Becoming "normatively formed": a contribution to supervision from Gregory the Great

Andrew Cameron

In their seminal book on the professional supervision of pastors,[1] Jane Leach and Michael Paterson deploy Inskipp and Proctor's "functional" model of supervision to show how the process includes *normative*, *formative*, and *restorative* functions. In our therapeutic age, the "restorative" function (where the supervisee finds some relief in the face of difficulty or distress) is easily apprehended as the most "heart-warming" of the three—and even, in the view of some, the most essential. The "formative" aspect sounds constructive, naming the opportunities afforded in supervision for the supervisee to discern and address their growing edges as a professional. The yearning for these two functions accounts perhaps for the rise of coaching and mentoring in the pastoral world—important modes of help in their own right, but subtly different from the professional supervision of pastors.

The "normative" function, on the other hand, is more daunting. In this aspect, the supervision attends to "ethical, managerial and boundary issues," and "is perhaps the least favourite of many ministers."[2] In the first instance, this function concerns norms within the supervision itself. But more generally,

> the normative function is also about helping the supervisee attend to the normative issues in their own work in other

---

The Revd Professor Andrew Cameron is Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University, with research and teaching interests in theological ethics. He is also a research fellow within CSU's Centre for Public and Contextual Theology (PaCT). This article has been peer reviewed.

> ways: their aims in relation to the aims of the organisations in which they work; appropriate codes of ethics for their working environment; their physical, mental and ministerial fitness to work; their abilities to set boundaries and expectations and to challenge inappropriate boundaries or expectations.[3]

Within this domain may arise the supervisor's role to challenge a supervisee's dangerous self-deceptions; or in an extreme case, even the sombre and unavoidable duty to report egregious ethical and moral failures. It can represent "ethics" in its "minor" key—that dark side of it, to do with calling out wrong. This function is also the most easily sidestepped.

The purpose of this paper is to complement this threefold model with a conception I will call "normative formation": the ongoing, consistent discovery by the supervisee of different ways to be and do. This task represents ethics in its "major" key, and springing from the structure of Christian theology, is also woven into the professional supervision of pastors. To get at this notion I will introduce a significant ancient thinker, the sixth century's Gregory the Great. He articulates the mixed motives we bring into and enact throughout ministry, and our tragic descents from distraction through self-deception into outright moral failure. What begins as a naïve lack of self-awareness ends, for Gregory, in outsized egos flailing about in self-adulation and distress. To offset that prospect, he envisions the integration of our self with our pastoral practice, our leadership role, and our inhabitation of Jesus Christ. I will describe this process of integration as "normative formation."

Inskipp and Proctor's threefold functional model, arising as it does from the domain of professional counselling ethics, uses the term "formation" differently from what will be heard by many in pastoral ministry after their early ministerial training. In that connection, "formation" for ministry entails intentional work to integrate what Christian faith teaches with who I am and what I do. This attention to character is inherently normative, since Christian faith includes the joyful expectation of redemptive change.

A first small point to note, then, is the functional supervision model's distinctive use of terms. It seeks to delineate a domain of attention to issues of workplace competence that may need to be better "formed"; and to issues of interpersonal boundaries and ethics that need to be "normed." That delineation remains an important and necessary one for ministers, who do well to develop

clarity on both, since bitter experience has shown how easily either can drift out of focus.

But at the risk of reducing the effectiveness of that delineation, my purpose here is to suggest that supervision can equally operate to "normatively form" the supervisee, in the sense of "formation" that ministers initially bring to supervision. In other words, *pastoral* supervision will also anticipate a "formative-normative" aspect. On this view, "formation" for ministry is a lifelong task, paralleling the normal Christian vocation to grow in "godliness" (to allude to the later New Testament's leveraging of a secular Greek term for conventional social rectitude, reappropriated to a life in Christ: 1 Timothy 6:6, 11; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 1:1; 2 Peter 1:6). Indeed, in the tradition of Christian theology, "normative formation" could even be regarded as central to God's redeeming, restorative project: that once reconciliation has begun, whether between God and each human or between us and each other, there begins the perpetual discovery of how actually to *be* toward the other: a worshipper and a disciple; or a neighbour, spouse, parent, carer, co-worker, pastor, and so on.

