A Common Oversight: Supervision of Christian Counsellors

Shannon R Hood¹ and Tracey Milson²

"Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task" St Paul – the first verse of chapter 3 from a letter he wrote to his friend and workmate Timothy (circa 65AD) taken from the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Counselling supervision in essence oversees counselling work. In this brief manuscript, we outline often overlooked aspects of Christian counselling supervision.

Keywords: Counselling, Supervision, Christian.

Christian Counselling Supervision

This paper is being written for the Clinical Supervisor who finds themselves providing Super–vision (or over–sight) of a Christian Counsellor. The role of Supervisor/overseer is an ancient idea that is at the core of the Christian worldview.

The original Greek text quoted above utilises the word 'epi-scopos' which is comprised of two words: "epi" (over, above) and "scopos" (sight, perspective). Whilst most English translations of the Bible use the word 'overseer', it could equally well be translated as 'Super-visor'. It is this word that was translated as bisceop in Old English and bishop in today's vernacular.

The importance of the role of overseer is emphasised by the high standards expected from those who occupy it. According to the Christian Bible (1 Tim 3:2-3) overseers are to be "above reproach". Examples of what this means include being "temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent - but gentle, not quarrelsome and not a lover of money". This list serves as a reminder to all of us involved in Supervision that who we are is as important as what we do.

This paper will begin with an exploration of what is a Christian Counsellor – observing that having this well-defined will be essential for the Supervisee. This definitional work will help classify Christian Counsellors into four broad types. One of these – the Professional Christian Counsellor will be explored in more detail as it is Supervision of this type of counsellor for

Corresponding Author: Shannon R Hood, 7 Crowe Court, Eltham, Victoria.

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which this paper is most relevant. Specifically, the paper will focus on some of the unique challenges likely to be faced by the Professional Christian Counsellor particularly in their work with Christian clients and how the supervisor can help navigate these challenges. It will include a brief discussion on the closely related topic of Pastoral Supervision.

Whilst the paper is written specifically for Supervision of Christian Counsellors, it is hoped there are elements that can be adapted to support Supervisors who are overseeing supervisees of other faith persuasions. It is inevitable the faith journey of the Supervisee will emerge as an important topic of supervision.

Christian Counselling

Many authors have observed the lack of an agreed definition of Christian Counselling (McMinn, 2011; McMinn et al., 2010; Sutton et al., 2016). However, if we are to discuss Supervision of the Christian Counsellor, we must define what a Christian Counsellor is so we can 'spot one when we see one'. We begin this process with a definition of counselling provided in 1973 by Collins (2007) which has stood the test of time to the extent that it is still being utilised by leading contemporary authors such as Tan (2011). Alongside Colin's definition we have provided a working definition of Christian Counselling. The unique aspects of Christian Counselling are highlighted in Table 1 These will be expanded individually below because they draw attention to some unique elements of Christian Counselling. **Table 1: Definition of Christian Counselling**

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C	Collins (1979)	Hood (2018a)					
b ir c e p	between two or more persons in which a person (the counsellor), seeks to advise, encourage or assist, another berson/s (the counselee[s]) to	Christian counselling is a relationship between two or more persons in which a <i>Christian</i> (the counsellor), <i>in partnership with the Holy</i> <i>Spirit,</i> seeks to advise, encourage or assist, and/or					
	ssues of life.'	accompany another person/s					

Email: shood@waverleyabbeycollege.ac.uk

¹ Waverley Abbey College

² Stirling Theological College

(the	counselee[s])	to	deal
more	effectively	with	the
journ	ey of life.'		

A Christian

This definition suggests that Christian Counselling can (and should) only be done by someone who is a Christian themselves. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to endeavour to provide a failsafe measure to evaluate whether another is a Christian, but for our purposes if a Supervisee self-identifies as being a Christian that will probably suffice. What we are seeking to challenge is the alternate suggestion that a person of any (or no) faith persuasion can provide Christian Counselling with integrity.

