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STEWARD LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN FLOURISHING IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPERVISION: A BIBLICALLY INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Clinical mental health supervision is one of the most influential leadership relationships within the helping professions because supervisors shape professional competence, ethical decision-making, counselor identity development, and ultimately client welfare. Although contemporary supervision literature increasingly emphasizes competency-based education, reflective practice, and evidence-informed leadership, supervision is often conceptualized primarily as an educational or administrative responsibility rather than as an exercise of entrusted moral leadership. This conceptual article argues that steward leadership provides a biblically grounded and theoretically integrative framework for understanding clinical supervision as leadership exercised on behalf of supervisees, clients, organizations, and society. Drawing from an exegetical examination of Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3, the article develops a biblical theology of stewardship characterized by entrusted authority, faithful service, accountability, and the promotion of flourishing. These theological principles are integrated with stewardship theory, servant leadership, authentic leadership, transformational leadership, competency-based supervision, instructional design, and adult learning scholarship to propose the Steward Leadership Framework for Clinical Mental Health Supervision. The framework identifies four interdependent supervisory responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service—that collectively foster supervisee professional growth, ethical clinical practice, client flourishing, organizational flourishing, and ultimately human flourishing. The article concludes by discussing implications for supervisor education, leadership scholarship, behavioral health organizations, and future research.

Keywords: clinical supervision, steward leadership, servant leadership, competency-based supervision, biblical leadership, human flourishing, counselor education

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Clinical supervision is central to the behavioral health professions because it develops competent, ethical, and reflective clinicians. Beyond monitoring clinical performance, supervision fosters professional identity, ethical decision-making, reflective practice, and client protection through mentoring, evaluation, and competency development (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). As behavioral health systems face workforce shortages, expanding service demands, broader scopes of practice, and clinician burnout, the need for well-prepared supervisors has become increasingly urgent (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2023; National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2024; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

Contemporary supervision has shifted from apprenticeship models toward competency-based education that emphasizes intentional instructional design, observable competencies, developmental assessment, deliberate practice, and structured feedback (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Advances in instructional design and technology-enhanced learning further support authentic learning, guided practice, multimedia instruction, and continuous performance assessment (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020; Pérez-Conde et al., 2026). Likewise, adult learning theory emphasizes that experienced professionals learn best through relevant, collaborative, and practice-centered educational experiences grounded in prior knowledge (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015).

Despite these advances, leadership remains comparatively underdeveloped as a conceptual foundation for supervision. Supervisors are commonly described as educators, evaluators, consultants, and gatekeepers, yet less attention has been given to the nature of supervisory authority and the ethical responsibilities accompanying its exercise (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [BACP], 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Although transformational, authentic, servant, and adaptive leadership contribute valuable insights into leader behavior and organizational effectiveness, each offers only a partial account of supervisors' responsibility to supervisees, clients, organizations, and the profession (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977; Kozachuk & Conley, 2021).

Stewardship provides a broader framework by viewing leadership as the faithful exercise of delegated authority on behalf of others rather than for personal gain (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Its emphasis on responsibility, accountability, trust, long-term development, and organizational flourishing closely parallels the responsibilities of clinical supervisors, who simultaneously develop supervisees, protect clients, evaluate competence, promote ethical practice, and strengthen behavioral health organizations (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

From a biblical perspective, stewardship extends beyond organizational leadership to humanity's original vocation under God's delegated authority. Scripture

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consistently portrays leadership as faithful service characterized by accountability, protection, and the cultivation of others, beginning with humanity's commission to cultivate and guard creation (Gen. 2:15), continuing through Christ's model of sacrificial leadership (Matt. 20:25–28), and culminating in Peter's exhortation to shepherd God's people willingly and by example (1 Pet. 5:2–3; Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). This understanding aligns closely with clinical supervision, where authority exists to cultivate competence, protect clients, and advance ethical practice. Research likewise associates servant leadership, developmental mentoring, and supportive supervision with greater resilience, reduced burnout and secondary traumatic stress, and stronger supervisory relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Ertl et al., 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Grunhaus et al., 2023; Hafford-Letchfield & Engelbrecht, 2018; Mahon, 2021).

The purpose of this conceptual article is to develop a biblically grounded framework of steward leadership for clinical mental health supervision by integrating biblical theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based supervision, instructional design, and adult learning theory. Specifically, the article proposes that faithful supervision is best understood as the exercise of entrusted authority through four interdependent leadership responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions foster supervisee development, ethical clinical practice, client and organizational flourishing, and ultimately human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017).

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF STEWARD LEADERSHIP: AN EXEGETICAL FOUNDATION

Steward leadership in clinical mental health supervision is best understood through the biblical theology of stewardship. Although contemporary leadership theories often define stewardship in organizational or managerial terms, Scripture presents it as a theological reality rooted in God's sovereignty and humanity's delegated responsibility. Throughout the biblical narrative, authority is portrayed not as autonomous but as entrusted by God to cultivate, protect, develop, and serve others faithfully. This understanding provides the theological foundation for steward leadership in clinical supervision.

Three biblical passages are central to this framework. Genesis 2:15 establishes stewardship as humanity's original vocation through the complementary responsibilities of cultivation and protection. Matthew 20:25–28 redefines leadership through Christ's model of sacrificial service rather than domination, while 1 Peter 5:2–3 applies these principles to leadership by portraying oversight as willing, exemplary, and accountable before God. Together, these passages form a coherent theology of entrusted authority that closely aligns with the responsibilities of clinical supervisors to develop competent clinicians while protecting clients, organizations, and the integrity of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Rather than serving as isolated proof texts, these passages reveal a progressive biblical understanding of leadership that begins in creation, is redefined by Christ, and is applied to leaders within the early church. Steward leadership, therefore, is more than a

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leadership style; it is a theological model of entrusted authority exercised for the flourishing of individuals, organizations, and communities.

Stewardship as Humanity's Original Vocation: Genesis 2:15

The biblical foundation for stewardship begins before the entrance of sin. In Genesis 2:15, God commissions humanity "to work it and keep it" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, Gen. 2:15), establishing stewardship as humanity's original vocation. Before leadership became associated with power or hierarchy, it was defined by faithful care for what belongs to God. Humanity received not ownership of creation but delegated responsibility for its cultivation and protection, establishing authority as entrusted rather than possessed.

The Hebrew verbs translated as "work" (*ʿābad*) and "keep" (*šāmar*) clarify this vocation. ʿĀbad conveys cultivating, serving, and developing toward maturity, whereas *šāmar* means to guard, preserve, and protect. Together, they portray stewardship as the complementary responsibilities of development and protection (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). These responsibilities closely parallel clinical supervision, where supervisors cultivate professional competence through instruction, reflective practice, and professional identity formation while protecting clients and the profession through ethical oversight, competency evaluation, documentation, and remediation when necessary (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Genesis also distinguishes stewardship from ownership. Because creation belongs to God, human authority remains derivative and accountable. Steward leaders therefore exercise authority on behalf of another rather than for personal advancement. This understanding aligns with stewardship theory, which emphasizes trust, responsibility, shared purpose, and long-term flourishing over self-interest (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012), contrasting with agency theory's assumption of individual self-interest (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Within clinical supervision, authority is thus understood as an entrusted responsibility exercised for the benefit of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession rather than as a source of status or control.

Genesis 2:15 also introduces a theological principle that extends throughout Scripture: faithful stewardship is measured by the flourishing of what has been entrusted to one's care. Healthy supervision develops competent clinicians who practice ethically and contribute to the well-being of clients, organizations, and society, reflecting the broader biblical vision of human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Accordingly, Genesis 2:15 provides more than a creation mandate; it establishes the theological foundation for steward leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through cultivation, protection, and accountability before God. These themes become even more explicit in the teachings of Jesus, who redefined leadership through sacrificial service.