This lifelong undertaking will be a clear and present expectation that many ministry supervisees will bring to supervisors; and ministers will be surprised and disappointed if their supervisor seems to have no interest in such growth. But handled well in that partnership, "normative formation" will pre-empt and obviate the need for those more melancholy duties within the normative aspect of supervision.

The task of normative formation of clergy has a long history in the Christian church. In the next section, I will introduce Gregory as an exemplar who reminds us of our mixed motives in ministry; who attends to our daily practices in ministry; who prioritises those whom we serve in ministry; and who alerts us not to lose our souls through ministry. His work can expand the moral imagination both of supervisor and supervisee.

I

In the sixth century of the church's life, Gregory the Great sought to form a range of clergy using his *Liber regula pastoralis* (*The Book of Pastoral Rule* or simply *Pastoral Rule*; or, more accessibly for us, *The Handbook of Pastoral Care*). There are several respects in which this ancient work offers a lens for the notion of "normative formation."

Most striking at the outset, and what commends it as a work of enduring significance, is his recognition of the beginnings of an unreflective drift that

never ends well. It is a drift that arises from the innocent problem of simply having too many jobs at once, and from split attention:

> [The pastor] is unable to handle single tasks because the mind is confused and divided by many things. This is why a certain wise man carefully warns, saying: "Son, do not meddle in many things." For clearly, the mind cannot focus well on one matter when it is divided by many concerns. . . . It becomes anxious arranging external matters and, ignoring only itself, it knows how to contemplate every thing except itself. . . . As a result, the mind is such a stranger to self-examination that it does not consider the damage that it suffers and is ignorant of the extent to which it errs.[4]

Who of us is not "divided by many concerns"? Yet Gregory acutely observes how this well-intentioned dividedness becomes the route, initially, to a loss-of-self that then gives way to overt self-deception. Typically for a patristic author, Gregory points to an Old Testament narrative for his type: in this case, King Hezekiah, who bragged to Babylonian visitors of Israel's wealth, with no insight into the geopolitical stupidity of this move, and with full self-justification (2 Kings 20:13–18; Isaiah 39:1–7). Gregory asserts that this initially innocent, if tragic, loss of self among the demands of role paves the way to self-deception and self-exaltation, "even though no sins were committed openly."[5] Not long after follows the outright pride that *does* drive rank and open sin.

The value of this ancient book is to take us into a domain of ancient Christian "soul science"—arguably the precursor to modern psychology[6]—with its thickly-textured weave of moral evaluation. The work is "moralistic", in a non-pejorative use of that term, in that it sets out a moral narrative, an account of life threaded with evaluation. Gregory believes this is necessary since ministry is a form of "government", or "rule", a conception that takes seriously the spiritual authority inherent to the role—and arguably, we might add, the fiduciary, statutory, denominational, and duty-of-care responsibilities that are very much a part of modern ministry roles. So, it is a work that gives us some options for the theological reflection necessary to "normative formation."

In the supervision room, the supervisee learns, under the supervisor, how to examine their own stories in the way that Gregory examines Hezekiah's. This ongoing use of case study, personal examples, verbatim accounts, and the like

elevates us from daily reactivity into modes of insight that bring transformation, and so "normative formation."

Liber Regulae Pastoralis is most often used in relation to its Book III, where Gregory lists seventy-two personality types and how to handle them. But the (perhaps) less-oft attended Books I, II and IV look at the mixed motives we bring into and enact throughout ministry, and at that tragic descent from distraction through self-deception into outright moral failure. Starting, as we have seen, with the loss of self-awareness, Gregory's final coda in Book IV becomes a plea for self-awareness, and for the integration of our self with our pastoral practice and our leadership role. The next section offers a summary of the book's narrative arc.

