



Christian Mentoring

JOHN MALLISON MINISTRIES

WHO PASTORS THE PASTORS?

John Mallison

A national survey of 4,500 senior clergy has revealed that for at least 19% of all congregational leaders, burnout is a major issue. A further half (one in two) are borderline and therefore potential candidates for burnout. Around 12% of leaders say they often think of leaving the ministry and an identical percentage self-diagnose themselves as having high, or very high, levels of stress. (*National Church Life Survey*).

As part of his PhD research, Paul Whetham, lecturer in ethics and counselling at the University of South Australia, surveyed sixty clergy from a cross-section of denominations working in southern New South Wales. As well as being asked to complete questionnaires, he also interviewed them individually on one or two separate occasions.

In their book, *Hard to be Holy*, Paul and Libby Whetham clearly show the pressing need for support for Christian leaders. They noted: 'The high levels of stress and burnout experienced by church leaders, growing attrition rates, high levels of loneliness and lack of intimacy with those closest to them, a frequently impoverished relationship with God and, at times, an abusive relationship with those they have been called to serve, is consistent with international literature about clergy relationships.'

In one question in the NSL Survey, leaders were asked whether they had someone with whom they could be completely honest, who encourages, supports and prays with them in their ministry role. Around 12% of clergy feel they have no such person with whom they can be completely honest. These have dramatically higher burnout scores than clergy as a whole.

The Whethams found that 'only 19% spoke of having "close", "deep", "intimate" or "loving" interactions with people. In other words, four out of five church leaders did not mention meaningful relationships.'

'Always giving in relationships but never receiving results in one-way interactions. This form of relating on its own is unnatural and unhealthy.' (1)

Peter Kaldor reports that 'there is a range of different methods of coping that leaders commonly seek to employ:

- *Finding time for relaxation* – stepping away from the pressures of work to get fresh air and, hopefully, to recharge the batteries.
- *Dealing strategically with the pressures* with which one is faced. Delegating tasks and responsibilities, reorganising time and priorities and seeking additional training are all ways to seek to deal with the pressures in the workplace in the hope that the stress will be reduced as a result.
- *Growing spiritually to combat pressures* that are being faced. Seeking time alone in reflection or intentional times of prayer provide good examples of seeking to build up one's spiritual backbone in order to be able to better deal with the challenges that exist.
- *Seeking support from others*. Talking with someone about the issues one is facing is an important method of coping open to clergy.

Those leaders who seek to cope by growing spiritually, or by dealing strategically with issues, recorded lower burnout scores.

One of the results of this study is the importance of leaders having a support framework around them.'

'*Hard to be Holy*' underscores the above emphasis upon the pivotal nature of relationships with both God and others, and goes on to comment that, 'Relationships simply take time...so time



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management becomes crucial. It requires making them a priority, allocating time to and making oneself available for such relationships.'

Increasingly, those who take their Christian discipleship and service seriously are seeing the value of having a friend and adviser with whom they can share openly and to whom they can be accountable. As the wise old sage said, 'Two are better than one' (*Ecclesiastes 4:9*).

The New Testament is full of 'one another', 'each other' and 'together' passages pointing to Christianity as relational, about community, the power of togetherness. Rugged individualism and do-it-yourself spirituality are contrary to New Testament spirituality.

John Wesley's '*General Rules for Methodist Fellowships*' (Societies) released in 1743 included the words, 'Watch over one another in love.' In class meetings and one-to-one, they cared for one another.

Mentoring enables us to walk the road with at least one other. It has been defined in various ways. In its broad application to Christian disciples and leaders, I define it as 'a dynamic, intentional relationship of trust in which one person enables another to maximise the grace of God in their life and service.'

J Robert Clinton defines mentoring of potential leaders, 'Mentoring refers to the process in which a person with a serving, giving, encouraging attitude (*mentor*), sees the leadership potential in a still to be developed person and is able to prompt or otherwise significantly influence that person along with the realisation of his / her potential'.

There are three ways in which we can be involved in mentoring.

The first is a receiving relationship with a more mature, more resourced 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.

'Mentors speak three messages: 'It can be done! You're not alone. I believe in you!' (2)

The second, generally referred to as peer mentoring, is a shared relationship 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 relationship is less formal than either the previous or the following. Often it simply involves making a present friendship more intentional by knowing the right questions to ask, sharing openly and honestly and keeping one another accountable. This ought to be an enjoyable, relaxed relationship with a fun dimension.

Unfortunately this so readily available, and most effective form of mentoring has been overlooked by many, or not developed to reach its full potential.

The third form of mentoring is the reverse of the first. Here we develop a giving relationship with a less experienced person. We exercise a similar role to that of our mentor in the receiving relationship. This person becomes our mentoree.

Sometimes this person will seek us out but often it requires us to take the initiative with those who we think may benefit from our help. As we actively listen to people, we may hear their silent or spoken cries for help and offer to stand with them in this way.

Being in this 3-dimensional network helps us maintain the balance of authentic Christian discipleship by both receiving and giving. It can also lessen the possibility of dependency developing.



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Meeting in small groups provides another dimension for mentoring. I meet with two businessmen in the city for breakfast. We are open and honest with each other in a framework of grace. For many years I have been a member of a group comprised of 6 to 8 clergy, where we share our joys and our concerns, then pray for each other.

To be a good Christian mentor, we need an adequate idea of God; a sane estimate of ourselves and others; the ability to ask good questions; active listening skills; to know our limitations and be able to set boundaries; to understand how adults learn; to have time to give; to believe in the power of prayer; to be familiar with the Bible and its application to daily living and, above all, to have a living relationship with God.

Some of the best mentoring is done by very busy people who are disciplined with the use of their time, and who know how to slot mentoring relationships into busy schedules.

Mentoring is a fulfilling role for seniors who may have less time restraints than previously. As a senior, I find mentoring emerging leaders one of the most satisfying aspects of what has been a very diverse and fulfilling ministry. I'm inspired by the idealism, enthusiasm and responsiveness of the emerging leaders with whom I work. They rejuvenate me! I find great joy in seeing them grow, and they help me keep growing.

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