The Value of Mentoring

By Jeffrey P. Greenman

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To be a disciple of Jesus Christ literally means being a “learner.” Christians are people who have learned to follow Jesus and who are continuing to grow as his followers. Jesus related to his immediate circle of twelve followers as a Jewish rabbi, a teacher of God’s truth. Much of his earthly ministry was spent training these people. He shared his life with them. He set an example for them in everything he did. He prayed for them and with them. He taught them what it meant to participate in the coming Kingdom of God that was being made real and actual in his own activity. He expounded the Scriptures to them. He took them along with him as he healed the sick, drove out demons and preached to the crowds. In all these ways, Jesus was acting as their mentor. Their learning was thoroughly relational. Their growing understanding of who Jesus was and what he was doing emerged from personal relationship rather than through an impersonal transmission of data. Jesus developed a culture of ongoing learning and growth among his followers.

The learning culture modelled by Jesus was continued in the early church. There are vivid examples of the power of mentoring in the New Testament. Barnabas, a respected leader in the earliest congregations of Jerusalem, becomes an invaluable mentor to the apostle Paul. Apart from the coaching of Barnabas, it is doubtful if Paul’s ministry would have had the impact that it did. Likewise Paul becomes a mentor to a circle of key leaders across the Mediterranean basin. Probably the best-known case is his influence on Timothy, who receives guidance and encouragement from Paul as his own influential ministry becomes established.

Throughout church history, the process of making disciples has always emphasized both the importance of personal relationship and the challenge of continued growth in holiness and spiritual maturity. Learning to be a faithful disciple of Jesus is a lifelong project, not a short-term accomplishment. In receiving the Great Commandment, each person should embrace their responsibility to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in the love and service of their neighbour. The church has consistently affirmed the value of community in the shaping of our hearts and lives as Christians. We are members of a body of Christ, and therefore interdependent participants in a shared way of life. Each person has something unique and valuable to give to
others in the community of faith; each person has something unique and valuable to receive from others in the community. In short, in order to grow into the maturity of faith modelled by Jesus, we need each other.

Christianity is based on a relational style of learning, to active participation in a learning community, and to the learner’s responsibility for ongoing development. These values are particularly conducive to mentoring as a means of fostering faithful Christian discipleship. This is why Tyndale Seminary takes mentoring seriously. In particular, this approach forms a central part of a required course for all students called “Leadership Development” and why the Tyndale Centre for Leadership Development is strongly emphasizing the value of mentoring.

Ted Engstrom, a long-time leader of World Vision, suggests a simple definition of mentoring: “passing on to others what God has given to you.” Theologians Paul Stanley and J. Robert Clinton have given a more comprehensive definition: “Mentoring is a relational process in which a mentor, who knows or has experienced something, transfers that something (resources of wisdom, information, experience, confidence, insight, relationships, status, etc.) to a mentoree, at an appropriate time and manner, so that it facilitates development or empowerment.”

Stanley and Clinton offer a detailed description of the mentoring process. Mentoring is an approach to adult learning that is:

- Personalized and individualized—learner-centred rather than mentor-centred.
- Needs oriented—taps into learner’s felt-needs and therefore a person’s high levels of motivation and commitment.
- Practical and usually oriented to a “major life activity”—e.g., handling an ongoing concern or problem, a need for guidance, skill development, etc.
- Can be undertaken anytime, anywhere—e.g., provided at the learner’s location, mentor’s location, neutral site, or on the “field of action.”
- Undertaken primarily through informal communication—e.g., conversation, face-to-face meetings, correspondence, etc.
- Is aimed at the whole person—e.g., deals primarily not with cognitive content, but rather with application to life, relational context, clarification of values, affective growth and experiential learning.
- Is relational learning—everything hinges on the operation of trust and openness in the relationship between mentor and learner.
- Can be undertaken throughout an entire lifetime, at little expense—as opposed to formal training, which usually lasts only 4-6 years at great expense.

What makes a mentoring relationship successful? A positive sense of “fit” between the people involved initiates the mentoring process. Strong mentoring relationships have an intangible element of “connection” and high levels of mutual trust and respect. Personal relationship becomes the context for the mentoree’s development. As the mentor and mentoree develop shared goals and take steps to address the mentoree’s needs, Stanley and Clinton point out that the mentoree’s responsiveness is essential—a willingness to learn, attentiveness to guidance offered, and seriousness about the relationship. The mentor’s key role is to provide a safe, encouraging context for accountability about meeting those goals. The successful mentor is
someone who is focused on the mentoree’s needs, not what one author has called “cloning” – “projecting their own lives experience onto the mentoree.” The intended result of the relationship is the mentoree’s development or growth in meeting personal needs. These same dynamics are at work both in one-on-one mentoring situations as well as in small mentoring groups.