II

Book I: Entering ministry. Gregory visits the motives, virtues, and hidden vices of those who aspire to ministry. He seeks to flush out all the bad reasons we have for wishing to be ministers. These were usually hidden, in his time, under pious quotation of 1 Timothy 3:1, where to aspire to ministry is to want something good. In other words, Gregory sought to unmask a form of ethical consequentialism that prevailed in his time, where since I aspire to something good in seeking a ministry vocation, then it doesn't matter who I am or what I do right now. While that kind of reasoning is easily challenged today, it can equally be the case in our time that our vices and poor motives are hidden under the trenchant assertion that I have been so "called" by God to ministry that no one has any right to question my motives, challenge my behaviours or capacities, or otherwise stand in my way.

Book I aims to dissect our inner worlds, assisting us to bring into the light what is commendable, and what is not, in our initial drives to enter ministry. It offers the opportunity for frank self-examination of our suitability to the task, and some areas in which we might challenge ourselves in formation toward the task. It is an ideal resource to facilitate exacting self-reflection when someone is an enquirer or ordination candidate, or when a vocation or role is changing later in a career. From time to time, it may also assist the mid- or late-career minister to come to terms with the less savoury aspects of their motivation in the role.

Book II: Of the Life of the Pastor. Once a person has entered ministry, this section outlines the personal demeanour we do well to develop. As in Book I, it uses the language of "virtue" and "vice" to summarise our complex lives.

While the last half century has seen a rise in the literature of "virtue ethics", it probably remains the case that the language of "virtue" has not really entered our common life. The "norms" to which the supervisor is expected to point the supervisee are usually found in those endless codes of compliance, top-heavy as they are with rules, and peppered with a few generic, jejune "values." We are not a culture literate in Gregory's language of "virtue" and "vice."

But these are quick thumbnail descriptors that workably summarise our *settled habits and patterns of action and feeling.* (A list of virtues might include such dispositions as "kindness", "hospitality," and "graciousness", for example. Similarly, a vice list might include predictable behaviour patterns like "envy," "snideness," or "laxity.") Chapter 1 of Book II lists several virtues, with the list providing a table of contents for what Gregory will commend in following chapters of Book II:

> [The minister] should be pure in thought, exemplary in conduct, discerning in silence, profitable in speech, a compassionate neighbour to everyone, superior to all in contemplation, a humble companion to the good, and firm in the zeal of righteousness against the vices of sinners. He must not relax his care for the internal life while he is occupied by external concerns, nor should he relinquish what is prudent of external matters so as to focus on things internal (II.1, p. 49.)

The list is a tall order, especially for those of us who have already started to lose ourselves among "external matters." Yet Book II can fruitfully be regarded as an alternate "code" for "normative formation." In Book II we are given an opportunity to begin to remediate loss of self, through examination of our *actual* performance in the areas Gregory traverses, rather than by preoccupation with *imagined* values that we *like to believe* constitute our performance.

Modern psychological investigation into the vexed arena of "authenticity studies" has discovered a high degree of disjunction between what we profess to be our "true self" (and our "values") as compared to our *actual* habitual behaviours. For Roy F. Baumeister, people report feeling most authentic "when their actions are conducive to establishing, maintaining, and enjoying their desired reputation. That will have some resemblance to their literal, actual self and its actual traits, but it will also resemble some ideals and goals." When people fail to act according to that desired reputation, they "dismiss their actions as not reflecting their true self, as inauthentic. " 'That's not me' would be the reaction

to some behaviors [*sic*] that detract from the project of establishing the desired reputation".[7]

Baumeister goes on to show that we have various desired reputations that depend upon our various audiences.[8] Ministers usually have an extensive set of audiences, and so, it would seem to follow, manifold desired reputations. Given this complexity, the gap between a minister's conception of their "true self" and their actual daily performances could easily become quite wide—particularly if that distracted "loss of self" is already in play.

Again then, Gregory's Book II could provide supervisors and supervisees with an overtly theological resource for grounding the minister's aspirations in consistent, close, and regular examination of the minister's daily practices.

Book III, Teaching and Admonishing. Having set in place the foundations for a life of ongoing, sober self-assessment, and a degree of integrity, Book III offers a how-to guide in pastoral ministry, where the minister's "soul" emanates into words and actions that are fit-for-purpose among a vastly diverse range of people.