Christ's Redefinition of Leadership: Matthew 20:25–28

Although Genesis establishes stewardship as humanity's original vocation, Jesus redefines how entrusted authority is exercised. In Matthew 20:25–28, following the disciples' dispute over positions of honor, Jesus contrasts worldly leadership with the values of God's kingdom. He observes that Gentile rulers "lord it over" others and

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exercise authority through domination but declares that such leadership should not characterize His followers. Instead, greatness is found in becoming a servant (*diakonos*) and even a bondservant (*doulos*), a principle ultimately demonstrated by the Son of Man, who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (ESV, 2001/2016, Matt. 20:25–28).

Rather than rejecting authority, Jesus rejects its misuse through domination, coercion, and self-promotion. The Greek verbs *katakurieuō* ("to lord over") and *katexousiazō* ("to exercise authority over") describe oppressive leadership, whereas diakonos and doulos redefine greatness through humble, sacrificial service modeled by Christ Himself (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Applied to clinical supervision, this teaching reframes supervisory authority as relational, developmental, and service-oriented. Supervisors continue to fulfill evaluative and gatekeeping responsibilities, but these functions are exercised to develop supervisees and protect clients rather than to enhance personal status or institutional control. This perspective aligns with contemporary supervision scholarship emphasizing collaborative learning, developmental feedback, reflective practice, and competency-based education (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Christ's model also anticipates contemporary leadership theories that emphasize authenticity, empowerment, and service. Authentic leadership highlights self-awareness and ethical relationships (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership emphasizes shared purpose and follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and servant leadership places the well-being of followers at the center of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Steward leadership integrates these strengths while grounding them in a theological understanding of entrusted authority, recognizing that leaders are accountable both to those they serve and to God, who entrusts them with responsibility. This relationship between authority, accountability, and faithful oversight is further developed in 1 Peter 5:2–3, where church leaders are exhorted to shepherd God's people willingly and by example.

Shepherding as Faithful Stewardship: 1 Peter 5:2–3

The stewardship principles established in Genesis and redefined by Christ are applied directly to leadership in 1 Peter 5:2–3. Peter instructs church elders to shepherd God's people by exercising oversight willingly rather than reluctantly, serving eagerly rather than for personal gain, and leading through example rather than domination (ESV, 1 Pet. 5:2–3). Although addressed to church leaders, these principles describe faithful leadership as the stewardship of people who ultimately belong to God. Leaders therefore exercise delegated authority while remaining accountable to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), a perspective that closely parallels the responsibilities of clinical supervisors.

Peter's model aligns closely with contemporary expectations of effective supervision. Clinical supervisors are expected to model ethical practice, demonstrate professional integrity, cultivate reflective learning environments, and mentor supervisees through guidance rather than intimidation or excessive control (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Likewise, supervision scholarship recognizes that supervisors shape learning not

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only through instruction but also through the professional behaviors they consistently model (BACP, 2021; Ertl et al., 2021).

Peter's emphasis on exemplary leadership also resonates with contemporary leadership theory. Authentic leadership highlights consistency between values and behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership emphasizes moral influence and shared purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and servant leadership prioritizes the growth and well-being of followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Steward leadership incorporates these perspectives while extending them through the theological conviction that all authority is delegated by God and exercised on behalf of others (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012).

Applied to clinical supervision, this perspective broadens the supervisor's role beyond evaluating counseling sessions or documenting competence. Supervisors shape professional identity, ethical judgment, clinical competence, and future practice, creating effects that extend to clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Effective supervision therefore requires humility, integrity, courage, compassion, and accountability, fostering internalized ethical responsibility rather than mere compliance (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Ultimately, Peter's teaching introduces a distinctive theological dimension: steward leaders are accountable not only to professional organizations but also to God, reinforcing faithful and ethical leadership through an enduring moral framework.

Synthesis: A Biblical Theology of Entrusted Authority

Taken together, Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3 provide a coherent biblical theology of steward leadership that extends from creation through Christ's teaching to the life of the early church. Collectively, these passages establish four foundational principles that shape the Steward Leadership Framework proposed in this article.

First, authority is entrusted rather than possessed. Genesis portrays leadership as delegated responsibility to cultivate and protect what belongs to God, establishing stewardship rather than ownership as the basis of leadership (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Likewise, clinical supervisors exercise authority through professional trust, ethical standards, and organizational responsibility rather than personal entitlement.

Second, stewardship requires both cultivation and protection. The complementary responsibilities of ʿābad and šāmar are reflected in supervision through developing supervisee competence while safeguarding client welfare by ethical oversight and competency evaluation (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Third, authority is exercised through service. Jesus redefines greatness through sacrificial service, making service the character of leadership rather than an additional supervisory responsibility. Formation, protection, and accountability therefore become expressions of service rather than instruments of control (Greenleaf, 1977; Mahon, 2021).

Finally, leaders remain accountable for the flourishing of those entrusted with their care. Peter portrays oversight as faithful stewardship under God's authority, reminding supervisors that their responsibility extends beyond supervisee development

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to ethical practice, client welfare, organizational integrity, and the long-term health of the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Together, these principles provide the theological foundation for the Steward Leadership Framework. The following section examines contemporary leadership scholarship to demonstrate how steward leadership complements and extends existing leadership theories by grounding them in a theology of entrusted authority directed toward human flourishing.

STEWARD LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP SCHOLARSHIP

Modern leadership scholarship has increasingly moved beyond models centered on positional authority and managerial control toward approaches emphasizing ethical responsibility, relational influence, follower development, and organizational sustainability. Transformational, authentic, servant, and adaptive leadership have each contributed important insights into effective leadership, reflecting growing recognition that leadership is measured not only by organizational performance but also by the ability to cultivate people, foster healthy organizational cultures, and promote the common good (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

This perspective is especially relevant to clinical supervision, where supervisors shape professional identity, ethical decision-making, clinical competence, and organizational culture. Effective supervision therefore requires more than technical expertise or administrative oversight; it requires leadership characterized by integrity, accountability, service, and commitment to the long-term flourishing of supervisees, clients, and organizations (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Although contemporary leadership theories provide valuable insights into these responsibilities, stewardship theory offers a distinctive perspective by viewing leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted responsibility rather than personal power. The following sections examine these leadership traditions and demonstrate how steward leadership integrates their strengths while extending them through a biblically grounded theology of entrusted authority.

From Agency Theory to Stewardship Theory

Modern stewardship theory emerged in response to agency theory, which assumes that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest and therefore require external monitoring and control to align their actions with organizational goals (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Although agency theory has shaped organizational governance, its assumptions only partially explain leadership in the helping professions. Clinical supervision requires accountability and evaluation, but it also depends on trust, collaboration, mentorship, and reflective learning to foster counselor development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Stewardship theory offers an alternative perspective by proposing that leaders willingly place collective welfare above personal gain. Davis et al. (1997) argued that stewardship is characterized by intrinsic motivation, shared purpose, trust, collaboration, and long-term organizational success. Hernandez (2012) further described stewardship as a psychological orientation of responsibility and accountability for preserving and

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enhancing what has been entrusted to one's care. This perspective closely aligns with clinical supervision, where supervisory decisions influence supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession.

From a biblical perspective, however, organizational stewardship remains incomplete. While stewardship theory explains leadership in terms of responsibility for collective welfare, Scripture grounds stewardship in God's delegated authority. Steward leadership therefore extends organizational stewardship by emphasizing accountability before God and responsibility for promoting human flourishing.