There are many kinds of mentoring relationships. Stanley and Clinton identify nine distinct types of mentoring in their book. For our purposes, two of their types are most important: the discipler and the coach. The discipler is the type of mentor whose focus is assisting a mentoree in establishing strong spiritual roots, cultivating key spiritual disciplines, and helping to solidify the godly patterns of conduct. Many readers will have benefited from the disciplining ministry of an older believer in their early years as a Christian. The other type that is most relevant to our concerns is the coach. Think of any coach you had for a sports team or your favourite music teacher. A coach is concerned with teaching the mentoree key performance skills, developing the person’s potential, evaluating their performance, and encouraging their success.

Stanley and Clinton suggest that all Christians would benefit from involvement in a “relational network” that includes (1) “upward” mentoring by receiving mentoring by someone you respect for their wisdom and spiritual maturity; (2) “lateral” mentoring by sharing in a peer-mentoring process with Christian friends who are at a similar stage of life and facing comparable challenges; and (3) “downward” mentoring by providing mentoring to those who are emerging in their faith or moving through an earlier stage of their life and work. I believe there is wisdom in this proposal. Three questions correlate to the three types of relationships. (1) Who is a respected “elder” in my life from whom I can learn and to whom I should be accountable? (2) Who are my peer co-mentors who will encourage me in our shared challenges, and walk with me in a common pursuit of faithfulness? (3) Who are the emerging Christians in my sphere of influence who might benefit from my personal support and learn from my experiences?

No matter whether it is upward, lateral or downward mentoring, Stanley and Clinton propose the “ten commandments” of mentoring as:
1. Establish the relationships of those involved.
2. Jointly agree on the specific purpose of the relationship.
3. Determine the regularity of interaction.
4. Determine how accountability will be maintained.
5. Agree upon communication mechanisms and frequency.
6. Clarify the level of confidentiality.
7. Set the life cycle of the relationship (i.e., “beware open-ended mentorships”).
8. Evaluate the relationship from time to time.
9. Modify expectations to fit the real-life mentoring situation.
10. Bring closure to the mentoring relationship.

In the Seminary’s required course, “Leadership Development,” we teach that leadership flows from the leader’s inner life—his or her character, spirituality, giftedness, personality and style. This means that leaders need to be highly self-aware, and need to have a plan for ongoing
personal growth and spiritual development. Leadership is the expression of who we are as persons. In order to help students understand more thoroughly how God has shaped them, students write four short reflection paper dealing with important topics: their personal timeline of how God has shaped them throughout their lives; their personality and leadership style; their giftedness; and their sense of calling and God’s guidance. These short papers become the basis for four 1-hour mentoring sessions, in which the student sits down with a godly, supportive mentor to explore their findings and to pray for God’s wisdom. Our experience has been that students have benefited enormously from this mentoring experience. For some, it has been a real highlight of their entire Christian life. The process has helped students to personalize the spiritual challenges that are presented in class, and to become accountable for their learning and growth. For many students, they have developed plans for ongoing mentoring as a result of seeing how helpful this experience has been.

The Tyndale Centre for Leadership Development also emphasizes the value of mentoring. The heart and soul of our work at the Centre is peer mentoring. We have a number of small groups (8-12 people) that meet monthly to learn more about leadership in different sectors of society and in congregational life. What we call “peer learning roundtables” are study groups where people can explore together what it means to give faithful, servant leadership in their own sphere of influence. Some groups focus on marketplace contexts, and others are geared for pastors. What these groups have in common is a strongly relational context for honest discussion, mutual encouragement and biblical reflection. These roundtables have been enthusiastically received.

Mentoring is an extremely valuable aspect of growing Christian discipleship, but it is not easy. There are several obstacles that can prevent effective mentoring.

A common reaction when someone is approached to provide mentoring is: “Not me. I’m no expert at this!” Many feel unqualified to provide mentoring. Sometimes they add, “I wish I’d had someone like that in my life when I was younger, but I didn’t.” Admittedly, not every “elder” will make a good mentor. A strong combination of relational skill, spiritual wisdom and faithful discipleship is not easy to find.

However, another reason why some are reluctant to provide mentoring is false humility. Sometimes well-qualified people are reluctant to volunteer themselves as an “expert” when they actually have a great deal to offer. Here it is important to see that mentorship is less about a mentor giving perfect “answers” than about a process of collaborative learning—it is searching together, sharing a journey of discovery, and seeking to reflect on our experiences with the mind of Christ.

Another limiting factor surrounding mentorship that needs to be addressed honestly is busyness. It is usual for both mentors and mentorees to juggle long working hours, multiple professional demands, family needs and local church involvement, all while finding time for sleep and exercise!
Finally, there are cultural factors involved in the shortage of mentors. North American culture is a strongly individualistic. Sometime we find it hard to “make time” for close relationships, even when we know we would benefit a great deal from them. Part of our individualistic bent is a tendency to self-sufficiency and a mythology of “pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps.” This mindset stands in the way of real participation in the body of Christ and real fellowship with others, which always involves both giving and receiving.

A simple truth of Christianity is that God’s people need each other. Mentoring gives God an opportunity to do his work in us and through us, so that we might offer our daily lives to God as a “living sacrifice” which is holy and pleasing to him (Rom. 12:1).

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3 Stanley & Clinton, 197-198. I have reworded their “commandments” slightly.