In Partnership with the Holy Spirit

Every adherent to the Christian faith will acknowledge a special relationship with The Holy Spirit. The vastly different views on how and when this connection happens must be appreciated but is beyond the scope of this paper. The Bible refers to the Holy Spirit as a "paraclete" (e.g., variously in John 14-16) - one who is called to come along side. This is variously translated as 'helper' (English Standard Version) or even 'counsellor' (Revised Standard Version). For the Christian Counsellor, the function of the Holy Spirit will extend beyond their personal lives and into their professional practice. For each Supervisee this will be described differently but words such as "help", "encouragement", "inspiration", "revelation", "vision", "nudge", and "prompting" are often used when discussing the operation of the Holy Spirit. As a Supervisor it can be helpful to ask the Christian counsellor if they feel their work is done in partnership with the Holy Spirit, and if so, how that operates for them. The value in this Supervision discussion is not for the supervisor to assess the appropriateness of the supervisee's answer but more for the supervisee to take the time to explore the answer for themselves.

To Accompany ... On the Journey of Life

Collins' initial definition restricted the activities of the counsellor to "advise, encourage and assist ... in dealing with the problems of life". The initial definition reflects the common experience of counselling being utilised exclusively to resolve a specific problem or issue and then terminated once this is done. Christian Counselling is often quite different. Although the client will typically begin with some kind of presenting issue, the Christian Counselling journey can quickly become one of two pilgrims on a shared journey - where assistance morphs into accompaniment.

The supervisor should be attuned to the difference as many supervisees can struggle with the transition from issue resolution to 'accompaniment' and the associated need to recontract. Recontracting might be formal or informal, but it is important the supervisee and their client agree that the nature of the relationship changes when the counselling relationship moves from "assistance in dealing with problems" to "accompanying on the journey of life". Problem (or solution) focussed methods and interventions within a structured counselling plan may need to be set aside for a relationship that is a little more reactive and 'day-to-day'. The conversation can include a lot more celebration of joys as well as dealing with problems. The goal focussed supervisee can struggle with this transition and the inexperienced Supervisors can struggle to encourage it. Of course, this 'accompaniment' phenomenon occurs elsewhere but in Christian Counselling it is far more prevalent.

Types of Christian Counselling

Previously published research has identified four types of Christian Counselling (Hood, 2018a). Enormous benefit can be found when supervising Christian Counsellors by exploring these types to see which (if any) the supervisee identifies with and even if they find themselves moving between types depending on the context and client/s. The types are discussed below in order of most to least likely to present for Supervision. Whilst the discussion will explore elements of supervision unique to each type, it should be noted that all that has been said so far in this paper is relevant to all types that follow:

1. Professional Christian Counselling

This is the Professional Counsellor1 who intentionally incorporates their 'Christian-ness' into their practice. Whilst these professionals encounter all the 'normal' challenges of their colleagues, there are some unique challenges they encounter that are likely to emerge in Supervision. Space only permits exploration of five of these that have been identified through the experience of both authors.

A. The use of Spiritual and Religious Interventions (SRIs) within the counselling conversation is perhaps the most uniquely challenging aspect of Christian Counselling

In 2015, the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) commissioned a Literature Review into the effectiveness of Spiritual/Religious (S/R) interventions in psychotherapy and counselling. This review concluded "Overall, the literature provides ample evidence to support the integration of a client's S/R beliefs and practices as part of good counselling and psychotherapy practice" (Ross, Kennedy, & Macnab, 2015, p. 2). Whilst the Literature review provided several examples of S/R Interventions, it did not provide a wider definition nor guidance on their use.

The most common examples of SRIs in a Christian context are Prayer2, Reference to Scripture, meditation/ mindfulness and Forgiveness (Aten et al., 2011; Hawkins & Clinton, 2015; McMinn, 2011; Ohlschlager, n.d.; Thompson, 2018; Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2013). It is highly likely SRIs will be requested by the Christian client or may be seen to be useful by the Christian Counsellor for a specific client situation and the Supervisor should be prepared for a conversation about the ethical use of SRIs by the Professional Christian Counsellor including informed consent. Rather than explore each of these examples in detail, it is helpful to have a framework for approaching the use of any intervention which can then be applied to SRIs broadly and any one of the examples specifically. The Hexethogram is one such framework that has been developed for this purpose and used extensively by these authors.

