The Ministry of Mentoring in the 21st Century Church

by

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In seminary, I learned quite a lot about what it means to be a pastor, and how that work differs from being a friend or a counselor. In my training as a field education supervisor, I was taught how a supervisor’s role differs from all of these, and I was admonished not to confuse it with being a spiritual director. Nowhere along the line was mentoring the heart of our conversation, reading, or reflection. I’ve never had a class on mentoring.

I have found only a small body of literature dedicated to it as a Christian ministerial task. And yet, through prayer, reflection on my experience, and conversation with my spiritual director and clergy group, it has become clear to me that this is the center of my calling as an ordained leader.

How about you? Do you think of yourself as a mentor? If someone thanked you for “mentoring” them, would you be able to explain what you had done and why it was received as mentoring? Who comes to your mind when you hear the term? Regardless of who you are, what your ministerial title is, or what kind of faith community you lead, I hope to persuade you in this article that mentoring is important and that it is important that you mentor.
I believe strongly that Christ comes to us in and through other people. The encouragement and commitment of mentors is a powerful avenue for this to happen. From adolescence on, I have been supported, persuaded, cajoled, prodded, humbled, and pounded into becoming who I was created to be through key mentoring relationships. Although I've been aware of this for many years, until recently I never had the chance to reflect on it in a careful way.

Through the generosity of the Louisville Institute, I was able to enjoy a season of reflection, re-connecting, and study around the theme of mentoring. What I discovered strengthened my ministry and deepened my gratitude. It also heightened my awareness of how critical an intentional revival of the ministry of mentoring could be for the life of the Church and for the world we seek to love in Christ’s name. In this article, I will be offering a “primer” on the ministry of mentoring as I've come to understand it, inviting you into reflection and conversation with yourself and others about mentoring in your own context, and pointing to ways in which changes in culture and society should shape Christian mentoring in our era.

**Mentoring 101**

Mentoring is a form of friendship, but friendship with a particular end in mind: the mentor companions and supports the protégé in discovering and claiming his or her authentic self. Mentoring relationships anchor the vision of the potential self, as the mentor offers both insight and emotional support.¹ For young adults, mentors embody and inspire the possibility of committed and meaningful adulthood. For older adults, mentors embody and inspire the possibility of committed and meaningful life within a particular profession, or through a particular era of life.

Mentoring is almost always mutual in practice. The protégé is learning from the mentor, but the mentor is also learning from the protégé. As Sue Anne Steffey Morrow, Chaplain at Lawrenceville School, points out, “a good mentor is ready for the magic of reciprocity.”² Indeed, one of the qualities of a mentor is awareness that they themselves are still a work-in-progress, still moving towards authenticity and deeper wisdom. Each mentor and each relationship is unique, but generally, good mentors exhibit certain qualities. They are good listeners. They are not afraid to ask hard questions and never force their answers on a protégé. Mentors share stories from their own lives and the lives of others in

¹ Sharon Daloz Parks. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith.* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 81.
² The Rev. Sue Anne Steffey Morrow at a panel discussion on mentoring, Princeton University, June 1, 2007.
ways that open up possibilities for, while not getting in the way of, the protégé. Mentors are honest about their struggles and their hopes and make lots of room to hear about the struggles and hopes of protégés. Most importantly, mentors are present: they show up, make time in their schedules, and are intentional in their commitment to their relationship with a protégé.

While mentors certainly can teach protégés specific skills or lead them through set curricula, the most powerful aspect of mentoring is not in the doing but in the being.

Ninety percent of what we have to offer as mentors is ourselves. Our health, self-awareness, and spiritual vitality are more valuable than any program we could organize.

This work of embodying committed and meaningful life is particularly important to younger adults and the rising generations of our era. Overwhelmed by myriad ideas about what “the good life” is and what it looks like, and growing into maturity in a culture where models of moral and holistic integrity are rare, they are anxious to see actual people actually living their intentions.