Authentic Leadership and Moral Integrity

Authentic leadership emphasizes consistency between values and behavior, relational transparency, objective decision-making, and an internalized moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Within clinical supervision, authenticity fosters trust, psychological safety, reflective practice, and open dialogue as supervisors model humility and ethical decision-making (Ertl et al., 2021; Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Yet authenticity alone provides limited guidance for supervisory evaluation, gatekeeping, and client protection. Steward leadership incorporates authenticity within a broader framework of entrusted authority and moral responsibility.

Transformational Leadership and Professional Development

Transformational leadership highlights the leader's ability to inspire growth, stimulate intellectual development, and motivate followers toward shared goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). These principles closely parallel effective supervision through developmental mentoring, reflective dialogue, constructive feedback, and competency development (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). However, transformational leadership primarily emphasizes performance and organizational effectiveness, whereas steward leadership integrates professional development with ethical accountability, client protection, and faithful oversight.

Servant Leadership and the Development of Others

Among contemporary leadership theories, servant leadership bears the strongest resemblance to biblical stewardship. Greenleaf (1977) argued that leadership begins with serving others by promoting their growth, well-being, and flourishing. Empirical studies likewise associate servant-oriented supervision with lower burnout, reduced secondary traumatic stress, greater resilience, and stronger supervisory relationships (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

Although closely related, servant leadership and steward leadership are not synonymous. Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's orientation toward followers, whereas steward leadership broadens this focus to include entrusted authority, accountability, protection, and responsibility to clients, organizations, professional standards, licensing boards, and society (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Service therefore represents the character through which stewardship is expressed, while formation, protection, and accountability define its core responsibilities.

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Adaptive Leadership and Developmental Supervision

Adaptive leadership emphasizes adjusting supervisory approaches to developmental needs, clinical complexity, and contextual demands (Kozachuk & Conley, 2021). This perspective aligns with competency-based education, which promotes individualized learning, formative assessment, deliberate practice, and progressive skill development (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Similarly, instructional design and adult learning research demonstrates that professionals learn most effectively through authentic practice, timely feedback, collaboration, and experience-based learning (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Clark, 25; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Knowles et al., 2015; Merrill, 2002, 2020).

Steward leadership naturally encompasses these educational principles because faithful stewardship is inherently developmental. Rather than merely evaluating current performance, steward supervisors intentionally cultivate future competence, ethical reasoning, reflective practice, resilience, and lifelong professional growth.

Toward a Biblically Integrative Model of Steward Leadership

Contemporary leadership scholarship provides valuable insights into ethical leadership, authenticity, transformational influence, service, and adaptive supervision. Yet no single theory fully captures the comprehensive responsibilities of clinical supervisors. Stewardship theory emphasizes responsibility and organizational trust, authentic leadership emphasizes moral integrity, transformational leadership promotes growth, servant leadership prioritizes follower development, and adaptive leadership recognizes developmental differences. Each contributes important dimensions of effective supervision.

The biblical theology developed in the previous section provides the integrating framework that unites these perspectives. Scripture portrays leadership as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through cultivation, protection, accountability, and service. This theological foundation expands contemporary leadership theories by recognizing that supervisors are accountable not only for supervisee development but also for client welfare, organizational integrity, professional standards, and ultimately the flourishing of the communities their supervisees serve.

The next section applies these leadership principles directly to clinical mental health supervision, demonstrating why supervision is most appropriately understood as an exercise of steward leadership rather than solely an educational, administrative, or managerial function.

Steward Leadership and Clinical Mental Health Supervision

Clinical mental health supervision is one of the most consequential leadership relationships in the behavioral health professions because supervisors shape clinicians' competence, ethical decision-making, professional identity, and long-term effectiveness. Their influence extends beyond supervisees to clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Supervision is therefore more than an educational process or administrative function; it is the exercise of entrusted authority to cultivate professional growth while protecting public welfare (ACA, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders

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et al., 2023).

Although supervisors are commonly described as teachers, consultants, evaluators, mentors, and gatekeepers, these roles collectively reflect a broader leadership responsibility that has received comparatively limited theoretical attention (Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Supervisors simultaneously develop competence, evaluate readiness for independent practice, protect clients, promote ethical practice, and strengthen organizations through the faithful exercise of delegated authority. Viewed through the lens of steward leadership, supervision shifts from positional authority to entrusted responsibility. Supervisors become stewards of professional formation, ethical practice, organizational integrity, and public trust, with leadership ultimately measured by the flourishing of those entrusted to their care.

Supervision as Entrusted Authority

Licensed clinical supervisors exercise delegated authority entrusted by licensing boards, professional organizations, healthcare systems, universities, and counseling agencies. They evaluate competence, determine readiness for increasing independence, recommend remediation, and, when necessary, restrict practice to protect clients and uphold professional standards (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

This authority is fiduciary rather than positional. Supervisors exercise authority for the benefit of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession, carrying corresponding responsibilities of accountability, transparency, fairness, and stewardship. Consistent with the biblical model of delegated authority established in Genesis 2:15, supervisors cultivate professional competence while safeguarding clients and the integrity of the profession. Steward leadership therefore views authority as responsibility rather than privilege, distinguishing it from authoritarian approaches that emphasize compliance over professional growth and reflective learning.

Competency-Based Supervision as Stewardship

The emergence of competency-based education further supports understanding supervision as stewardship. Rather than emphasizing time-based training, competency-based models prioritize demonstrated competence, observable behaviors, formative assessment, deliberate practice, and continuous improvement (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Within counseling, supervisors intentionally develop competence through structured learning objectives, developmental progression, direct observation, feedback, and measurable outcomes (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

This educational approach closely reflects biblical stewardship. Just as faithful stewards intentionally cultivate what has been entrusted to their care, supervisors intentionally design learning experiences that foster professional growth rather than merely document performance. Instructional design research likewise demonstrates that authentic learning, guided practice, structured feedback, and integration into professional practice produce meaningful competency development (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020). Steward leadership provides the theological and ethical foundation for these educational practices by framing supervision as the intentional cultivation of those entrusted to the supervisor's care.

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Adult Learning and Professional Formation

Adult learning theory reinforces steward leadership by recognizing that experienced professionals construct knowledge through reflection, experience, collaboration, and application to practice (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Consistent with these principles, effective supervision builds on supervisees' prior experience through collaborative dialogue, guided reflection, clinical consultation, and progressively challenging learning experiences rather than relying solely on didactic instruction (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022).

Steward leadership complements adult learning by viewing supervisees as developing professionals entrusted to the supervisor's care. Accordingly, supervision extends beyond teaching clinical skills to cultivating professional identity, ethical judgment, cultural responsiveness, and lifelong learning. Experiential learning further strengthens this perspective, as authentic practice environments enhance knowledge integration, confidence, and professional responsibility (Ertl et al., 2021).

Supervision as Ethical Stewardship

The ethical responsibilities of clinical supervisors further illustrate stewardship in practice. Supervisors must simultaneously support supervisees, protect clients, and uphold professional standards, requiring wisdom, integrity, and accountability. Professional codes emphasize responsibilities for client welfare, supervisee competence, informed consent, cultural responsiveness, confidentiality, documentation, and ongoing professional development (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Competency frameworks similarly identify reflective practice, ethical awareness, developmental responsiveness, and collaborative learning as essential supervisory competencies (BACP, 2021). At the global level, competency-based workforce initiatives recognize supervision as fundamental to expanding high-quality behavioral healthcare (Kohrt et al., 2025; WHO, 2022). Given persistent workforce shortages and increasing demand for behavioral health services, faithful supervision represents one of the profession's most significant stewardship responsibilities (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023).

STEWARD LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Steward leadership also broadens the purpose of supervision beyond competence, licensure, or organizational performance to human flourishing. VanderWeele (2017) described flourishing as encompassing purpose, relationships, character, health, and contribution to the common good. Within supervision, flourishing begins with supervisee development and extends through ethical clinical practice to clients, organizations, communities, and society.

