

# The Role of the **Mentor** on a Christian Campus

**M**y first encounter with Christian education was in a small multigrade school in Palmerston North, New Zealand. My teacher, Miss Gilmore, daily shared her spiritual understandings, shaped my handwriting, and taught me my times tables, reading, and writing. She inspired in me a passion for music, poetry, literature, and art, as well as a curiosity for life. Best of all, she modeled superbly the craft of teaching. Even today, she continues to cheer me on, and her bright mind remembers every detail of those years.

I also recall a college professor who modeled the journey of faith for me. Pastor Hefron was determined that his students would learn to think. While he posed many questions, he also modeled a deep commitment to God. In those days, teachers didn't have the luxury of a private office, so he set aside a room in his home where students could come and talk with him. I have never forgotten his thoughtful counsel and caring spirit.

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**By Verlie Ward**

Many of us have been touched by a mentor teacher who modeled a deep compassion for people, a profound curiosity for life, and an eagerness to join with other learners in the search for meaning. For many of us, the fire within was fueled by an insightful instructor who caught a glimpse of what we could become and willingly invested time and energy to nurture our growth.

## **Mentors Throughout History**

The Jews called Yahweh their Mentor. They also looked to priests, rabbis, prophets, and wise men as spiritual leaders. The early Christian Church fostered mentoring in the form of spiritual guidance. St. Basil (330-379 A.D.) wrote to the believers, urging them to find a man "who may



serve you as a very sure guide in the work of leading a holy life," one who knows the "straight road to God." He warned that "to believe that one does not need counsel is great pride."<sup>1</sup>

In the fourth and fifth centuries, the Desert Fathers in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine modeled spiritual direction. Disciples would seek advice and guidance from these holy men of the desert who helped to shape the inner life through prayer and pastoral care. In the Celtic tradition, we find the emergence of the "Soul-Friend," who was essentially a guide and counselor. During the seventh century, St. John Climacus insisted that "beginners who wished to leave Egypt for the promised land must find another Moses [to be their] guide."<sup>2</sup> By the 10th century, there were many Eastern religions with spiritual mentors. Buddhism had meditant ascetics, and the Chinese turned to sages for spiritual guidance. During the 16th century, we find a woman, Teresa of Avila, establishing foundations to support men and women in their spiritual life. She encouraged interior prayer, which was regarded with suspicion at that time.<sup>3</sup> In 18th century Russia, spiritual guides inspired their followers to live a simple, humble life, devoted to acquiring the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that since the beginning of

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time, patterns of mentoring have existed throughout the world.

Literature abounds with stories of mentoring. Plato was mentored by Socrates, Beethoven absorbed the example of Haydn into his musical life, and Florence Nightingale turned to Sidney Herbert for support in carrying out medical reform that she could never have accomplished alone. Mendel the geneticist found renewal from his physics teacher, Friedrich Franz. Martin Luther King, Jr., was influenced by his college president, Dr. Benjamin Mays. In chapel talks, Mays constantly reminded the students of Morehouse College that "they could be poor; they could be black; their ancestors may have been slaves; they may be segregated and discriminated against, but still be free in their mind and soul."<sup>5</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life abounded with mentoring relationships. He mentored his peers as well as his students. Finally, in a German concentration camp, he shared hope with fellow prisoners. Even his guards

were changed forever because of what they saw in his personal life.<sup>6</sup>

### Christian Mentors Today

What does it mean to be a faithful mentor on a Christian campus today? Most students come to college to obtain a degree or to acquire job skills. On the way to that degree, many students discover that the road on which they have embarked is full of surprises and detours. In exploring these new pathways, they discover goals they had not considered, questions they had not entertained, and challenges for which they feel unprepared. The role of the mentor is not to fix the road but rather to help the young adult to find meaning, create a purposeful vision, and become a competent traveler.<sup>7</sup>

