



# Holy containment and the supervision of leaders in ministry

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*In this devotional article, the artist reflects on the process of creating a work entitled Containment. Both the artwork itself and the process of creating it prompt reflection on the nature of pastoral supervision, especially as it relates to leaders within the Church.*

CONTAINMENT • LEADERSHIP • SUPERVISION • BOUNDARIES • POIESIS



*Containment pastel on paper by J. Leach 2016*

I am painting. I am painting in dust. Chalk-stained fingers drawing orange and blacks and greens from within, posting emotions on the page. Lines emerging and changing, defining boundaries and spaces, responsibilities.

I am painting to think. Making is an art form, but a thought form too.<sup>1</sup> My right brain alert.<sup>2</sup> Making connections. Drawing on feeling and living and on the making of others – a Shona sculpture in my mind's eye – a community of responsibilities and spaces and boundaries carved from a single block of stone.

The thinking is about leadership – about the responsibilities and spaces and boundaries – about the stories of leadership brought into supervision: stories of intractable problems; of resource constraints; of theological conflicts; of dying churches; of pastoral need; and stories of leaders – of burnout and of illness, of isolation and burden, and of depression – stories of leadership under pressure. And I wonder about the role of the supervisor and how – now that supervision will be compulsory for ordained ministers<sup>3</sup> – this might be not just another burden in an impossible diary, but might be a means of grace;<sup>4</sup> a structure of redemption<sup>5</sup> through which we might help one another to dance in the rain.

On the page the lines reveal a woman holding a child. The holding is costly. It demands all that she has. And perhaps the baby will live and perhaps the baby will die. And how will she hold it well? And I think of all that ministers need to hold – the hopes and the fears of others; the births and the deaths; the tensions and the conflicts; the unanswerable questions. And I think about the loneliness of holding it all alone. And I remember the day when as a probationer minister I gathered stones from the congregation, invested, as I had requested, with whatever weighed them down, and how by the time the basket was full, each whispered to each as they passed it along the line, 'Careful! Its heavy,' and how I, receiving it at the communion rail thought, 'I cannot hold it.' And I remember how I wondered as I placed it on the table what it takes to hand it all to God and what kind of holding God does, when in the morning it would be largely me who had to find a way to support these people and to lead them on.

I look at my work. The woman holding the child. Is God the mother-figure and I the child? Can I, who must lead, allow myself to admit smallness and helplessness, when even here I must stand behind the table, and never kneel at the rail with my hands outstretched to receive? And even if I can admit my need, can I bear then to receive the burdens back, to become again the mother who must hold so many things?

The painting is not finished. More colours. More light, and out of the blackness of the page another figure emerges and takes shape. A father-figure. An other. He presses against the woman, his arm around her. He holds her as she holds what she must hold and does not interfere. It is not his role to take her role away. Instead he bears with her. His breathing steady. His body close. Anxiety contained, he keeps watch for all that she might miss as she gazes steadily at the bundle that demands her attention.

Is God the father-figure and I the mother? Is it the case that I have work to do that only I can do? Burdens to carry that only I can carry, and yet burdens that I need not carry alone? Burdens that can only be borne because I too am held? Not as a child, but as an adult, as a leader, as a mother to a people?

Or, is the invitation for me to become the father? To become the one, not who tries to carry what others must carry – their grief, their anger, their hopes, their responsibilities – but the one who acknowledges the weight of what they carry, and lends my weight to help them stand? The one who keeps watch and alerts them to what they might otherwise miss ... even the presence of the God who holds us all in being, and all things?

I think about supervision and the role of the supervisor and the hosting and containing work that needs to be done.<sup>6</sup> I think about the temptation to invade the space between the mother and the child.<sup>7</sup> I think about the stories I hear of leaders trying to rescue their people from their problems; their churches from decline; their warring colleagues from the consequences. I think about the assumption they miss that the role of the leader is to find the solution; to intervene; to be the saviour of the day.<sup>8</sup> And I realise that the role of the supervisor is not to try to put my face between the supervisee and what she or he must carry; nor to help her or him to get between those they serve and the things they must face, but to come alongside; to lend my weight; and keep watch for what they might miss ...<sup>9</sup>

... not least how difficult it is to dance when you are weighed down with other people's stones.

## Notes

1. Heather Walton points to the possibilities for *poiēsis* in practical theology with reference to the work of Henri Lefebvre, the dialectic materialist, for whom *poiēsis* refers to the 'supreme, restless, transformative capacity of human beings to reshape their world and create meaning out of the mundane'. (Walton, 2014,