This cascading influence reflects the steward leadership model: faithful supervisors develop competent clinicians; competent clinicians provide ethical care; ethical care promotes client well-being; healthy organizations sustain quality behavioral health services; and these outcomes collectively contribute to human flourishing. Supervisory leadership is therefore measured not only by supervisee competence but also by its enduring impact on individuals, organizations, and communities.

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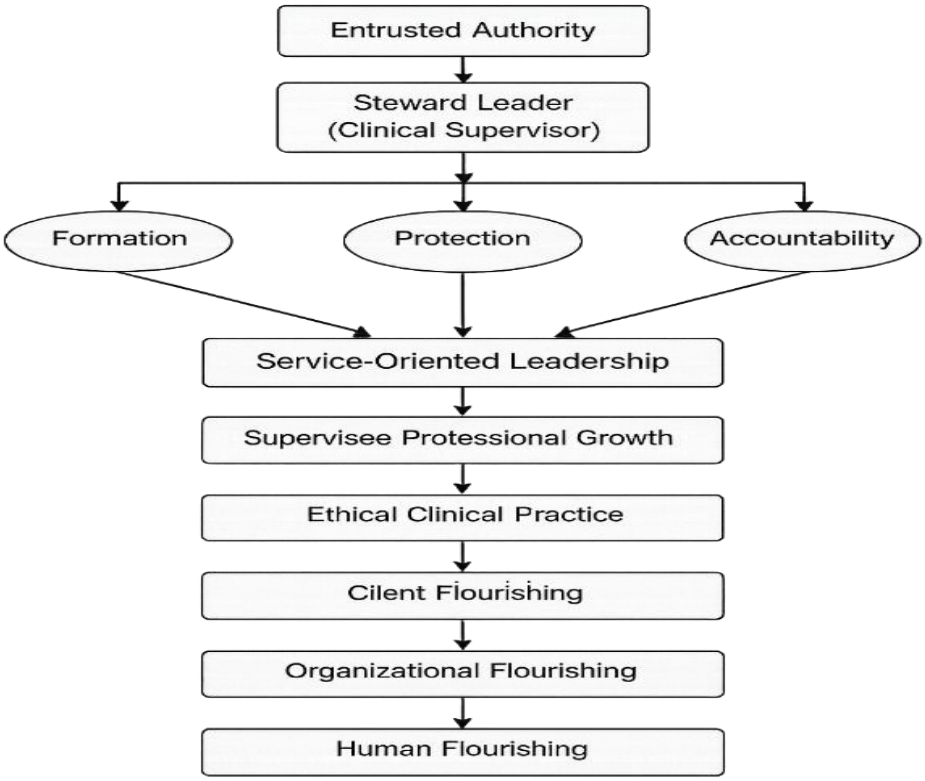
Transition to the Steward Leadership Framework

The preceding discussion demonstrates that biblical theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based education, instructional design, adult learning theory, and professional supervision standards converge on a common principle: leadership is the faithful exercise of entrusted authority for the development and protection of others. While each perspective contributes valuable insights, steward leadership integrates them into a coherent theological and conceptual framework.

The Steward Leadership Framework proposed in this article conceptualizes supervision as the faithful exercise of delegated authority through four interdependent leadership responsibilities: formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions promote supervisee professional growth, ethical clinical practice, client well-being, organizational health, and ultimately human flourishing. Rather than representing sequential stages, they operate simultaneously throughout the supervisory relationship, continually reinforcing one another.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual structure of the Steward Leadership Framework.

Figure 1
Steward Leadership Framework



Note. Steward leaders exercise delegated authority through four interdependent supervisory responsibilities. Formation, protection, and accountability describe the primary functions of supervision, while service represents the character through which each responsibility is exercised. Collectively, these dimensions foster professional growth and ethical practice that ultimately contribute to client, organizational, and societal flourishing.

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Entrusted Authority: The Foundation of Steward Leadership

The Steward Leadership Framework begins with the theological conviction that supervisory authority is entrusted rather than possessed. Supervisors exercise delegated authority on behalf of licensing boards, professional organizations, employers, educational institutions, and ultimately society (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Biblically, this authority originates in God's commission to cultivate and guard creation (Gen. 2:15), is redefined through Christ's model of sacrificial service (Matt. 20:25–28), and is exemplified in Peter's call for leaders to shepherd God's people faithfully (1 Pet. 5:2–3; Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Organizational stewardship theory similarly emphasizes responsibility for the welfare of others rather than personal interests (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Together, these perspectives establish entrusted authority as the theological and conceptual foundation of steward leadership.

Four Interdependent Responsibilities. The framework proposes four interdependent leadership responsibilities—formation, protection, accountability, and service—that operate simultaneously throughout supervision rather than as isolated roles. Formation cultivates competence and professional identity (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). Protection safeguards clients, supervisees, organizations, and the profession through ethical oversight (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011). Accountability ensures fair evaluation, constructive feedback, and responsible gatekeeping (Falender & Shafranske, 2021). Service is not a separate responsibility but the character through which all supervisory authority is exercised, shaping formation, protection, and accountability through humility, compassion, and relational commitment (Greenleaf, 1977; Mahon, 2021).

The Steward Leadership Process. Steward leadership functions as a developmental process. Faithful supervisors exercise entrusted authority through formation, protection, accountability, and service, fostering supervisee competence, ethical maturity, reflective practice, and professional identity. As clinicians develop, they provide increasingly ethical and effective care, strengthening client outcomes, organizational health, public trust, and ultimately human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Because flourishing organizations cultivate future steward leaders, the process is recursive, continually developing the next generation of clinicians.

A Framework for Contemporary Behavioral Healthcare. The Steward Leadership Framework is particularly relevant as behavioral healthcare faces workforce shortages, rising service demands, clinician burnout, and increasing expectations for quality and accountability (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). Competency-based education addresses these challenges through structured supervision and intentional professional development (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017). Steward leadership complements these initiatives by providing a theological and ethical rationale for competency-based supervision, framing competence, accountability, and client protection as acts of faithful stewardship.

Formation: Cultivating Competent and Flourishing Professionals

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Formation is the first responsibility of steward leadership because faithful stewardship begins with intentional cultivation. Consistent with the creation mandate of Genesis 2:15, supervisors intentionally develop supervisees' professional competence, ethical judgment, reflective capacity, and leadership potential rather than simply preparing them for licensure (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Steward leaders view supervisees as future colleagues, leaders, educators, and supervisors whose influence will extend far beyond the supervisory relationship.

Theologically, formation reflects the biblical concept of ʿābad, which conveys cultivating and bringing to maturity through faithful care (Hamilton, 1990). Supervisors therefore function less as inspectors than as cultivators, creating conditions in which competence, wisdom, ethical judgment, and professional identity can flourish. This model parallels Christ's formation of His disciples through teaching, modeling, guided practice, reflection, correction, encouragement, and progressively increasing responsibility.

Contemporary competency-based supervision reinforces this developmental perspective by emphasizing observable competencies, structured learning objectives, formative assessment, and progressive skill development rather than supervised hours alone (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021; Ten Cate, 2017). Steward leadership broadens competency beyond technical proficiency to include emotional intelligence, cultural humility, ethical sensitivity, leadership capacity, and lifelong learning.

Evidence-based instructional design further strengthens formation. Merrill's (2002, 2020) *First Principles of Instruction* and subsequent instructional design research demonstrate that authentic problems, guided practice, timely feedback, and integration into professional contexts produce meaningful learning (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023). Technology-enhanced learning further expands these opportunities through recorded sessions, simulations, competency tracking, and interactive learning activities (Pérez-Conde et al., 2026). Steward leadership provides the ethical rationale for instructional excellence by recognizing that those entrusted to the supervisor's care deserve educational experiences intentionally designed to maximize professional growth.