As important as individual mentors are, those who have reflected on and studied mentoring note that mentoring communities are just as important. An academic class, a discipleship group, a volunteer organization, or an entire university can be a mentoring community, providing participants a context that balances support and challenge as they probe commitments to ways of being and understanding themselves. Participants, as peers, support one another and share experiences, triumphs and failures. As Sharon Daloz Parks writes, such communities offer “access to worthy dreams of self and the world.” Participation in mentoring communities develops one’s capacity for dialogue, critical thought, holistic thinking, contemplation, and the articulation of goals.

In my time at MIT, the most effective mentoring community I have worked with was a group of graduate students who met together for three years every Thursday evening.

The “Journey Group” was composed of students who had grown up in a wide variety of faith traditions and were not sure what they actually believed, but they wanted a safe place in which to begin figuring out what they believed and how to live into it. While the group had a loose curriculum, the most powerful learning was in the sharing of stories, the probing of new commitments, and the simple act of showing up for one another week after week. After three years, they each launched out in a different direction, clearer about their identities and encouraged for the journey ahead.
Questions for reflection and conversation:
1. Who were (or are) your mentors? What gifts did they give you? Are you aware of how you may have gifted them as well?
2. Marsha Sinetar has written, "Show me your mentors and I will show you yourself." Does this statement ring true with your experience?
3. Have you participated in something that you would call a "mentoring community"? How did this group help you discover and claim your authentic self?

Christian mentoring

Edward Sellner writes in his excellent book *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship* that “Formation is education for loving.” As Christians, our mentoring will look like the mentoring offered by any other person or community, but our understanding of what we are doing and why will have another layer. Grounded in the belief that all humans were created by a God who is love in order to love one another and God’s creation, Christian mentors accompany protégés towards their particular vocation to love.

Christian mentoring proceeds from an assumption of the fundamental goodness of the protégé towards the glad task of discovering how this particular person is called to love. Committed, thriving adulthood for the protégé will find them embodying a way (or ways) of loving, and this way we call their “vocation.” The Christian psychologist James Fowler defines vocation as “finding a purpose for one’s life that is part of the purposes of God.”

Christian mentors provide support and challenge for those on this quest. Parker Palmer says that to be fully alive is to discover and live into one’s vocation. Vocation is about fulfilling the original selfhood given to each of us at birth by God; it is the pearl of great price. For Christians, receiving and living into vocation is a life-long process – one that will transform and infuse all aspects of our daily lives. This process will “perfect” us as we grow into a mature personhood that partakes of the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:13). As Christians who mentor, we watch for how a protégé is called to be Christ-like, and we offer support and challenge to help them discover their particular vocation for themselves and live into it.

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Questions for reflection and discussion:
1. Take another look at the explanation offered here of “vocation”? At this point in your life, how would you name your vocation(s)? How would you have named them ten years ago (or twenty)?
2. How has your own sense of vocation been developed? Have mentors played a role, and if so, how?
3. How does your congregation or chaplaincy help people grow more Christ-like? What more might you do to mentor people as they grow into mature Christian personhood?

Who needs mentors?

While mentoring can be enormously beneficial at many times in life, there are three particular life-transitions during which mentors and mentoring communities can play particularly crucial roles: college/young adulthood, early professional life, and early retirement. These life-transitions correlate with what Daniel Levinson has found to be the three critical junctures between major eras of life. They are times when we are likely to be in particularly great psychic and spiritual turmoil, and the stakes of our decisions about our meaning and identity seem particularly high.6

For college students and young adults, the main task of mentors and mentoring communities is to support and challenge a person as they test out provisional notions of whom God is calling them to be as an adult. Sharon Parks calls this critical time in one’s spiritual development “probing commitment.” This period is characterized by appropriate ambivalence towards outward commitments due to new integrity within. Chaplains and chaplaincies, priests and congregations working with young adults may be the only place where they can be honest about their doubts, fears, new discoveries about themselves, anger at the state of the world, or excitement about their growing spiritual wisdom.

