

*Christian Today Australian* recently caught up with John Mallison to share his wide experience in mentoring and small groups based on his personal experience. He is a lecturer, consultant and a trainer in Christian leader development and a prolific writer, having just released his 24<sup>th</sup> book.

*CT AUS: Business mentoring is a common term. However, Christian mentoring is something which has rarely been mentioned, I was wondering if you can briefly explained what this involves?*

JM: The word “mentoring” comes from Greek mythology. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Mentor was the wise and trusted companion and friend of Ulysses and the guardian of his house during his ten-year absence at the Trojan wars. He acted as teacher and adviser of Ulysses’ son Telemachus, helping him to develop sound values, attitudes and behaviour so he would mature to be an upright, wise and courageous adult.

The word mentoring is now extensively used in both church and community organisations to describe the one-to-one nurture of individuals in their life and work.

Many words are used in the New Testament which relate to this task of nurturing. These are often found in the “one another”, “together” or “each other” passages (loving, caring for, watching over, bearing burdens, encouraging, praying, exhorting, rebuking, spurring one, etc.) The tasks of pastoring, teaching, oversight, etc all relate to the support of followers of Christ in their personal and spiritual growth and equipping for ministry.

In what has become known as Christ’s great commission in Matthew 28:19,20, he gives his disciples clear goals to pursue in order to continue his ministry of building the Kingdom of God. “Make disciples” is at the core of Christ’s commission.

“Disciple” literally means learner. Christian disciples are meant to keep growing by taking seriously Jesus Christ the Son of God as their teacher and model.

Christian mentoring, or disciple making, is essentially concerned with helping mentorees maintain and develop this grace relationship with Christ.

There are three ways in which a person can be involved in mentoring. Ideally a person should endeavour to be engaged in each of these aspects at one and the same time to balance the receiving in personal mentoring relationships with the giving and support and encouragement to others.

**The first** is a receiving relationship. In this dimension of mentoring we enter into a relationship with a more mature, more experienced person, who has been faithful in the long haul. They become our mentor and we, as mentorees, benefit from their wise advice, modelling and encouragement.

**The second** is a sharing relationship. This involves co-mentoring with a peer, a person of similar age and interest and commitment to Christ. It is an equal relationship between two people who value and respect each other and believe each can enrich the other.

**The third** is a giving relationship. Here we develop a relationship with a less experienced person exercising a similar role to the mentor in the receiving relationship. This person becomes our mentoree.

Being in this three-dimensional network helps us maintain the balance of authentic Christian discipleship through receiving and giving. It can also lessen the possibility that dependency could develop.

*CT AUS: Are there any similarities or differences between business mentoring and Christian mentoring?*

JM: As I see it, there are a lot of similarities between the two types of mentoring, business and Christian. However, there is one obvious important difference, which is the spiritual aspect to Christian mentoring.

In a secular environment, mentoring or coaching is essentially concerned about performance and outcome, whereas in Christian mentoring, we are also concerned about all aspects of the person’s personal and spiritual well being.

Prayer also plays a major role. During my sessions we pray, and I have a large prayer group who undergird my mentoring sessions. I also require mentorees to develop their own prayer support base.

*CT: Is there a safeguard to ensure a mentoring relationship does not become intimate?*

JM: I am often asked if people should be mentored by people of the same sex, or can they have a cross-sex mentor. My advice is that man should mentor man, and woman should mentor woman. Although I mentor women who are in a leadership position, I am always very careful about the location of our meetings. I always mentor them in a coffee shop.

This opens up the whole area of boundaries in mentoring. In my book, "Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders", I have a whole section on boundaries. Let me just list a few I deal with, in addition to this matter of avoiding excessive intimacy. We need to be available – within reason and we must keep confidences. Allowing others to develop God's way – not trying to force them into our own mould and knowing our own limitations so we act as a bridge to specialist resources are some of the other boundaries I deal with.

*CT AUS: Please tell us about your special interest in small groups.*

My special interest in small groups grew from my 17 years being in the churches and parishes where I was the pastor.

Small groups have played an important role in all my training events over the last 30 years. Much time is spent working in small groups during my sessions and as follow up to these events

I have had the privilege of training thousands of small group leaders in 30 different countries.

I also belong to an ongoing small group for prayer and personal support.

Based on my experience of being involved in establishing small groups, I am totally convinced that they play an integral part in what the church is meant to be. However my prime reason for acknowledging the imperative of small groups is the example that Jesus Christ left for us. Jesus' strategy was very clear. Though he worked with the crowds, most of the time he worked with the small group of 12 disciples where he did his deepest work in building potential leaders to carry on his ministry.

Some Christian groups do not fulfil their God-given duty because they miss the mission dimension. These groups seek to build themselves up but they do not go out to serve. A Christian small group needs to both receive and give.

A prayer cell has a very clear mission dimension to it by conducting an outreach through intercessory prayer. Other small groups that study the Bible, pray and worship together as a group, should seek to serve in various ways.

Robert Logan, in one of his books on small groups, said "a growing church must build an ever broadening array of cell groups with different focuses, different target groups and different strategies".

Many groups conduct outreach programs, with the first step being to invite people from their neighbourhood to the home of a group member. They seek to build genuine relationships as a precursor to evangelism.

Bill Hybel, in his book, "Just Walk Across the Room", gives a practical guide to this relational evangelism.

*CT AUS: Do you have any comments about the Uniting Church (UC) 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary?*

JM: Although I am well aware that there are negatives and weakness, most people don't hear about the positive sides of the UC.

The UC has a strong emphasis on prayer in NSW through the "In a State of Prayer" network. A bi-monthly publication goes to 400 churches and individuals who pray daily for all aspects of the church. The strong evangelical wing of the UC has an additional prayer network.

Personal scripture reading also plays a very important role in the denomination. "With Love to the World" daily Bible reading guide involves 13,000 people, to say nothing of the many who use Scripture Union and Every Day With Jesus guides.

Most of our big churches are evangelical like Pittwater church, with its large modern church complex and dynamic program for all ages. Another is West Epping and there are many others. The biggest is Wesley Central Mission in Sydney where they balance evangelism with social concern.

In Wesley Mission there is 3,000 social welfare staff and 3,000 volunteers involved in 400 centres. The strong evangelical aspect is well maintained by Rev Keith Garner, the new leader of the Mission, who followed in the evangelical footsteps of Frank Raywood, Alan Walker and Gordon Moyes.

So, my comment about the UC is that I have sadness for aspects of our Church but I also have a joy because of dimensions that seldom get mention in public comment.

*CT AUS: Thank you so much for your time Mr Mallison.*

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