Adult Learning and Reflective Professional Development

Formation is equally informed by adult learning theory, which recognizes that experienced professionals construct knowledge through reflection, experience, collaboration, and immediate application to meaningful professional problems (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learners bring substantial prior knowledge to supervision, requiring educational approaches that respect learner autonomy while encouraging continued professional development.

Accordingly, effective supervisors function less as lecturers and more as facilitators of professional learning. Rather than providing answers to every clinical question, steward supervisors encourage supervisees to analyze complex cases, evaluate competing interventions, examine personal assumptions, and integrate theory with clinical practice. Reflection becomes a central mechanism through which supervisees develop independent clinical judgment.

Reflective supervision also promotes self-awareness, one of the defining

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characteristics of effective clinicians. Supervisees learn to recognize emotional reactions, countertransference, cultural assumptions, cognitive biases, and ethical dilemmas that influence clinical decision-making. Such reflective capacity enhances both clinical competence and professional resilience by enabling clinicians to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to complex therapeutic situations (Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Hands-on learning further strengthens professional formation. Ertl et al. (2021) demonstrated that experiential educational approaches promote deeper integration of knowledge, increased confidence, and greater professional responsibility within health service psychology. Similarly, supervision grounded in authentic clinical experiences enables supervisees to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application through deliberate practice and guided reflection.

Formation of Professional Identity. Perhaps the most enduring outcome of supervision is the formation of professional identity. Professional identity extends beyond competence to encompass how clinicians understand themselves, their responsibilities, their ethical commitments, and their place within the counseling profession. Effective supervision shapes how future clinicians think, relate, lead, and serve throughout their professional lives (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Professional identity develops through repeated interactions in which supervisees observe professional modeling, receive feedback, navigate ethical dilemmas, and gradually internalize professional values. Supervisors therefore influence not only what supervisees know but who they become as professionals.

Steward leaders intentionally cultivate this identity by modeling humility, ethical integrity, lifelong learning, compassion, accountability, and service. Their influence extends beyond formal supervision because supervisees often adopt supervisory behaviors that later shape their own leadership when they become supervisors themselves. Stewardship thus creates an intergenerational process of professional formation in which faithful leaders develop future steward leaders.

This developmental perspective aligns with authentic leadership theory, which emphasizes congruence between personal values and professional behavior (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). It also reflects transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire followers toward increasing maturity, purpose, and commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Steward leadership integrates these perspectives by grounding professional identity within the biblical understanding of entrusted authority exercised for the flourishing of others.

Formation and Human Flourishing. Formation ultimately extends beyond individual professional development to contribute to human flourishing. Competent clinicians provide higher quality care, strengthen therapeutic relationships, improve client outcomes, and enhance organizational effectiveness. Clients who receive ethical, compassionate, and evidence-informed care experience greater opportunities for healing and well-being, creating positive effects that extend to families, communities, and society (VanderWeele, 2017).

Consequently, formation represents far more than educational preparation. It is

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an act of faithful stewardship through which supervisors intentionally cultivate professionals capable of promoting the flourishing of others. Every investment in supervisee development carries the potential to influence countless future clinical encounters, making formation one of the most significant leadership responsibilities within behavioral healthcare.

Yet faithful stewardship requires more than cultivating growth. Gardens flourish only when they are also protected. Likewise, developing competent clinicians requires supervisors to safeguard clients, supervisees, organizations, and the counseling profession from preventable harm. The second dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework therefore addresses protection, the complementary responsibility that transforms professional formation into faithful stewardship.

PROTECTION: GUARDING CLIENTS, PROFESSIONALS, AND THE INTEGRITY OF THE COUNSELING PROFESSION

Formation and protection represent complementary responsibilities within biblical stewardship. The commission of Genesis 2:15 instructs humanity both to cultivate (*ʿābad*) and to guard *(šāmar*) God's creation (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Stewardship is therefore incomplete if it emphasizes development while neglecting protection. Clinical supervisors who effectively cultivate competence but fail to safeguard clients, supervisees, or organizations have only partially fulfilled their stewardship responsibilities. Conversely, supervisors who focus exclusively on risk management without intentionally fostering growth may inhibit professional development. Faithful stewardship requires both responsibilities operating simultaneously.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, protection is defined as the intentional safeguarding of supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession through ethical oversight, competency evaluation, risk management, remediation, and the promotion of psychologically safe learning environments. Protection is not simply reactive intervention after problems occur; rather, it is a proactive leadership responsibility that anticipates risk, strengthens resilience, and preserves the conditions necessary for professional flourishing.

Unlike authoritarian approaches that often equate protection with control, steward leadership understands protection as an expression of service. Supervisors protect because they are entrusted with the welfare of others. Their responsibility extends beyond organizational liability to encompass the well-being of clients, the development of supervisees, and the long-term integrity of the profession itself.

Protection as a Biblical Responsibility

The Hebrew verb *šāmar* means "to guard," "to watch over," "to preserve," or "to protect." Throughout the Old Testament, it describes faithful care exercised over something valuable that has been entrusted to another's responsibility (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987). Protection therefore reflects vigilance rather than control. The steward remains attentive to potential threats while actively preserving what has been entrusted to his or her care.

This theological principle extends throughout Scripture. Shepherds protect sheep

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from danger. Parents protect children while preparing them for maturity. Leaders protect communities through wise governance. In every instance, protection exists for the flourishing of others rather than the preservation of authority.

Applied to supervision, protection involves safeguarding both people and processes. Supervisors protect clients from incompetent practice, supervisees from preventable professional failure, organizations from ethical violations, and the counseling profession from practices that undermine public trust. Because authority is delegated, supervisors remain accountable for exercising this protective responsibility faithfully.

Protection of Client Welfare

The primary ethical obligation of clinical supervision is the protection of client welfare. Professional ethical codes consistently identify client well-being as the supervisor's foremost responsibility, recognizing that supervision ultimately exists to ensure competent and ethical behavioral healthcare (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Client protection requires supervisors to monitor clinical decision-making, review documentation, observe counseling performance, evaluate treatment planning, and intervene when supervisees demonstrate unsafe or unethical practice. These responsibilities become particularly important when supervisees work with high-risk populations or complex clinical presentations that exceed their current developmental level (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023).

Protection, however, extends beyond correcting errors. Steward leaders intentionally create educational environments in which supervisees can acknowledge uncertainty, discuss mistakes openly, and seek consultation without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Such environments promote learning while simultaneously reducing risk to clients because supervisees are more likely to disclose clinical concerns before they become ethical problems.

This balance between accountability and psychological safety reflects stewardship. Supervisors neither ignore mistakes nor create climates of fear. Instead, they respond with honesty, guidance, and developmental support while maintaining unwavering commitment to client welfare.

Protection Through Ethical Supervision

Ethical supervision represents one of the clearest expressions of stewardship because supervisors are entrusted with maintaining professional integrity while supporting supervisee development. Ethical decision-making permeates every aspect of supervision, including informed consent, confidentiality, documentation, cultural responsiveness, dual relationships, boundaries, competence, and evaluation (ACA, 2014).

Professional standards further recognize that supervisors possess responsibilities extending beyond individual supervisees. The ACES (2011) standards emphasize that supervisors are responsible for establishing clear expectations, promoting ethical practice, monitoring competence, and providing ongoing evaluation throughout the supervisory relationship. Similarly, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2021) identifies ethical awareness, reflective practice,

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collaborative learning, and developmental responsiveness as foundational supervisory competencies.

Steward leadership provides the theological rationale underlying these professional expectations. Ethical supervision is not merely compliance with organizational policy; it represents faithful stewardship of relationships characterized by trust, vulnerability, and professional responsibility. Supervisors protect because ethical leadership requires safeguarding those who depend upon their judgment.