The application of an SRI to a specific client in their unique context will of course be made on a case-by-case basis. However, there are six broad principles that can be helpful in guiding both counsellor (and by extension their Supervisor) in determining suitability of use. These are described as the Hexethogram. Like an effective playground fence, the boundaries represented by the six sides of the Hexethogram give permission for exploration and discovery within the confines of a clearly defined fence- designed to keep everyone safe.

i. The context of the counselling situation is a critical consideration for the suitability of using SRIs. In a recent survey of counsellors, 23% of those who were directly employed and 25% of those who worked as sub-contractors for an agency felt they did not have permission to include spirituality in their work (Hood, 2018b)

Counsellors who work as employees are subject not only to their professional code of ethics but also to that employer's policies and procedures. Occasionally these place explicit expectations and/or limitations on the counsellor's practice and at times these expectations or limitations may be undocumented.

In some ways Christian Counsellors who work as sub-contractors for agencies can face the greatest ambiguity. Generally speaking, it would be unwise and inappropriate for any Professional Counsellor to be utilising SRIs when working for an independent agency contracted (say) to a commercial enterprise or a Government Department - even where the client might hold to a Christian worldview. But what about (for example) the context whereby a Christian Counsellor responds to a tragedy at a Christian School as a contractor employed by Catholic Care or The Salvation Army? Answers to questions like this are often not easy to come by which is why they are often (and appropriately) raised in Supervision. Simply asking the supervisee to consider the full breadth of the counselling context (policies, procedures, inclusion and diversity statements, reasonable expectations of clientele, physical location, advertising/marketing content) can often prove invaluable in helping evaluate the contextual suitability of SRIs.

ii. Informed consent from the client is essential before considering any intervention (Martindale et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 1993). Provided below is a three-fold strategy that Supervisees may be encouraged to consider:

1. For the sake of transparency, practice information forms might openly declare one's own religious affiliation whilst being clear that no client will be discriminated against based on gender, race, sexuality or religious worldview. This information should be provided to every client and may often be included with other introductory documentation such as the fee structure, confidentiality agreements and the like, and in their practice marketing and advertising.

2. It is typical for client information (intake) forms to ask a series of questions (marital status, current medication, next of kin etc.). Therefore, inclusion of questions such as "do you wish your spirituality to be included in counselling?", or when they add their religious affiliation "would you like spiritual interventions used in sessions?" can be quite natural. Any client who answers 'No' would not be questioned further and would be deemed unsuitable for S/R Interventions. If a client answers 'Yes', the counsellor might enquire about the client's spiritual background and ask what they imagine it might look like if spirituality or S/R Interventions were included in their counselling experience. This client-centric approach then guides the process.

3. If the outcome of the discussion above is that they would like Christian 'Spiritual Practices' such as prayer, meditation, reference to the Bible etc included in their counselling experience then asking the client to sign a separate consent form to this effect can be useful.

iii. The client worldview must be respected (Christian Counsellors Association of Australia, 2017) and affirmed

(Australian Counselling Association, 2012). A client's spirituality and religion are a key component of their worldview. The Counsellor must be careful not to impose their own worldview upon the client but only offer interventions that they know are supportive of the client's worldview.

iv. Evidence informed principles of practice should be applied. PACFA intentionally encourages Evident Informed (as opposed to Evidence based) practice (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), 2019). The subtle but important challenges of an evidence based (comparted to evidence informed) approach is noted by (Kumah et al., 2019). Epstein (2009) observes that an evidence informed approach. enables practice that is "enriched by prior research but not limited to it". With respect to using SRIs the counsellor (and by extension the supervisor) must be aware of the evidence relating to the efficacy and risks associated with any potential intervention and allow this evidence to inform decisions of suitability. Generally speaking the evidence supporting the efficacy of introducing spirituality into the counselling conversation is strong and growing stronger (Captari et al., 2018; Gubi, 2011), however, this does not permit complacency when discerning the suitability of a specific intervention to a particular client situation.