Young adulthood is the place where habits and beliefs are forged. To achieve these goals, the young adult must pass through the process of re-evaluating his or her beliefs and developing a personal set of values. These become the launching pad for adulthood. Many young adults begin this process in college. The evaluation involves a careful examination of the most elemental beliefs upon which they have built their lives. These beliefs are usually based upon what Parks calls "an uncritical dependence upon prevailing conventional, family [church], and peer group authority."<sup>8</sup> The young person embarks on a search for richer understandings, as well as an attempt to discover a personal faith that gives significance and meaning to life. As humans, we seek to find meaning, to achieve order and form, and to make connections. This process proceeds more smoothly in a supportive, nurturing environment among individuals who have begun the walk and have developed a strong personal faith.

### A Place of Shelter

To describe mentoring, Parks chooses the metaphor of the canopy, which comes to life in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In this story, the

second daughter follows her revolutionary lover to Siberia. As father and daughter stand together on a desolate prairie, waiting for the train, he acknowledges his deep inner pain at not knowing when he will see her again. She offers this tender farewell gift: "I promise you, I will be married under the canopy." The canopy symbolizes her connection to the family and to her heritage.

For young Christians, the canopy is a safe shelter where they can unpack the knowledge they have accumulated thus far, a place where they can investigate the fabric of life's meaning without unraveling the weavings. It is a place of honesty and integrity from which an adult can emerge. It is also a place of safety, even though the process may be unsettling for them and those who support them.

Erikson says that the test of a culture is its capacity to nurture and to receive its idealistic young adults and initiate them into the future.<sup>10</sup>

To enter the canopy of mentorship, the young adult needs to sense support and trust. Erikson says that trust is foundational to the develop-

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mental process: "It is the well from which we draw the courage to let go of what we no longer need and to receive [what is of worth]."<sup>11</sup> When that trust is offered, the developmental process can proceed. But if young people are unable to unpack and examine their personal values, this task is often delayed, sometimes until midlife. In some situations, an individual can become frozen at this stage of development and never form that core of self-chosen values that provide individual integrity, faith, and a sense of worth.

Richard R. Niebuhr describes this faith-growing experience as a time of suffering when doubt, struggling, yearning, and despair become a natural part of the young person's life.<sup>12</sup>

Parks goes so far as to use the metaphor of a shipwreck to describe "the coming apart of what has served as a shelter and protection and has held and carried one where one wanted to go, the collapse of a structure that once promised trustworthiness."<sup>13</sup>

Such a shipwreck can be precipitated by many events—a divorce in the family, sickness, a poor moral choice, breakup of a love affair, disillusionment, or just the storms of life. However, Parks does not leave us there. She goes on to describe the washing up on a new shore where there is gladness, relief, restoration, and transformation.

### **Models of Living Faith**

Seventh-day Adventist universities and colleges need to be places where mature Christian mentors provide living models of faith. While such individuals have experienced hope and joy, they also know pain, loss, suffering, and disillusionment. Students who are seeking approval for their new, fragile, emerging selves look for this canopy of faith, a shelter where they can find confirmation, acceptance, and a sense of community. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they can undertake the work of restoration and transformation, moving beyond their doubts and losses to a new meaning and a stronger faith.

### **What Is Mentoring?**

Mentors take many forms: parent, coach, priest, host, guide, teacher, sponsor, maestro, master practitioner, spiritual director, counselor, friend, role model, advisor, advocate, confidant, scholar, and my personal favorite, "geezer." Clark writes humorously, "Latch on to the old geezers and sop up all you can from them," and concludes by saying, "the more wrinkles they have, the more stories they can tell, the more experience and wisdom they have. They have traveled enough miles to become interesting."<sup>14</sup>

Mentoring cannot be assigned, any more than one can plan a friend-



ship or demand a caring relationship. Friendships and relationships grow from common ground, mutual respect, and a willingness to be open to the other. Some of the most beneficial mentoring occurs without formal intent or even the awareness of the mentor.