Protection Through Competency Evaluation

Protection also requires accurate assessment of supervisee competence. Competency-based supervision emphasizes continuous evaluation using observable behaviors, structured feedback, and developmental benchmarks rather than subjective impressions or accumulated supervision hours (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, competency evaluation serves two complementary purposes. First, evaluation identifies strengths that should be reinforced and expanded. Second, it identifies developmental needs requiring additional instruction, practice, or remediation before supervisees assume greater clinical responsibility. Assessment therefore functions as both educational guidance and client protection.

Steward supervisors approach evaluation as an act of care rather than criticism. Honest assessment prevents supervisees from entering independent practice before they are adequately prepared while simultaneously providing clear pathways for continued professional growth. Avoiding difficult evaluations may temporarily preserve relationships, but it ultimately places clients, supervisees, and organizations at unnecessary risk. Consequently, faithful stewardship requires supervisors to exercise evaluative authority with both courage and compassion.

Protection Through Remediation and Gatekeeping

Few supervisory responsibilities illustrate stewardship more clearly than remediation and gatekeeping. Although these responsibilities are often perceived negatively, they represent essential expressions of faithful leadership because they prioritize public protection over personal comfort.

Remediation involves identifying deficiencies, developing structured improvement plans, providing additional educational support, and reassessing competence over time (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022). Effective remediation reflects the steward leader's commitment to formation rather than punishment. The supervisor's goal is restoration whenever possible.

However, stewardship also recognizes that some situations require restricting or terminating clinical responsibilities when supervisees remain unable to provide safe and ethical care. Such decisions demand fairness, transparency, documentation, and due process while maintaining unwavering commitment to client welfare (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

This responsibility often creates ethical tension because supervisors simultaneously serve as mentors and evaluators. Steward leadership resolves this

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tension by recognizing that both roles exist for the flourishing of others. Supporting supervisees and protecting clients are not competing responsibilities but complementary expressions of faithful stewardship.

Protecting Supervisee Well-Being

Protection extends beyond client welfare to include the well-being of supervisees themselves. Behavioral health professionals face significant occupational risks, including compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and moral distress (HRSA, 2023; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). Without intentional supervisory support, these challenges may impair clinical effectiveness and contribute to workforce attrition.

Recent research suggests that leadership characterized by humility, service, and relational support can reduce burnout while strengthening professional resilience. Grunhaus et al. (2023) found that supervisor servant leadership was associated with lower supervisee burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Likewise, Mahon (2021) reported that servant-oriented supervision promoted resilience among health and social care professionals by fostering supportive supervisory relationships.

Steward leaders therefore intentionally protect supervisees by monitoring workload, encouraging reflective practice, promoting healthy professional boundaries, and normalizing help-seeking behaviors. Rather than viewing resilience as an individual responsibility alone, stewardship recognizes organizational and supervisory obligations to create environments that sustain long-term professional well-being.

Protecting Organizational Integrity

Supervisors also serve as stewards of organizational culture. Their leadership influences ethical climate, professional standards, collaboration, accountability, and employee development. Organizations characterized by transparent communication, psychological safety, shared learning, and ethical leadership are better positioned to recruit, retain, and develop competent behavioral health professionals (Caldwell et al., 1990).

As behavioral health organizations confront expanding service demands, workforce shortages, and increasing public accountability, supervisory leadership becomes increasingly important for sustaining organizational effectiveness (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024). Steward supervisors contribute to organizational flourishing by cultivating competent clinicians, modeling ethical leadership, supporting interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthening professional learning cultures.

This organizational perspective reflects stewardship theory's emphasis on preserving and enhancing institutions entrusted to leaders' care (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). Supervisors therefore serve not only individual clinicians but also the organizations through which behavioral healthcare is delivered.

Protection and Human Flourishing

Ultimately, protection contributes directly to human flourishing because flourishing cannot exist where preventable harm persists. Ethical oversight, competency

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evaluation, client advocacy, organizational integrity, and professional resilience collectively create conditions in which individuals and communities are more likely to thrive (VanderWeele, 2017).

Steward leaders recognize that every decision to address ethical concerns, provide difficult feedback, implement remediation, or intervene on behalf of clients represents an investment in long-term flourishing. Protection therefore complements formation by ensuring that professional growth occurs within environments characterized by safety, integrity, accountability, and trust.

Yet faithful protection requires more than vigilance and ethical oversight. Steward leaders must also accept responsibility for evaluating performance, documenting decisions, and remaining answerable for the authority entrusted to them. The third dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework therefore examines accountability, the leadership responsibility that ensures entrusted authority is exercised with integrity, transparency, and justice.

ACCOUNTABILITY: EXERCISING ENTRUSTED AUTHORITY WITH INTEGRITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND JUSTICE

The third dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework is accountability. While formation emphasizes cultivating professional growth and protection focuses on safeguarding people and institutions, accountability ensures that supervisory authority is exercised responsibly, transparently, and ethically. Steward leaders recognize that authority is inseparable from responsibility; every supervisory decision carries consequences for supervisees, clients, organizations, and the counseling profession. Consequently, accountability is not merely an administrative function but a moral obligation inherent in entrusted leadership.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, accountability is defined as the faithful exercise of delegated authority through honest evaluation, transparent communication, ethical decision-making, documentation, and responsible stewardship of professional trust. Accountability reflects the biblical conviction that leaders ultimately answer not only to organizations or professional licensing boards but also to God, who entrusts authority for the benefit of others (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Unlike punitive approaches that equate accountability with discipline or compliance, steward leadership views accountability as an essential mechanism for promoting professional growth, protecting clients, strengthening organizations, and preserving public confidence in the counseling profession.

Accountability as a Biblical Principle

The biblical narrative consistently portrays stewardship as accountable leadership. Throughout Scripture, those entrusted with responsibility are expected to give an account of how faithfully they have managed what has been placed in their care. This principle extends from the creation mandate of Genesis through Christ's teachings on faithful stewardship and Peter’s instruction that leaders shepherd God's people under the authority of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:2–4).

Within Genesis, accountability is implicit in humanity's delegated responsibility to

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cultivate and guard creation. Stewardship assumes that authority remains derivative rather than autonomous; therefore, human leaders are responsible for how they exercise the authority entrusted to them (Hamilton, 1990; Wenham, 1987).

Jesus further develops this principle by consistently teaching that leadership carries corresponding responsibility. Greatness within God's kingdom is measured not by authority itself but by the faithful use of authority for the benefit of others (Matt. 20:25–28). Likewise, Peter reminds leaders that they shepherd "the flock of God," emphasizing that those under their care ultimately belong to God rather than to the leaders themselves (1 Pet. 5:2–3). This theological perspective transforms accountability from institutional oversight into an act of faithful stewardship before God.

Applied to clinical supervision, biblical accountability reminds supervisors that every evaluative decision, every supervisory recommendation, and every leadership action carries ethical significance extending beyond organizational expectations.

Accountability Through Competency Evaluation

Competency-based supervision provides one of the clearest contemporary expressions of accountability. Rather than relying upon subjective impressions or informal mentoring alone, competency-based models require supervisors to evaluate observable professional behaviors using established standards, developmental benchmarks, and structured assessment processes (Borders et al., 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Effective evaluation serves multiple stewardship purposes. It provides supervisees with accurate feedback regarding current performance, identifies areas requiring continued development, informs educational planning, and protects clients by ensuring that supervisees demonstrate competence before assuming greater clinical responsibility (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022).

Steward leaders therefore approach evaluation neither as bureaucratic obligation nor personal judgment but as faithful stewardship. Honest evaluation honors supervisees by providing meaningful guidance for professional growth while simultaneously protecting clients and maintaining professional standards. Avoiding difficult conversations may preserve temporary interpersonal comfort, but it ultimately undermines stewardship by allowing deficiencies to remain unaddressed. Accordingly, accountability requires supervisors to balance honesty with encouragement, objectivity with compassion, and professional rigor with developmental support.