Gregory lists seventy-two kinds of people (drawing from a table of contents for Book III, III.1, pp. 88–89), including: the sincere and the insincere; the healthy and the sick; "those who fear punishment and therefore live innocently, and those who have become so hardened in iniquity that they cannot be corrected by punishment"; the too silent, and the prolix; the lazy and the hasty; "those who misinterpret the words of sacred Scripture, and those who understand them but do not speak about them with humility"; "those who do not begin good works and those who begin but complete few of them"; and many more such binaries.

It is a compendium deserving a study of its own (particularly by supervisors as they contemplate the diversity of their supervisees). In light of these many foibles and forms of brokenness, Gregory gives thirty-six *Admonitions* on how to handle such folk. The final chapters of the Book then deal with some special cases, such as how to exhort crowds without making individuals worse (III.36); or how to address the person "who suffers from contrary passions" (III.37, p. 203); or how tactically to side-step "lesser vices" so as to address weightier ones (III.38, p. 204); or the handling of fragile people (III.39).

This Book III is a tour-de-force of pastoral acumen, and indeed of pastoral supervision acumen. It seeks to develop a "watchman's" discernment in relation to others. But Gregory will not allow the minister to become an ironically-detached or cynical observer of other's foibles. The purpose of these many

diagnostic binaries is to develop a fine-grained love of each neighbour in their particularity, in concert with attentiveness to one's own "normative formation":

> But in the midst of these considerations, we are brought back in the zeal of charity to what we have already said, which is that every preacher should be "heard" more by his deeds than by his words. Moreover, the footprint of his good living should be the path that others follow rather than the sound of his voice showing them where to go (III.40, pp. 206–07).

The value of Book III for supervision is to remind both supervisor and supervisee that in a very important sense, the task of supervision is primarily *for those not in the room*—the men and women, boys and girls under the minister's care. Serious training in supervision will show the supervisor how to enable supervisees to attend to these relationships in supervision, so as to prevent supervision from devolving into mere introspection. While it is beyond my scope to rehearse here the relevant supervisory methods, it suffices to note the prominence of those beyond the room in the popular "seven eyed" model of supervision. In this complex account of supervision, the so-called "Mode 1" and "Mode 2" of supervision attend respectively to the supervisee's "clients" and to the supervisee's mode of operation with those clients. Also, a "Mode 7" focuses on the wider social contexts within which the supervisee's work functions.[9] I mention these modes to indicate how elementary to supervision is the minister's attention, finally, to his or her people.

We may not agree with all of Gregory's proposed binaries among people. But his close attention to them, and that this Book comprises the bulk of *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, reminds supervisor and supervisor alike to think hard about those in the minister's care, and that the minister's profession exists "to tend the flock of God" neither for gain nor for power, but as willing participants in God's love for them *and* as "examples to" this flock (1 Peter 5:2–3, NRSV). Honing this awareness is also "normative formation."

Book IV: Returning to the Self. In a short final coda, Gregory returns to where he began. There is to be desired a kind of "fear and circumspection" (p. 209) without which:

> when the mind disregards the supernal Ruler, it seeks praise on its own merits and begins to confer on itself every good

> which it has received for the purpose of being a herald for the real Giver. Moreover, it desires to spread abroad a good opinion of itself and it desires to be admired for all its qualities (IV, p. 210).

Gregory, just like many experienced pastoral supervisors, has clearly seen his share of people who began bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed in ministry, with a due sense of "call" as we like to put it, but who have since drifted into egregious narcissism and self-congratulatory orgies of egoism. Book IV, while brief, is a salutary warning against this all-too-common abandonment to the wastelands of ego and the lust for profile and "legacy" that bedevils mid- and late-life ministers. The losing of one's soul in the pursuit of one's role is as clear and present a danger now as in Gregory's day. At our stage in the church's life, the "normative formation" available through professional supervision is one of our very few antidotes to this predictable and time-worn form of failure.