For young professionals, the main task of mentors and mentoring communities is to help a person incarnate the wisdom and training they received as apprentices or in graduate school in a way that has integrity and is life-giving for them and those whom they serve. This “from lab to life” transition is critical in starting them on a path of sustaining energy and enthusiasm for their work. For ordinands and lay church professionals, mentors induct them into the deeper

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meanings of the priestly vocation and help them develop the capacity for ongoing personal formation.7

For the recently retired, the main task of mentors and mentoring communities is to support and challenge a person through perhaps the most difficult shift in their sense of self they will experience. Mentors and mentoring communities here model the process of reflecting on experience in order to claim blessing and finding new ways to lead and serve during what may be another twenty or more years of physical and mental health.

Mentoring older adults is a relatively new frontier for the church, as most of our efforts and intentional programs have been directed toward the formation of younger Christians. I would argue that there is a growing need for people, groups and congregations to intentionally take on the ministry of mentoring those who are retiring, both as a ministry to the individuals and as a gift to the church. The wisdom and capacities of our older members are astounding, and anything we can help them do to thrive and discover life-giving, late-life vocations is enormously valuable.

Questions for reflection and conversation:
1. What was your experience of the three major life transitions discussed here? (at least the ones you've experienced so far!). Did you have mentors in the midst of these times, and if so, what difference did they make?
2. What other major life transitions seem to be challenging for people in your community of faith? How does your congregation serve as a mentoring community for them? What else might you do for them?

Formal and informal mentoring in the Church

Some mentoring just happens. By the grace of God, people find one another and develop a mentoring relationship. Sometimes, neither the mentor nor the protégé uses the word “mentoring” to describe what’s happening; it might be years before one or another of them looks back and names it that way. Sometimes a community forms that has all the marks of a mentoring community, but such was neither its intention nor part of its members’ consciousness throughout their experience together. All of these examples fall into the category of informal mentoring.

Informal mentoring can be something other than accidental, however. A person facing a major life transition or working towards a vocation or specific goal can

7 See David T. Gortner and John Dreiblebis, "Mentoring Clergy for Effective Leadership," in Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry, 27 (2007) for more on the importance of this.
reach out to someone whom they see embodying one or more aspects of what they are trying to embody themselves. Not required by an institution nor proscribed by a set of expectations, this relationship grows into something unique with its own rhythm and seasons. This kind of mentoring happens all the time in the church.

Formal mentoring happens intentionally and within the framework of a program established by an institution or a structure devised and mutually agreed upon by the mentor and protégé. Some judicatories have such programs for newly ordained clergy, for leaders from under-represented minority group. While fewer people participate in formal mentoring, it can be a powerful means for and strengthening and even transforming the ministry of the church.

Formal and informal mentoring are both valuable, and the church needs more of both. Greater consciousness of opportunities for informal mentoring and some basic training to prepare oneself or one’s community to offer it well will add depth and effectiveness to our ministry for the life of the world. The development of more formal mentoring opportunities to serve specific populations in specific communities will allow us, with the Spirit’s guidance, to identify and help equip a broader range of people to thrive in their vocations.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Which kinds of mentoring have you experienced: informal – by chance, informal – intentional, or formal? What worked well about it? What didn't?
2. Is there a ministry area in which a formal mentoring program might benefit people in your congregation or judicatory? How might you raise this possibility and what kinds of resources or planning might it necessitate?
3. What ministry might you be more willing to take on or move into if you knew that you would participate in an excellent formal mentoring program?

New mentoring for a new era

Some aspects of mentoring are timeless, testifying to its place as a central ministry of the Church in all places and eras. But as our culture and society move through enormous shifts and technology and globalization push aside what seemed to be timeless assumptions about the meaning of community and the flow of human relationships, how we approach the ministry of mentoring must shift too. Here I want to discuss two trends worth keeping our eye on. I do not have solutions or conclusions regarding these trends, but my experience as a college chaplain and a diocesan priest over the last seven years has convinced me that we need to reflect together about their implications.
First, the rising generations of our era are growing up and growing into a world that is increasingly “open source” in its orientation to learning, authority and work. Setting aside traditional models of hierarchy within institutions and working groups, and sharing in the ownership of intellectual property, an open source approach encourages as many people as possible to contribute to the generation of work, share in the development of ideas, and “own” the running of an organization. Starting with the creation of the Internet and certain computer software, the approach has affected almost every aspect of life for younger adults.