Accountability Through Documentation

Faithful stewardship also requires careful documentation. Documentation provides a transparent record of supervisory observations, competency evaluations, feedback, remediation plans, and significant supervisory decisions. Such records protect supervisees, supervisors, organizations, and clients by demonstrating that supervisory authority has been exercised responsibly and consistently (ACA, 2014; ACES, 2011).

Documentation reflects stewardship in several ways. First, it promotes fairness by ensuring that evaluations are based upon observable behaviors rather than

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subjective impressions. Second, it facilitates continuity of supervision by providing clear records of supervisee progress over time. Third, documentation strengthens organizational accountability by supporting informed decision-making regarding licensure, credentialing, remediation, and professional advancement.

Within steward leadership, documentation is therefore more than an administrative requirement. It is an ethical practice that demonstrates transparency, integrity, and respect for those affected by supervisory decisions.

Accountability and Difficult Conversations

Perhaps the greatest test of supervisory accountability occurs during difficult conversations. Supervisors frequently address ethical concerns, inadequate clinical performance, interpersonal conflicts, professional impairment, or failure to meet competency expectations. Such conversations require courage because they involve balancing compassion for supervisees with responsibility toward clients and organizations.

Steward leaders approach these conversations with clarity, honesty, and respect. Feedback is specific, behaviorally focused, timely, and developmentally appropriate rather than vague, punitive, or personally critical (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023). Supervisees are treated with dignity while being held accountable for professional responsibilities.

Importantly, stewardship rejects both extremes commonly encountered in supervision. On one hand, supervisors who avoid accountability out of fear of conflict fail to protect clients and impede supervisee growth. On the other hand, supervisors who rely exclusively on criticism or authoritarian control often undermine trust and psychological safety. Steward leadership instead seeks restorative accountability—truth communicated through relationships characterized by respect, service, and commitment to professional development.

Accountability and Organizational Trust

Accountability also strengthens organizational trust. Healthcare organizations increasingly operate within environments characterized by regulatory oversight, accreditation requirements, public scrutiny, and increasing expectations regarding quality assurance. Supervisors therefore function as organizational stewards whose leadership contributes directly to institutional credibility and effectiveness (HRSA, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Steward leaders promote organizational trust by applying standards consistently, documenting supervisory decisions accurately, encouraging ethical behavior, and fostering cultures of openness and continuous learning. Such leadership supports organizational commitment, collaboration, and professional engagement, characteristics associated with healthy organizational cultures (Caldwell et al., 1990). This organizational perspective aligns with stewardship theory, which emphasizes that leaders bear responsibility not only for immediate outcomes but also for preserving and strengthening the long-term health of the institutions they serve (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012).

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Accountability and Reflective Leadership

Authentic accountability also requires supervisors to evaluate their own leadership. Stewardship is reciprocal: supervisors assess supervisees while simultaneously reflecting upon the effectiveness, fairness, and integrity of their own supervisory practices.

Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and ongoing self-reflection as essential characteristics of ethical leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Similarly, reflective supervision encourages supervisors to examine how their assumptions, emotions, cultural perspectives, and leadership behaviors influence supervisory relationships (Falender & Shafranske, 2021).

Steward leaders therefore ask not only whether supervisees are developing appropriately but also whether they themselves are exercising authority faithfully. Such reflective accountability promotes humility, lifelong learning, and continuous leadership development.

Accountability and Human Flourishing

Accountability ultimately contributes to flourishing because it establishes the trust necessary for healthy professional relationships. Supervisees flourish when expectations are clear, evaluations are fair, and feedback promotes meaningful growth. Clients flourish when competent practitioners provide ethical care. Organizations flourish when leadership is transparent and responsible. The counseling profession flourishes when supervisors faithfully uphold standards of competence and integrity.

Within the Steward Leadership Framework, accountability therefore functions not as an end in itself but as a means of promoting flourishing across every level of behavioral healthcare. By exercising authority transparently and responsibly, steward leaders create environments characterized by trust, justice, and professional excellence.

However, accountability alone does not fully capture the character of faithful leadership. Formation, protection, and accountability describe what supervisors do, but they do not fully explain how those responsibilities should be exercised. The distinguishing characteristic of steward leadership is that every supervisory responsibility is expressed through service. Consequently, the fourth and integrating dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework examines service as the defining character of entrusted leadership.

SERVICE: THE CHARACTER OF FAITHFUL STEWARD LEADERSHIP

Service is the fourth dimension of the Steward Leadership Framework. Unlike formation, protection, and accountability, which describe supervisory responsibilities, service describes the character through which those responsibilities are exercised. Rather than constituting another supervisory task, service is the moral posture that shapes the faithful use of entrusted authority.

Within this framework, service is the intentional use of delegated authority to promote the flourishing of others rather than personal status or organizational convenience. Supervisors continue to evaluate competence, address ethical concerns,

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implement remediation, and exercise gatekeeping responsibilities, but these actions are conducted through humility, compassion, relational commitment, and long-term investment in supervisee development and client welfare. Service therefore integrates the other three dimensions into a coherent model of steward leadership.

Service as the Pattern of Christ

The biblical model for service is found in Christ's teaching that greatness is expressed through serving rather than dominating others (Matt. 20:25–28). Jesus did not abolish authority but transformed its purpose. Likewise, supervisors retain evaluative and gatekeeping responsibilities, yet exercise authority as an instrument of stewardship rather than self-interest.

This distinction is especially important in clinical supervision because supervisors hold considerable influence over licensure, evaluation, and professional advancement. Steward leadership recognizes that authority itself is morally neutral; its ethical quality depends on how it is exercised. Service therefore distinguishes faithful stewardship from authoritarian supervision.

Service Beyond Servant Leadership

The Steward Leadership Framework builds upon Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership while extending it. Whereas servant leadership emphasizes serving followers, steward leadership also recognizes responsibilities to clients, organizations, professional standards, and society. Consequently, service is not synonymous with accommodation or conflict avoidance. Difficult conversations, remediation, and gatekeeping may all become acts of service when they protect clients and promote the flourishing of those entrusted to the supervisor's care.

Research supports this perspective by demonstrating that servant-oriented supervision contributes to lower burnout, stronger supervisory relationships, greater resilience, and healthier organizations (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

Service Through Professional Relationships

Because supervision is fundamentally relational, steward leaders intentionally cultivate trust, collaboration, psychological safety, and reflective dialogue, conditions known to support adult learning and professional development (Baumgartner & Carr-Chellman, 2024; Knowles et al., 2015). They also design authentic learning experiences that promote active engagement, meaningful feedback, and reflective practice, consistent with evidence-based instructional design (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002, 2020).

Service Through Leadership Development

Steward leadership extends beyond preparing competent clinicians to developing future supervisors, educators, administrators, and professional leaders. Because supervisees often adopt the leadership behaviors they experience, supervisory

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relationships have an intergenerational influence. This perspective aligns with transformational leadership's emphasis on follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and authentic leadership's focus on integrity and transparency (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), while grounding leadership development in the biblical purpose of promoting the flourishing of others.

Service and Organizational Stewardship

Service also encompasses stewardship of behavioral health organizations. By fostering ethical cultures, collaboration, psychological safety, and professional development, supervisors strengthen organizational resilience and workforce sustainability (Caldwell et al., 1990). These responsibilities are increasingly important as behavioral healthcare addresses workforce shortages, clinician burnout, and growing service demands (HRSA, 2023; Jordans & Kohrt, 2020; NCSL, 2024; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Service and Human Flourishing

The ultimate purpose of service is human flourishing. VanderWeele (2017) described flourishing as multidimensional well-being characterized by purpose, relationships, character, health, and contribution to the common good. Supervisors who lead through service cultivate competent and resilient clinicians whose influence extends to clients, organizations, families, and communities. Formation, protection, accountability, and service therefore function together as mutually reinforcing expressions of faithful stewardship directed toward the flourishing of others.