Gregory's *Return to the Self* in Book IV forms a powerful *inclusio* with the work's initial burden for self-examination as we enter, and then progress, in ministry. The *Return* of Book IV highlights Gregory's ultimate insight: that the integration of "soul" with "role" is an iterative, recursive task. He is a purveyor of theological reflection, and a kind of "patron-practical theologian" for pastoral supervision's task, guiding supervisors to become aware of how their supervisees are being normatively formed overtime, instead of saddling them with occasional boorish conversations about codes of ethics.

III

As a suggested outcome of this introduction to Gregory's work, supervisors and supervisees may in some contexts perhaps even study parts of it together as a springboard to supervision. (Indeed, the *Rule* already makes an appearance in St Mark's National Theological Centre's pioneering training course in supervision, *10706NAT Graduate Certificate in Professional Supervision*.)

To that end, some final reflections and caveats on *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* are in order, since it has some context-dependent features, some idiosyncrasies, and some dangers. I will say a little about features of the writing that are less accessible to moderns, and more about what can seem to us like Gregory's overbearing moral sternness. I will end by reiterating why I think it retains much value for our cultural moment.

Readers of Gregory may be thrown by his "allegorical" hermeneutic, where many scriptural stories and injunctions become symbolic of moral truths in the present. It is a common ancient approach to the Bible that we are regularly discouraged from using. But this approach to Scripture constitutes a kind of "moral hermeneutic," relying upon the view that right and wrong are a constant throughout history. If that is the case, then ancient biblical stories can legitimately be used to discern moral aspects of our present. In an allegorical reading of Scripture, such a use of these stories exercises and strengthens our moral imagination. Growing acuity in a morally imaginative apprehension of Scripture may also have a side benefit, assisting supervisees to grow in the creative and imaginative transformational learning styles that are deployed in professional pastoral supervision.

Gregory also relies upon a conception of the "mean" or average between extremes, a time-worn ancient way to determine "virtue" as a midpoint between two opposite "vices." For example, we walk between prosperity and adversity, each with its own dangers (II.3, p. 54); we traverse the need to receive and enact both divine- and neighbour-love, rather than one over the other (II.3, p. 54); or we navigate between total silence and garrulousness in order to find truly profitable speech (II.4, p. 57).

This approach to discipline and formation attempts to knit self with role using a language of interiority, virtue, and (often hidden) vices. Gregory's conceptions of virtue and vice are indebted to Scripture. Examples abound: for example, the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23; or, among the vices, Jesus' list of what defiles the heart in Mark 7:21–22.[10]

Demacopoulos suggests that Gregory thought the ascetic practices of the early church needed to be injected into aspirants to ministry in his more permissive and uncatechized post-Constantinian era,[11] hence the utility of virtue and vice language to do so. His approach culminated in an explosion of extreme moralism in the late medieval period (for example, after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215).[12] But that kind of development can leave a bitter aftertaste: when pushed too far, the language of virtue and vice pushes us too hard. For we moderns, it smacks of an overbearing moral sternness; and in the supervision room, overbearing moral sternness will cause the supervision to be perceived as (inept) line-management supervision—which is expressly inimical to the supervisee-directed transformation that is essential to professional supervision.

Gregory's work is indeed susceptible to the critique that his antidotes are incipiently "Pelagian"—that graceless "just do it" heresy opposed by Augustine

and, later, by Protestant reformers—in Gregory's focus upon self-control, performance, and sheer will-power. His take on moral formation is laced with fear of God, consistent appeals to eschatological judgment, and heavenly rewards predicated on lifetime virtues and inner undividedness. Read through a Pelagian lens, Gregory's work becomes a self-abnegating, self-destructive moralism. These emphases risk corroding any Christian's joyful motivation, at best leaving him or her in a kind of Christianised Stoicism.

Liber Regulae Pastoralis is, therefore, a book that needs to be handled with care. In Gregory's defence we might observe that the "fear" of God and the prospect of our final accounting before God are common enough tropes in Scripture that serve to concentrate the mind, rather than inevitably eliciting our snide late-modern contempt.