- p. 13). She quotes Lefebvre saying that in our playful creativity 'another reality is born, not a separate one, but one which is "lived" in the everyday, alongside the functional . . . It is a domain without limits' (Walton, 2014, p. 13).
2. Iain McGilchrist's recent book on the dominance of left-brain thinking in Western culture is reviewed in *Holiness* at: [www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/12-review.pdf](http://www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/12-review.pdf).
  3. In July 2015 the British Methodist Conference decided to introduce compulsory supervision for all ordained ministers. I have responsibility as Connexional Director of Supervision for the implementation of the Interim Supervision Policy adopted by the Conference in 2017.
  4. When John Wesley spoke of means of grace he partly meant 'works of piety': 'outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace' (John Wesley, Sermon 16: 'On the Means of Grace', 1739). But he also meant 'works of mercy': 'Are there no other means than these, whereby God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily, to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him? Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace?' (John Wesley, Sermon 98: 'On Visiting the Sick', 1786). In particular, Wesley believed that pastoral visiting could be a means of grace as one person puts themselves at the disposal of the other for their deep good and so that God might visit them both in the process. I explored this thinking in a previous article in *Holiness*: [www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/08-leach.pdf](http://www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/08-leach.pdf). Following Wesley's thinking, if supervision is to be a means of grace it needs to be:
    - 1 Eccentric – the person supervising needs to put themselves out of the centre in order to host the concerns of the supervisee.
    - 2 Prayerful – making intentional room for God to speak (praying before; praying during; praying afterwards; praying silently; praying aloud).
    - 3 Structured – Wesley had a clear structure for pastoral visiting in order that it be an intentional use of time and not just a chat. This was in order that the conversation might reach beneath the surface of things.
  5. According to Reformed practical theologian Ed Farley, a redemptive structure is:
    - a social, economic or political system or practice
    - that shapes the encounters and interactions that happen within it
    - in ways that promote human health and well-being
    - in the light of God's self-revelation.Supervision that attempts inappropriately to use power or to rescue or 'fix' supervisees might be considered idolatrous (displacing power from its proper place). Supervision that empowers might be considered redemptive.
  6. In *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook* (2nd edn, 2015), Michael Paterson and I link the role of the supervisor as one who contains the supervisee with the notion of hospitality – the making of space for the other to be received. At the practical level this is about creating a physical space that is conducive to the task, and making the space in the diary in a reliable way. At a deeper level it is about being



emotionally available and allowing ourselves to be fully present to the supervisee and what they bring.

7. In considering the kind of parenting that infants need, psychologist Carl Goldberg identified three kinds of looking that the mother-figure can offer as she holds her baby. The healthiest kind that is of the most developmental use to the infant is the gazing upon that allows the infant to look back and see into the inner world of the mother; what this gazing does is to establish that both the parent and the infant have inner worlds to be cherished and explored. By containing her own anxiety and making it safe for the infant to gaze openly at her, the mother makes a safe enough space in which the infant can become a person with their own inner world.

Goldberg's second kind of looking maintains the gaze but does not allow the infant access to what's within, resulting in the sensation for the infant of being looked at. This is often because the parent is aware of their anxiety and wants to push that anxiety away and protect the infant from it. Unfortunately the child does not receive a message of protection, but a sense of distance and loss.

Goldberg's third kind of looking at an infant is the kind that is overwhelmed by anxiety each time the gaze is engaged. The child learns to fear their own inner world and intimacy with others.

The consequences of Goldberg's theory for supervision relationships is to highlight the importance of the supervisor working on their own fears and anxieties and their healthy containment – neither pushing these fears away, nor allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by them, but letting the negative emotions have a place, contained by something more solid. This is also true in healthy pastoral work, and part of the role of the supervisor is to support the development in the supervisor of the management of their own anxiety in the face of others' fears.

8. Another resource for thinking about these unconscious patterns in ministry is the drama triangle presented by Leach and Paterson (2015, pp. 100–104).
9. One of Donald Winnicott's important contributions to the world of psychotherapy is his notion of the third space or what is sometimes known as the nursing triad. The importance of such a figure is twofold according to Winnicott, for whom this figure is paradigmatically the father. This figure, at one remove from the visceral business of birth and umbilical ties, at his best, can provide both physical and emotional holding for the mother without being consumed by her fears and anxiety, and at the same time can see in broader perspective what is happening in the environment and so hold this holding work in time and in space. In this picture, the father-figure, though physically close to the mother and child, faces away from them, keeping watch for what she, absorbed, might miss.

As a minister it is my experience that I need this kind of support, helping me to hold what at times feels uncontainable, and yet that is not all I need. I also need a supervisor who is not only absorbed in my stuff and in my version of events; who is not only validating the fact that, yes, I have a lot to hold, but who is able to see more of what is happening in the wider environment and help me gain some greater perspective and – if necessary – some distance; who is able

to put me in touch not only with the part of myself that can contain the work, but with the part of myself that can see and explore and take a view.

There are three consequences for supervisory work of seeing the kind of holding that God does through Winnicott's notion of the third space. First, the restorative dimension of supervision in which the supervisor makes space for the supervisee, identifies with their state of mind and conveys to them that she or he has done so is crucial to effective supervision. Second, the supervisor needs to offer not only containment, but a broad horizon. A wide-ranging perspective that feels unsympathetic or disconnected from the supervisee's concerns will not lead to a productive supervision session or an owned change of perspective in the supervisee, so discerning when that connection is already in place and when it needs reinforcement is a crucial skill. Third, while the attention of the supervisee as carer is on the person cared for, they too, to be effective, need to be able to stand in the place of the one gaining more perspective and distance in order to offer care that is safe and directed towards the horizon of God's justice and care. In helping the carer as supervisee to achieve such perspective, the supervisor needs not only to offer their own perspective, but to try to create the kind of space in which alternative perspectives can be considered and, in the case of those supervisees for whom this matters, in which they might reconnect with their own fundamental sense of who God is and how God's priorities and perspective might shape their work.

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