v. Counsellor competence and integrity is a key issue to consider when determining suitability of using SRIs. The demand for counsellors to operate within their training and competence is normative and deeply engrained in most codes of practice and conduct. Yet challenges to counsellor integrity are often not so well considered. There is insufficient space to do justice to the importance of counsellors operating with integrity to themselves but suffice to say there is nothing in the ethical codes to suggest that concepts of integrity, dignity, and respect for worldview in the counselling relationship apply only to the client. With regard to SRIs this means (for example) a Muslim Counsellor should not feel obliged to pray to a Christian God, a Jewish counsellor should not feel obliged to treat the New Testament scriptures as sacred and a Christian counsellor should not feel obliged to lead a Buddhist client in Eastern meditation. Within the Christian Counselling context, these challenges of integrity even occur within different denominational expressions of their shared Christian faith between client and counsellor. If a client requests interventions that are beyond the integrity of the counsellor and this cannot be resolved, then referral is an option that should be considered.

vi. Client best interest completes the 'fence-line' of the Hexethogram. Even if all of the five prior conditions are met, the ethical concept of beneficence (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, 2017) demands that an intervention only be applied if it is in the Counsellor's best professional judgement that no other intervention is likely to be better for the client. Just because an intervention can be done does not mean it should be. Overwhelmingly the preferred way of navigating this ethical boundary is by emphasising that consent must be informed. Where there are a number of interventions that may support the client, it is generally best practice to explain these to the client including the risks and possible benefits and allowing the client to decide which they would prefer.

B. The purpose of the counselling journey is slightly nuanced for most people seeking Christian Counselling and must be appreciated by both Counsellor and Supervisor. In Christian Counselling the principles of client centeredness are upheld including the Rogerian assumption that clients have "vast potential for understanding themselves and resolving their own problems without direct intervention" (Corey, 2016, p. 165). However, these assumptions are held in tension with the equal assumption that "True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the Word of God. They submit without reserve to the Word of God..." (Packer, 1993, p. 116)

This idea of living "under the word of God" (i.e., in accordance with the teachings of the Bible) may represent the most difficult aspect of Christian Counselling for the atheist supervisor to work with3. Paradoxically, the Supervisor who comes from an alternate faith background (e.g., Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist) will often be comfortable with the idea of submitting one's life to an external set of religious teachings - they may not agree with the choice, but they can resonate with the idea. However, this idea that an external set of teaching provides the primary source for practical solutions to life's challenges can be seen to be far removed from the Rogerian idea that clients should seek answers to their questions from within themselves.

Many clients come to counselling in order to minimise the discomfort they are experiencing in life and maximise life's happiness. Whilst these objectives are not unimportant for the Christian client, the client's greater purpose of is often to live in accordance with the teaching of the Bible even if this brings with it discomfort and unhappiness. The Christian Counsellor will often find themselves coming to Supervision to discuss ways of supporting clients in their desire to endure (not avoid) suffering and persist in discomfort in order to uphold their Christian worldview.

C. Dual relationships are a common issue that need to be managed for the Christian Counsellor. Dual relationships are almost inevitable when one is part of a small community. Examples of small communities include a country town, a community of a similar culture or language within a large city or the active Christian community in any city. When one further divide these 'active' Christians into sub-groups according to Denomination or geography, multiple relationships tend to become an inevitability that must be managed rather than something that can be completely avoided. Where a supervisee is challenged by a situation of the possibility of a dual relationship forming the following may be some helpful strategies:

- Referral to another Christian Counsellor –alternative delivery modes such as face to screen/online may need to be considered.
- Agreement to put 'on-hold' the 'other' relationship for an appropriate time frame to accommodate the counselling season. This may mean the client or counsellor chooses to temporarily (for example) no longer be part of the choir or they choose to attend Church services at different times.
- Have the counsellor explain that if they inadvertently 'bumpinto' the client (e.g., at the coffee queue) the counsellor will make no reference to the counselling connection and they recommend the client refrains from doing so or engage in lengthy, social conversations.
- Encourage regular check-ins within the counselling journey to specifically discuss the management of any dual relationship.

D. Self-Disclosure is often more prevalent in Christian Counselling. Many Christian Counsellors will indicate that they find themselves engaging in noticeably more self-disclosure when supporting Christian clients who have requested Christian Counselling. This is perhaps not surprising when one enters the paradigm of being on a shared journey of Christian living with a fellow pilgrim. In Christian parlance the notion of Discipleship is often referred to – where the counsellor and the counselee share a common journey of the Christian life with its struggles and joys. The Supervisor should not necessarily be concerned if they sense a level of self-disclosure that might otherwise be surprising in other settings.

