations confronted them. On the one hand, they could blame the congregation for their lack of response. On the other hand, they could simply run away from the situation without stopping to ask why it happened and what it said about the team's understanding of the unity and mission of the church. At least one of the students, however, stopped sharply in his tracks, paused to reappraise his own vocation and proceeded, as a wiser man, to shed

some of his idealistic fantasies about the ministry. This cross-grained experience was not of course contrived by the supervisor, but nor was it entirely unpredictable. The decision to put the first-year students in a team which included the exceptionally autonomous ordinand, rendered the dynamics of what followed an inherent possibility from the moment the list was posted on the college notice-board.

For many students, the director may have to select a cross-grained experience outside a specifically Christian content. The secular agencies usually work from standards and goals with which the typical ordinand finds it hard to identify. Christian values and responses have to fight for a hearing, and sometimes—in the work of the Samaritans and the Marriage Guidance Council for instance—they must remain mute or at least unobtrusive. Students benefit from battling with this constraint. For example, one student was assigned to work with a community development officer who professed to be an atheist. The student conducted a survey of the felt-needs of those who used a busy city centre. In the market-place stood a large church which was open on Sundays when the centre was deserted and, at that time, was devoid of activity on weekdays when thousands passed its doors. The officer was at once critical of the church's lack of involvement and appreciative of the church's potential, but unrealized, contribution to community needs. At first, the student found these firmly held opinions a threat to his previously held convictions about the church's mission, and the supervisor found it almost impossible to draw him out into any kind of dialogue. In the course of a year, however, he slowly came to an articulate recognition of the concern of the gospel for the whole man. He faced new and urgent questions, and discovered different and more appropriate responses as he worked outside the familiar boundaries of his previous thought and action.

The critical moment

A critical moment occurs when anxiety is generated in the student, the supervisor, or the people among whom the student is working. It may occur in the area of feeling, act or reaction. In other words, there may be a feeling of disappointment, a bad performance, or an unfavourable feedback. A critical moment is not a hopeless crisis but an occasion when, for whatever reason, the student faces the necessity of making choices about alternative courses of action or response. In the course of field training such moments will occur rarely, and may even be missed or avoided by the student and the supervisor. Often the critical moment arises very early in a placement, or about the half-way stage when the novelty has worn off and the end is not yet in sight.

For one student a critical moment occurred when, in a hospital placement, he was sent to visit a woman who had just had her second

leg amputated. She displayed a number of bereavement symptoms, chiefly extreme lassitude. The student found it difficult to make an adequate response. The hospital chaplain had been in the habit of taking Holy Communion to her in the ward, and the student wondered if it would be a good idea to persuade her to come to the chapel. At this the chaplain, who was also the supervisor, explored the implications of such a suggestion. They agreed that it would be a recognition of the fact that God made demands upon her physically and spiritually. It could constitute a step towards the healing of the problem she refused to face. The student was now better equipped to articulate a practical gospel challenge. Through dialogue with the supervisor he was grappling with the issue of how to move the patient from Christian passivity to active faith and wholeness, in spite of her incapacity.

Another type of critical moment occurs when a student is unable, because of his personality, ingrained nature, or conditioned response, to make the appropriate moves in the task before him. Ministerial students, more than most, come at their training with perceptions of their future role which are sometimes rigid, and often indebted to ideas about ministry inherited from early and formative experiences in church. They have deep character traits of which they may be only dimly aware, with the result that the ineffectiveness of their natural and congruent responses in given situations creates a highly critical moment. For example, a student was placed, at his own wish, in a secondary school to teach non-examinable religious studies. After only one term, in spite of complimentary remarks by the staff about his methods and material, the student claimed that the discipline and task were entirely beyond his competence. He was, he concluded, hopeless with teenagers. That was, certainly at one level, the fact of the matter. But as the challenge was in any event formidable, and as the school staff judged that his self-evaluation was over hasty, it suggested that this particular student had difficulty in handling roles. In other clearly defined roles, the student was perfectly at ease; but when removed from the security they gave, he was sorely tempted to withdraw. Without the status of a teacher, or even a teacher in training, he naturally felt exposed. The student was brutally frank about his own limitations and determined on immediate withdrawal. The supervisor, on the other hand, attempted to turn the occasion into a consideration of the Christian ministry. Issues affecting the student's whole approach to his vocation were at stake. The vital question of the relationship between role and function were on the table. It was a critical moment at which practical experience and theological insight needed to speak to each other and had a good opportunity to do so.

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These days most students and supervisors are required to complete

assessment-sheets relating to their field-work placements. On the proformas there usually is, and certainly ought to be, a question which invites each party to comment on the student's ability to relate theory to practice. In my experience, the question is usually answered, if at all, in a brief generalization; for example, 'good' or 'adequate'. In fact, supervisors and their students confess that they find it hard to say more. This article has tried to clarify and enlarge upon that question because it represents the most important issue on the whole assessment-sheet. Is this student able to relate his theological insights to his field-training experiences and to allow them to feed back upon each other? It is the cross-grained experience and the handling of the critical moment in field training which gives both supervisor and student the best tools to chisel out an adequate and creative response.

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