



Christian Mentoring

JOHN MALLISON MINISTRIES

LET MY PEOPLE GROW!

John Mallison

The New Testament presents the Christian life as a dynamic, ever-growing experience – anything but passive or static. The concepts of ‘new birth’ and ‘seeds’ imply the need for ongoing growth. Paul and Peter make this quite specific when they exhort their hearers to ‘continue to grow’, ‘grow up into Christ’ and ‘grow in grace and knowledge of Christ’.

When the church gathers, worship of God is its central focus. But every aspect of the service of worship, hymns, prayers, the preached word and celebration of the sacraments and the fellowship should be facilitating individual and collective spiritual growth.

Richard Foster has helped many cultivate their personal and collective spiritual life by providing stimulating guides for spiritual growth, the best-known being *‘Celebration of Discipline’*. In addition to these spiritual disciplines best known to Protestants: prayer, study, service and worship, he has reintroduced us to other classical disciplines such as simplicity, solitude, fasting, etc. But growth in a church gathering and the practice of the personal disciplines have their limitations. The large gathering can be too impersonal and we can easily become introverted on our own.

Small Groups that Make a Difference:

Small groups are playing a critical role in fostering holistic Christian growth. The dynamics of a small cluster are right for attention to God’s word, intimate sharing, caring fellowship, encouragement and accountability. Jesus set us an example with his group of twelve and the early church followed his model as they worshipped in the temple and then dispersed into house gatherings for deeper fellowship.

Over many years small groups have played a major role in my own life and ministry. I now belong to a group that comprises two businessmen and myself. We share openly and honestly, encourage and support one another and pray together. It helps mould our lives and witness for Christ. I also belong to a group of clergy, who have met twice a month for the past 20 years, to share and pray.

My wife and I have found great support in meeting with other couples in small groups to study God’s word, share and pray together.

After I caught the vision of the potential of small groups to build the Christian church over 40 years ago, my churches were transformed as networks of small groups in those congregations breathed new life into individual’s lives and grew new experiences of credible Christian community.

Over the years, I have found that there are clear guidelines to follow if a group is to remain vital in developing true Christian maturity. Here are just a few.

Size is important. Large groups produce superficiality in most aspects of the group’s life. Groups that are serious about growth based on Christ’s teaching limit their size to a maximum of twelve. The more committed a group is about developing an authentic Christian style of life, the smaller it needs to be. Some of the most effective groups in this regard limit their numbers to three, or to no more than six.

Another principle to follow is that of balancing community and mission. Groups can so easily deteriorate into ‘bless me clubs’. The concerns of the world and the needs of others are neglected. Intercession for any person or situation outside the group is rare. They avoid inviting others lest their cosy group experience is disrupted. Prayer as a group for specific people and a genuine effort to those who are lost and seek and win others to Christ. They rarely become involved in service to others who are not in the Christian fellowship. Community, nurture, fellowship, togetherness needs to be balanced with mission, evangelism and social concern. The most alive groups I know are committed to maintaining this balance of holistic Christian spirituality.



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Christ's Great Commission to 'go', to reach out to others with his message of promise and hope, was not a request – it was a command! A clear direction from our Lord and Master.

Christian community is about praising God, studying and taking seriously the Scriptures, serious prayer in faith and genuinely caring for each other. Mission is about giving our lives away, individually and collectively. It is about losing our life to find it!

Another key to keeping a group alive and well is for the group to reproduce itself, to plant other groups. Ralph Neighbour, the father of the modern Cell Group Movement, used to say that if a small group has not grown and divided within twelve months, it should be closed down. While I think that time frame is too rigid and doesn't take into account many factors, I thoroughly agree with the principle. It is in line with Christ's Great Commission to reach out to others with the Good News.

Another key to dynamic groups is that they should be havens of hope. Grace must govern all dimensions of the group life. Paul worked hard at helping the early church understand 'law' and 'grace'. Legalism stifles and eventually destroys Christian life. It produces spiritual straight-jackets that greatly limit a Christian's freedom in Christ. It generates a 'try harder' theology which takes the joy out of Christian living and produces unreal guilt. The great themes of God's unconditional love, his mercy, his undeserved kindness, living and walking in the Spirit, loving as Christ loved, and servanthood will occupy the attention of a group that is a haven of hope!

