

THE ROLE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTANT

Since its inception the Perkins School of Theology Intern Program has included a mental health professional as a vital member of the internship team. Students who are preparing for ministry can benefit from help in integrating personal and professional dimensions of their lives. The call to ministry does not evacuate personal and/or professional issues that are certain to surface in the everyday routines of ministry. It is, therefore, the judgment of the school of theology that seminarians should have a safe place where they can reflect on their own joys and struggles in ministry. Using a mental health professional in the role of consultant confirms the need for ministers to be whole persons if they are going to lead others toward wholeness. It affirms that the mental health professional is a resource for improving the quality of one's own ministry through helping the student look at the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of ministry. Intern Program consultants are not engaged in a therapeutic relationship with the student and are not viewed as persons who can "fix" what is "wrong" with a particular person. Rather, they are seen as trained professionals who can assist in the educational mission of preparing effective leaders for the church's work in the world. As an additional benefit, personal experience with a psychologist or other mental health professional is valuable for pastors who will certainly have occasion to recommend such counseling to parishioners.

An implied resource that consultants bring to their work is their own faith journey. Students who are preparing for ministry are themselves on a faith journey and would benefit from hearing the consultant's journey of faith. Consultants are encouraged to share as much as they feel comfortable sharing.

In the role of Intern Program consultant, the mental health professional will:

1. *Assist interns in integrating the personal and professional dimensions of their lives.*

Internship requires students to shift from thinking that success is evaluated on the final outcome (a grade) to success as evaluated on how the outcome is defined and attained. Another way of stating this is that students often pride themselves too much on having the technical skills to do ministry, as if the doing is devoid of the process of self-development, or being.

For many students, the internship experience is the first time they will be challenged to take an in-depth look at themselves. It is not uncommon for family issues and unresolved personal issues to surface during the intensity of an internship. *The role of the mental health consultant is critical* in giving the student guidance as well as support through this process of self-reflection. The mental health consultant helps students discern how to utilize the feedback they are receiving from their mentor pastor and/or lay teaching committee as part of their personal growth. Our hope is that the student can emerge from the internship with a greater sense of self-awareness about personal issues, relationships and spirituality—all of which contribute to the student's ministerial identity. In addition, a beginning understanding of church or agency family systems as seen in actual practice can be invaluable to the intern's future ministry.

Most interns participate with a group of their peers in the Internship Seminar led by the consultant and often the Intern Faculty supervisor. The students are encouraged to meet

with the consultant on an individual basis twice per semester, or more if approved in advance by the intern faculty supervisor.

When interns are too far from campus to meet with a peer group, a mental health consultant will meet individually with the student on a schedule approved by the Intern faculty supervisor.

2. *Assist mentor pastors in acquiring and improving their supervisory skills.*

In this role the consultant assists the mentor pastor in reflecting upon her/his supervisory style, addressing issues that have arisen in the supervision of the intern, and (when leading groups) enabling mentor pastors to help each other with identified supervisory issues. The goal of the consultant is to get mentor pastors to work upon their own supervisory issues for the purpose of providing improved supervision of their interns. Mentor pastors are encouraged to share their concerns, struggles, and joys as these relate to the growth and learning of the student. In facilitating the discussion, the consultant invites each mentor pastor to explore her or his feelings around the identified issue, guides the group feedback, and perhaps offers professional resources and/or insights from the professional discipline. The consultant encourages the mentor pastors to reflect on their own personal issues arising in the supervisory relationship as well as to engage in theological reflection upon their styles of supervision.

The consultant's work with the mentor pastors is done primarily in the groups that meet during the Mentor Pastor Colloquies held on campus twice each year, led by four assigned consultants. However, an individual mentor pastor has the option to avail herself or himself of up to two hours per semester of private consultation on supervisory issues with any of the consultants who have contracted to provide services to the Intern Program.

3. *Consult in appropriate ways with the faculty supervisor.*

The intern will be relating to various members of the internship team throughout the internship, including the mentor pastor, lay teaching committee, consultant and Intern Program faculty supervisor. When the intern is relating to the consultant in the Internship Seminar or private session, this is considered to be confidential information that is not to be shared beyond the group or the private conversation itself. Because both the consultant and the faculty supervisor have a common interest in the growth and learning of the intern, however, it may be necessary for them to come together for consultation if the student is acting out or exhibiting learning resistance on some issue that threatens the success of the internship. The consultation should be carried out in a way that does not divulge confidential information but focuses on helpful ways to address the identified concern. There may be occasions when the consultant will initiate the conversation with the faculty supervisor as well as occasions when the faculty supervisor will initiate the conversation. In either case, both need to check the appropriateness of the proposed conversation and decide together how to proceed.