The mentor is a builder, a nurturer who looks beneath the layers into the depth of the soul. A mentor sees God at work in each person's life and views each individual as possessing a rich potential. Bruno Bettelheim reminds us that with the support of a mentor, we can, indeed, survive the terror of the coming journey and undergo a transformation by moving through, not around, our fear.<sup>15</sup> Often, the mentor appears near the outset of the journey as a helper, equipping the mentee in some way

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for what is to come, serving as a midwife to help birth his or her dreams.

#### **The Mentor's Role**

The first business of the mentor is to listen to the dreams of the protégé, to his or her stories, hopes for the fu-

ture, and fears. Daloz says that you can tell a good mentor by how much he or she knows about the family and the life of the protégé. He describes listening as the mentor's most powerful intervention.<sup>16</sup> This means listening thoughtfully, responding to what one hears, and reinforcing parts of the story. It is rather like holding a mirror before the student, extending his or her own self-awareness.

Mentors invite protégés to observe their growth, acknowledge the changes, and ponder their journey. Reflection is necessary for lasting growth.

The mentor also provides vision. The Christian mentor offers a light that gives vitality, authenticity, and an inner glow. Daloz writes that "Mentors 'hang around' through transitions, a foot on either side of the gulf, they offer a hand to help swing across. By their very existence, mentors provide proof that the journey can be made, the leap taken."<sup>17</sup>

Mentors offer hope. Young adults are not looking for exhortation but for connection, nourishment, and hope. They are searching for communities where the humble and the wise learn together, where trusting strugglers lock arms with one another as they walk on together. Protégés need to hear not only of their mentors' successes but also of their pain and suffering, of the dark night of the soul. Most of all, they need to see the quiet working of the Spirit in the mentor's life.

The mentor also asks questions. Writing about her mentor, Kidd says: "When I ask my mentor . . . a question, she sometimes responds not with an answer but with an even bigger question. Sometimes my soul has to get on tiptoe just to hear it."<sup>18</sup> A fellow questioner helps the protégé to live with his or her questions, to hold onto the unknown rather than rushing into incomplete answers. It is often the patient act of living with a question that helps us to unravel the answer. Questions bend and reshape us, making our souls malleable.

### **The Path to Mentoring**

How does the educator become connected with the mentee? While most Adventist colleges and universities assign advisees, genuine mentoring often occurs outside of this relationship. Very often, a student will resonate with the soul of a teacher and begin meaningful conversations. From this, a bond is established that may last a lifetime.

Mentoring relationships can also develop from reading and responding to students in a class journal. Frequently, students who are reluctant to speak out in class will pour out their heart on paper, and this provides an opportunity for a mentoring relationship to develop.

Observe the body language of students as they walk into class; this may tell you whether they are in pain. A word at the end of class, an E-mail, a phone call, or a card recognizing the need, and assuring them of your availability can become the key to a rich mentoring relationship.

I will always remember a college professor who came to me at a difficult time in my life and said, "I think we need some time to talk." How thankful I was that the professor took the initiative to listen and guide me through that part of life's journey.

Open doors invite conversation. Leave your office door open at times during the day to let students know you are available. By arriving 10 or 15 minutes before class and lingering afterward, engaging students in dynamic conversations, you can convey the message that you are approachable and available. Sharing appropriate parts of your own life experience also helps show students that you are genuine and authentic. This process is often enriched by describing your personal encounters with God. Occasionally, a student will want to know more, and this becomes the key to a shared spiritual journey.

Are there disappointments in mentoring? Of course. Idealistic college students often look for perfect models. We cannot always be available, and we aren't perfect. However, we can be authentic, genuine, and honest. Sometimes, when we find students distancing themselves, it is wise to give them space. Other times when students pull away, they are deeply troubled and do not know how to maintain the link. This is the time to reconnect, offer support, and be available. Occasionally, after some months or years, the mentee returns to continue the relationship.