2. Professional Counselling by a Christian

The second type of Christian Counselling is Professional Counselling by a Christian (Hood, 2018a). According to the most recent Australian Census, 52% of Australians self-identify as having a Christian Religious Affiliation of some form (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Thus, every Supervision session conducted in Australia has a better than even chance of a Christian overlay. It is inevitable that this Christian worldview will shape the counsellor's understanding of good and evil, will influence the lens through which they view their clients, will be part of how they make sense of personal and relationship brokenness and will underpin their deepest understanding of the meaning and purpose in life. It is equally true and inevitable that the counsellor's own gender identification, marital status, sexuality, and racial association (to name a few) will shape the counsellor's worldview. However, the experienced, person-centred counsellor will often develop strategies to conceal their worldview from the client experience. This will often mean suppressing their own views particularly when supporting a client whose views, gender, sexuality, values, marital status etc. are different to their own. Some Mental Health Professionals (MHPs) have become so well-schooled in this approach that they find it hard to conceive of any alternative.

For the sake of definition, we label this type of Christian Counselling as Professional Counselling by a Christian (Hood, 2018a). Usually, this situation occurs by the counsellor's choice. In these instances, challenges such using SR Interventions and Self disclosure discussed earlier rarely come to the surface for the counsellor and therefore rarely present in supervision. Ironically, whilst the Professional Christian Counsellor (discussed earlier) is often bringing the question "How can I ethically express my faith?" to supervision, this new type of Christian Counsellor is often asking "How do I professionally suppress my faith?"

This can be especially challenging where the client has specifically indicated they do not want their spirituality included in their counselling conversation or the counselling context prohibits it, yet the counsellor has a preference to allow their faith to be expressed.

3. Pastoral Counselling

The authors have great regard for the highly effective Christian Counselling conducted by religious leaders (Pastoral Counselling) who provide support for members of their religious community.

It is pleasing that an increasing number of religious leaders (including ordained clergy) are seeking supervision for their Pastoral work4. Whilst there may be many points of overlap between the practice of Clinical Supervision of a Mental Health Professional and Pastoral Supervision (Supervision of a Religious Leader or religious worker), one must be careful not to simply 'cut-and-paste' from one domain to the other.

Barletta provides a helpful definition of clinical supervision as "a process whereby colleagues of a similar profession..." (Barletta, 2017, p. 6). The Clinical Supervisor who

is considering taking on a supervisee who is a religious leader should consider whether they are truly "of a similar profession" particularly if they do not share the supervisee's religious beliefs. Having provided Pastoral Supervision to a number of religious leaders, the authors share a few insights below. The four areas of supervision (Armstrong, 2020, pp. 27–29) still broadly apply but need to be adapted to the Supervisee's Pastoral context:

1. Identifying any mental or emotional issues. It has been the experience of these authors that the presence of mental and emotional issues is often more likely in Pastoral Supervision than clinical supervision of an MHP, due to the pastoral commitment to their people.

2. Challenging use of theories, modalities, and ethics. Religious leaders and workers tend to face 'situations' rather than 'clients'. Whilst client specific conversations can tend to occupy the many MHP Supervision sessions, it is not uncommon for this to be replaced by discussions of 'situations' Having said this, asking the Pastoral supervisee to identify and refer to codes of ethics (how decisions should be made) and codes of conduct (acceptable behaviours) or their equivalent can lead to equally powerful insight in Supervision. Sometimes these codes are explicit and documented but sometimes the supervisee will gain great insight by seeking and exploring 'undocumented codes'. The supervisor from a Mental Health background must be open to the idea that these codes of conduct in a religious context may not always align with those that they are familiar with. Situations faced by religious leaders can include conflict between two key influential families, moral failure of a key leader, managing the expectations of a needy family who are abusing the congregation's generosity, and challenges to doctrinal teaching. These examples also demonstrate how far-removed Pastoral work and Mental Health work can be that the Supervisor must be prepared for.

3. Professional Development. This can often be a fruitful discussion particularly where the supervisee can be supported in their use of systems and processes that exist within the denominational or institutional framework.