As a result, today’s younger adults and teens are “naturally” collaborators. They assume mutuality in most relationships and are less likely than previous generations to defer to or be intimidated by someone on the basis of their “rank” or achievements. They are just as in need of mentoring as anyone ever was, but they are refreshingly uninterested in sitting at the foot of a “guru” in order to hear the “right” answers to life’s questions. They are refreshingly more interested in participating actively in a group where peers resource and coach one another, or developing a mentoring relationship with someone who is conscious and articulate about what they, as a mentor, have to learn from them, the protégé.

The second development with implications for mentoring is the increasing complexity of life in a post-modern society. The tasks of psychological and spiritual growth, which have always been challenging, are made even more so by the overload of information, the myriad, ever-expanding options for finding meaning and identity, and the technology-enabled speed with which communications and work happens in our time. As psychologist Robert Kagan explains, we are “In Over Our Heads.” The higher order cognitive capacities required to navigate in our day and age are increasingly hard to develop. The high incidence of medical depression and anxiety disorders on our college campuses and addictive behaviors in our society are indicative of how hard it is to thrive in these times. In a real sense, we are all always in crisis, all always in major transition, and all struggling to develop interior capacities to deal with the mental and spiritual demands of modern life.

In such an environment, the companionship of a mentor or a mentoring community can be the key factor in navigating the gale forces of life. I have seen in my own ministry on campus how our chaplaincy community has made the difference for students between dropping out and sticking with it, between emotional collapse and emotional rebalancing, between despair and renewal. But it is more important than ever, I believe, that mentors know what they can handle and what they cannot and are well-equipped to discern when a person needs

professional help. The journey into authentic selfhood is an exciting one, but it is a journey a person cannot start until they are mentally and emotionally even-keeled.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Where do you see and experience the challenges described in this section in your own life? In the lives of others in your faith community?
2. What might you have to learn or unlearn to mentor faithfully and well in light of the changes described in this section?
3. How else might the trends described here shape the ministry of mentoring in the years ahead?

Next Steps

Living into the fullness and the uniqueness of our vocations is a life’s work. It is work we cannot do alone; we must do it with the help of others. In our era more than ever, we need one another in Christian community to companion us into being – into being Christ-like, equipped for loving service for the life of the world. I hope this article has given you some tools for looking at your own practice of mentoring, for wondering about how else you might grow into this ministry and why it is critical to do so now.

One of the great blessings of my sabbatical work was the chance to reconnect with three of my mentors and to gain an even deeper thankfulness for all those who have brought me this far in my journey. I invite you as you put down this article to offer a prayer of thanks for those who have been mentors to you. If this article has inspired conversation in your congregation, I hope you will continue it, and I offer the resource list below to help you further your discussion and planning. And finally, please be in touch with me with your ideas, questions, and reflections on Christian mentoring in our era; the conversation has just begun!
Short Resource List

In-depth analysis of how the complexity of modern life places unique demands on our psyches and what social and educational "scaffolding" can help us thrive in the midst of complexity.

Excellent resource for understanding the value of intentional mentoring and reflection structures for lay leaders and others in congregations.

Distills a growing body of research seeking to understand the unique strengths and vulnerabilities of young adulthood and how best to support young adults.

A beautiful book on vocation and relationships, suitable for use with small groups, leadership teams, or on retreats.

Very helpful overview of some of the history of mentoring in western Christianity, with useful reflection on the qualities of good mentoring.

A Collection of excellent essays and research reports on how and why young adults do or do not develop spiritually while at college.