Indeed "fear" in Gregory is not of the abject kind. It represents a transcendent way of self-seeing according to the true purpose of our existence, as when (for example) the minister learns to "despise the charms of the world by respecting the fear they cause within him, and then condemn these fears in the expectation of the sweet delights of internal contemplation" (II.3, p. 52). That is a sixth-century way to describe an intentional, reflective, regular, soul-satisfying handling of experience.

Indeed Gregory's "thick" moral frame is arguably more satisfying than our conceptions of "ethics," when "ethics" becomes that boring *cul de sac* of professional near-death experiences resulting from our poor decisions under some professional code of compliance. In contrast, Gregory has an account of the world that is richly woven with moment-by-moment consideration of our inner and outer functioning toward others and before God, which is arguably the stuff of an "integrated" self.

This "thick" moral frame is predominantly expressed through the "lens" of virtues and vices, since these are the simplest terms by which to get a handle on our "character"—*as long as* we are attending to our settled habits and patterns of *action* and feeling, rather than simply imagining our "character" to reside in our *aspirations* to some reputation.

To read *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* is, therefore, to discover that the issues at stake in professional supervision are perennial, and not merely a product of our time. It reveals that failure in ministry long predates the awful specifics and systemic aberrations emerging in our recent *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse.* The long history of such failure gives us

good reason to think that the need for professional supervision is hardly some twenty-first-century fad.

Gregory's work reminds us of our mixed motives in engaging in ministry that deserve close and ongoing attention. He pioneers means by which "normative formation" will closely attend to the gaps between our aspirations, our reputations, and our actual practices, by repeated and close reflection on praxis. He reminds us that the main foci of supervision are *always,* in a sense, the people under our care. He shows how the loss of our soul within the pursuit of our role remains a clear and present danger.

Gregory's "thick moral weave"—or better, the supervisor's nuanced, contemporary instantiation of it—can bring further texture and meaning to Inskipp and Proctor's already helpful threefold functional model. To coin a modern metaphor, Gregory offers a close examination of the inputs into and outputs of our "operating system"—that is, of our "souls"—complete with a compendium of the hidden "viruses" that corrupt us. In this way he offers a positive contribution to human flourishing, both within the minister and arising from good ministry.

We may even be thankful that Gregory normalises our legitimate self-doubts about our suitability for ministry, or, more accurately, our lack of it; we are indeed the "clay pots" of 2 Corinthians 4:7. He *shows a path through that lack* that I have called "normative formation." It is a path that is powerfully realistic about the ways towards loss of self, while also offering ways to monitor the soul, challenge the soul, and set the conditions for the Spirit of Christ to change the soul. In this generous work of God, the supervisor may become a servant, a midwife, and a fellow-traveller.

Endnotes

1 Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2015).

2 Ibid., 22.

3 Ibid., 23.

4 Gregory, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, tr. George Demacopoulos (Crestwood, New York: Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 34 (I.4). Gregory cites here the intertestamental book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, 11:10. Subsequent references to Gregory will be made in-text, and are from this edition. Demacopoulos divides the work into four "Parts," but I will retain the more traditional division into books.

5 Ibid., 35.

6 See further, Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

7 Roy F. Baumeister, "Stalking the True Self Through the Jungles of Authenticity: Problems, Contradictions, Inconsistencies, Disturbing Findings—and a Possible Way Forward," *Review of General Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2019): 150.

8 Ibid., 151.

9 Peter Hawkins et al, *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, 5th ed. (London: Open University Press, 2020), 85–114.

10 For further discussion of this kind of moral language, see Andrew J. B. Cameron, *Joined-up Life: A Christian Account of How Ethics Works* (Nottingham: IVP, 2011), 194–202.

11 See Demacopoulos' preface to *Pastoral Rule,* 9; also George Demacopoulos, "A Monk in Shepherd's Clothing: Pope Gregory I and the Asceticizing of Pastoral Direction," PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2001.

12 Albrecht Diem, "Virtues and Vices In Early Texts on Pastoral Care," *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004), 193, and *passim.*