4. Career development may take on a very different perspective where the church is concerned. Where an individual has taken a vow to pursue a 'vocation' and there is only one 'employer', navigating one's career is truly unique. This varies dramatically across different denominational settings even within the Christian community.

The above discussion is provided to give a few ideas when Supervising a religious leader (even in their Christian Counselling work) as well as caution the clinical supervisor considering offering supervision as to whether they are truly "of a similar profession" and appropriately equipped. It emphasises the much-needed expansion of Clinical Supervision training for religious leaders by religious leaders that will encompass their Christian Counselling work amongst many other aspects of their Pastoral and Church worker functions. Many churches have embraced, and more will likely embrace in the future, Professional Christian Supervision as part of their staff requirements.

4. Lay Christian counselling

The authors have high regard for the final type of Christian counsellor – the lay person who comes alongside a brother or sister in the faith to advise, encourage, assist or accompany them on the journey of life. If only more of this were done more effectively, perhaps there would be less need for Professional help. Whilst this group is affirmed and acknowledged, they are unlikely to present for Supervision and are therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

Professional Christian Supervised Supervision

So far we have limited our discussion to Supervision of Christian Counsellors. However, we must also consider supervised Supervision. Supervised supervision appears to work best when an effective alliance with an experienced and qualified Christian supervisor of supervisors enables a deeper reflective space and increased learning, resulting in best practice for Professional Christian Supervisors. It may involve scrutiny and curiosity of clinical supervision practice, ethically and relationally, creating checks and safeguards for the practitioners and their Christian clients. Professional and Pastoral Christian supervised supervision may be described as an exponential step up from supervision and it is recommended that Professional Christian supervising supervisors be required to demonstrate greater expertise, experience, credentials, training, responsibility, and knowledge of SRIs. In Australia supervised supervision is a Counselling Association requirement.

Conclusion

The supervision of Christian counsellors will be different depending on the type of Christian counsellor the supervisee identifies as. Exploring the four types of Professional Christian Counselling provided in this paper is recommended as beneficial for the supervisee. As noted, the professional Christian counsellor will likely face some unique challenges. When brought to supervision the supervisor needs to be ready and equipped to deal with them knowledgeably, ethically, compassionately, and non-judgmentally. Generally speaking, competent supervisors will be able to provide adequate supervision for the professional counsellor who happens to have a Christian faith. However, supervisors are advised to think carefully about their own suitability for supervising Professional Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Counsellors as colleagues in a similar profession. The need for Professional Christian Supervision and Pastoral Supervision is expanding and can no longer be a common oversight.

Footnotes

¹ For the sake of this paper, Professional Counsellor is an umbrella term that encompasses any Mental Health professional that utilises counselling. Primary examples include Registered Counsellors, Psychologists, and Social Workers.

² The suitable use of prayer in counselling is a topic unto itself and cannot be covered in this paper. The Supervisee should be encouraged to bring to supervision what 'using prayer' might actually look like as its application can be as innocuous as the counsellor praying before each session begins through to the use of prayer ministry (or prayer counselling) in session, which is specifically prohibited in some codes of conduct (Christian Counsellors Association of Australia, 2017), and countless options in between.

³ A practical, relevant, and often emotive example of this

surrounds conversion therapy which in many places is now illegal. There can be no doubt that people have been harmed by well-intentioned religious groups and harm must be prevented. This paper has already outlined the importance of operating within a client's worldview at the subordination of the worldview of the counsellor. However, the Christian Counsellor will inevitably encounter various individuals that wish to suppress all types of sexual attraction in order to live a life in accordance with how they interpret the Bible. Just as the counselling relationship must be a safe place for the client to discuss these matters, so the supervision relationship must be a safe and non-judgmental place for Christian Counsellors to bring these complex ethical challenges confident they will not be met with simplistic solutions from their supervisor. Similarly, this applies to not converting a client to a faith or religion of the counsellor's preference against their wishes. This dilemma may however, be discussed openly in supervision to consider informed consent and ethical best practice.

⁴This phenomenon is likely this is being driven, at least in part, by recommendation 16.45 emerging from Australia's recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: " ...that all people in religious or pastoral ministry, including religious leaders, have professional supervision..." (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

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