Sure, occasionally there will need to be appropriate rebuke and discipline where sin has raised its ugly head, but it will all be done in a spirit of grace, reflecting the mind and heart of God.

The Discipling Process

Another central area for the development of Christian maturity is in the one-to-one discipling of Jesus Christ's followers. The word 'disciple' means 'learner'. It implies that to be a disciple of Christ, one is expected to be continually learning, developing knowledge and understanding and applying it to the whole of one's life. I have been a committed Christian for 56 years, but with Paul, I openly admit I haven't arrived – far from it! I still have much learning and growing to do. To enable this continuing process, I have a number who walk the road closely with me to disciple me.

Today the term 'mentoring' is more commonly used for this process where a person more resourced and experienced enriches the skills and performance of another. Good parenting is a natural form of mentoring. In the workplace, tradespeople pass on their skills and experience to persons new to a trade in a one on one apprenticeship relationship. In the business and professional world, mentoring is common. Individual sports-people and sporting teams are in mentoring relationships with coaches to enhance their performance. Over the last decade amongst Christians there has been a huge, increased commitment to mentoring aimed at enabling personal and spiritual growth and the development of life and ministry skills.

Mentoring is a means of fulfilling the many exhortations found in the New Testament's 'one another', 'together', and 'each other' passages which exhort us not to live individualistic lives trying to make it on our own. We need the love, care, fellowship, wisdom, support and prayers of other believers.

There are three dimensions to mentoring as practised in the Christian context. The first, where a more competent person works with one who is less experienced. The second is amongst peers in an equal relationship, where each enriches the other. In the third, a person being mentored in turn mentors another who is less mature. In the second it is generally a friendship that is made more intentional by asking significant questions, being accountable and encouraging and praying for each other. I value the great contribution my senior mentors and peer have made to my life, by their wisdom, their challenging me to face issues and keep growing, their modelling and their prayers and encouragement.



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These three dimensions of mentoring are clearly seen in Paul and Barnabas' relationship recorded in the New Testament. Initially, Barnabas was Paul's mentor. This then grew into a co-mentoring relationship as Paul quickly matured. Paul then took others like Timothy under his wing to foster their growth.

Amongst the many factors that help make mentoring effective is openness and honesty. I seek to model this with my mentorees. A mentoree may share an area of struggle in his/her life and when appropriate I may admit that it is an area of difficulty for me too, and share some ways I have learnt to handle it. I find this openness increases the bonding between us and brings hope as I show I am a fellow struggler, a 'becomer' rather than remaining aloof as if I have arrived and have no challenges!

Jesus' modelling with his disciples of humility, graciousness and openness to receive provides some further guidance to attitude in mentoring.

The Bible's teaching about the Christian perspective on human beings is foundational in helping and understanding others. The fact that all are made in the image of God, are flawed (sinners) and are wounded, provides a framework for all helping situations. Christ's good news then gives promise and hope that life can begin again. Over the years, this has enabled me to act as an 'apostle of hope' in working with all whose behaviour is dysfunctional, or who are without hope. Christ helps me see them both as they are and what they can be. Many a discouraged mentoree has left our mentoring session with a whole new perspective on themselves and realising that through who God is and all that he has done through the cross and resurrection, they need not be locked into more of the same!

Fundamental to good mentoring is the ability to help others reflect, to learn from their experiences. Educationally we call it 'experience-based education'. Good mentoring is not merely telling, or advice giving. It is essentially about asking good questions to enable reflection on everyday experiences. And of course, this requires good active listening skills on the part of the mentor. There will be information shared by the mentor and advice given, but it will be at the 'teachable moment' amidst a reflective process rather than dominating the encounter. I encourage journalling to maximise the learning. This is done as notes are made during and between the mentoring sessions.

Encouragement is an essential part of mentoring. No mentoree should leave a mentoring session discouraged. Even when issues have to be faced frankly and there may need to be an element of warning and rebuke, this needs to be balanced by grace and hope. The word for encouragement in Greek comes from the same root as that used for the Holy Spirit. He is the ultimate encourager, the one who is always standing alongside, acting as advocate and guide.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit is in fact the mentor, we are but under-mentors through whom he works to transform and empower. How imperative then, that mentors are in a living, growing relationship with God so they can be open channels through whom the Spirit can minister.

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