Integrating the Four Dimensions

The Steward Leadership Framework emphasizes that formation, protection, accountability, and service are inseparable. Formation without protection risks unsafe practice; protection without formation limits professional growth; accountability without service becomes punitive; and service without accountability fails to safeguard clients or uphold professional standards.

Faithful supervision integrates all four dimensions under the central principle of entrusted authority. Together, they cultivate professional growth, protect those entrusted to the supervisor's care, exercise accountability with integrity, and express every supervisory responsibility through service. This integrated model distinguishes steward leadership by positioning entrusted authority as the conceptual center of supervision and directing every aspect of supervisory leadership toward human flourishing. The following section examines the practical implications of this framework for supervisor education, behavioral health organizations, leadership scholarship, and future research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERVISOR EDUCATION

The Steward Leadership Framework suggests that supervisor education should cultivate leadership identity alongside supervisory competence. Traditional training

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emphasizes supervision models, ethics, evaluation, and legal responsibilities (Bernard & Goodyear, 2022; Borders et al., 2023), but steward leadership encourages programs to prepare supervisors as leaders entrusted with developing clinicians, protecting clients, strengthening organizations, and advancing the counseling profession.

Competency-based education provides an effective structure for this broader goal by intentionally developing competencies related to formation, protection, accountability, and service. Authentic learning experiences—including case-based instruction, simulated supervision, reflective practice, competency portfolios, direct observation, and structured feedback—allow trainees to practice steward leadership before assuming independent supervisory roles (Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Merrill, 2002; Merrill, 2020). Accordingly, supervisor education shifts from asking How do we teach supervision? to How do we develop faithful steward leaders?

Implications for Clinical Practice

The Steward Leadership Framework also provides an integrative lens for everyday supervision. Rather than viewing teaching, consultation, evaluation, documentation, crisis management, and gatekeeping as separate tasks, supervisors can evaluate each decision through the complementary responsibilities of formation, protection, accountability, and service. This perspective supplements existing ethical decision-making models by integrating educational, ethical, organizational, and relational responsibilities within a coherent stewardship framework.

Viewed through this lens, corrective feedback becomes an act of formation, remediation emphasizes restoration, gatekeeping protects clients and professional integrity, and documentation promotes transparency and organizational trust. Steward leadership therefore encourages greater consistency between supervisory philosophy and daily practice.

Implications for Behavioral Health Organizations

Behavioral health organizations increasingly rely on effective supervision to address workforce shortages, clinician burnout, quality improvement, and growing service demands (HRSA, 2023; SAMHSA, 2023; WHO, 2022). The Steward Leadership Framework therefore encourages organizations to view supervisors as leadership developers rather than solely clinical managers.

Organizations may strengthen supervision by incorporating stewardship competencies into supervisor selection, evaluation, and development. Leadership effectiveness extends beyond productivity to include developing clinicians, fostering ethical cultures, promoting psychological safety, retaining employees, and preparing future leaders. Investments in supervisor education, mentorship, leadership coaching, peer consultation, and competency-based evaluation can strengthen organizational capacity while improving employee well-being and client care (Grunhaus et al., 2023; Mahon, 2021).

The Steward Leadership Framework complements competency-based education by providing an ethical and theological rationale for competency development. Rather than pursuing competence solely to satisfy accreditation or organizational requirements, stewardship frames professional development as a moral responsibility to cultivate

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those entrusted to the supervisor's care. Accordingly, competency extends beyond technical performance to include leadership, ethical reasoning, relational competence, reflective practice, and lifelong learning (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Kohrt et al., 2025; Ten Cate, 2017).

Implications for Leadership Scholarship

The Steward Leadership Framework contributes to leadership scholarship by integrating stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and competency-based education (Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Ten Cate, 2017) within a biblical understanding of entrusted authority. Rather than replacing these perspectives, the framework provides a unifying foundation that integrates educational, ethical, organizational, and theological dimensions of leadership. Although developed for counseling, it may also inform leadership development across psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, nursing, medicine, chaplaincy, and other helping professions.

Implications for Human Flourishing

The framework's broadest contribution is its emphasis on human flourishing as the ultimate outcome of supervision. Rather than evaluating effectiveness solely through competence or organizational performance, steward leadership understands flourishing as multidimensional well-being characterized by purpose, relationships, ethical character, psychological health, and contribution to the common good (VanderWeele, 2017). Because supervisory influence extends from clinicians to clients, organizations, families, and communities, every supervisory relationship becomes an investment in future generations and the broader flourishing of society.

Future Research

Because the Steward Leadership Framework is conceptual, empirical investigation is needed to evaluate its usefulness within clinical supervision. Several research directions appear particularly promising. First, qualitative studies could explore how experienced supervisors understand stewardship within their leadership practices and whether the four dimensions of formation, protection, accountability, and service accurately reflect lived supervisory experiences.

Second, quantitative research could develop and validate measures of steward leadership within clinical supervision. Such instruments could examine relationships between steward leadership behaviors and supervisee outcomes, including professional identity, competency development, resilience, supervisory alliance, ethical decision-making, and burnout.

Third, comparative studies could evaluate steward leadership alongside servant leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership to determine whether the proposed framework explains unique variance in supervisory effectiveness or organizational outcomes. Fourth, intervention studies could evaluate supervisor education programs intentionally designed around the Steward Leadership Framework.

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Such research might examine whether stewardship-based training improves leadership competence, supervisory confidence, organizational commitment, or client-related outcomes.

Finally, additional theological scholarship could further examine stewardship across broader biblical themes, including wisdom literature, pastoral leadership, reconciliation, justice, and community formation, thereby enriching the theological foundations of supervision within Christian higher education and faith-based behavioral healthcare.

CONCLUSION

Clinical mental health supervision is one of the profession's most influential leadership relationships because supervisors shape the competence, ethical judgment, professional identity, and future leadership of clinicians whose work affects clients, organizations, and communities. This article addresses the tendency to view supervision primarily as an educational or administrative function by proposing the Steward Leadership Framework for Clinical Mental Health Supervision—a biblically grounded model integrating stewardship theology, leadership scholarship, competency-based education, instructional design, and contemporary supervision literature.

Grounded in Genesis 2:15, Matthew 20:25–28, and 1 Peter 5:2–3, the framework conceptualizes supervision as the faithful exercise of entrusted authority through four interdependent responsibilities: formation, protection, accountability, and service. Together, these dimensions integrate educational excellence with ethical responsibility while preserving the developmental, evaluative, and protective functions of clinical supervision.

The framework also provides a theological rationale for competency-based supervision by framing professional development as an act of faithful stewardship supported by evidence-based instructional design, adult learning, reflective practice, and meaningful feedback (Borders et al., 2023; Clark, 2025; Clark & Mayer, 2023; Cooper & Holmboe, 2025; Merrill, 2002, 2020). Rather than viewing supervisory effectiveness solely in terms of competence or organizational outcomes, steward leadership positions human flourishing as its ultimate purpose, extending supervisory influence from clinicians to clients, organizations, and society (VanderWeele, 2017).

Because this framework is conceptual, empirical research is needed to examine its application, evaluate stewardship-based supervisor education, and explore relationships between steward leadership and supervisory outcomes. Nevertheless, the Steward Leadership Framework offers a coherent foundation for supervisor education, professional practice, organizational leadership, and future scholarship while advancing a distinctly Christian vision of supervision rooted in entrusted authority and directed toward human flourishing.

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