To touch the life of another is a sacred calling that requires constant dependence upon God. It is not a task to venture upon alone. When we are anchored in Christ, He grants us the ability to meet the divergent path of mentoring and become a part of our students' spiritual lives. As we assure them of our prayers and our unconditional love, asking nothing in return, we will be rewarded by seeing their growth, both professional and spiritual.

When we offer protégés time to work through questions without forcing answers, a God-given enlightenment dawns from within that is well worth the wait.

The mentor helps facilitate the intellectual development of the protégé. Often, this is an intense interactive relationship from which both the mentor and protégé benefit. This function works best in the context of a caring relationship.

When I asked college students what they respected most in a mentor, they said: one who is genuine, authentic, willing to help, one who shows compassion and encouragement. When I asked them what they

needed, the list was much longer. The item listed most frequently was the need for a good listener. They asked for reassurance, suggesting that the mentor should “guide me as I discover; do not make my discoveries for me.” They asked for mentors who were not judgmental, who looked for the good in them and trusted their intelligence. At the same time, they wanted sound advice. They were also looking for mentors who were not afraid to make mistakes or to laugh at themselves. Finally, students looked for mentors who would share their personal spiritual journey and show how knowing God has transformed their lives.

### Why Mentor?

Teaching is a relatively safe occupation. It involves the creation of a

learning environment, sharing information, and inviting participation and feedback. Mentoring is not safe. When you offer yourself as a mentor, you become vulnerable, open, and observed.

Why, then, volunteer to be a mentor? First, the mentor needs the protégé as much as the protégé needs the mentor. Mentoring changes us, just as parenting does. We thrive on meaningful interactions with the next generation. As we explore learning and faith with students, it rekindles our own fires. We see the promise in the next generation, and this gives us hope. It awakens our own tired dreams and invigorates us with re-

newed passion and vision.

In our inmost souls, we all need to be needed. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote: “Those who barter nothing of themselves become nothing.”<sup>19</sup> When a life is lived selfishly, it lacks tension, form, and direction. It is a lonely road to nowhere. That is why Erikson writes: “The adult . . . is so constituted as to need to be needed lest he suffer the mental deformation of self-absorption, in which he becomes his own infant and pet.”<sup>20</sup> He reminds us that we need to teach and mentor, not just for our students, but for ourselves as well.

Successful people rarely reach their goals alone. McGreevy writes, “For centuries it has been said that almost always, wherever independence and creativity flourish and persist and important achievements occur, there

is some other person who plays the role of mentor (or) sponsor.”<sup>21</sup> The mentor can provide us an awareness of beauty, stimulate and challenge the protégé’s potential, and encourage expansion in the aesthetic and spiritual realm, as well as in intellectual pursuits.

Throughout our lives, we want to achieve growth, creativity, and success. This is often accomplished through our vocations. Yamamoto speaks of three stages of growth in a career: Initially, the emphasis is on what we can accomplish alone. As time goes on, however, those expectations change. In mid-career, it matters more what we can do in cooperation and collaboration with others. Finally, in the mature stages of our careers, we are usually recognized not for our own accomplishments, but for what we have created through others. To be able to do this graciously, we need to see things from a higher plane, to stand back, to let go and offer our finest, knowing that our protégés will go farther than they have ever gone.<sup>22</sup>

### How Does One Mentor?

Kidd speaks of mentoring as “mindful availability”<sup>23</sup>—receiving another with a whole heart and an attentive mind. This is not natural behavior for human beings, who find themselves distracted and snared in their own agenda, standing on the sidelines rather than being present and engaged. Availability leads the mentor to accept individuals as they are, without trying to fix or cure their problems. The mentor reaches out with an open heart. Henri Nouwen calls this hospitality.<sup>24</sup> This means not only receiving others, but also being authentic with them—not hiding behind neutrality but offering ideas, opinions, and lifestyle, clearly and distinctly.

Thoreau describes this hospitality in concrete terms. He writes of sitting at a table where the food was rich, the wine abundant, but the atmosphere was cold as ice. The luxurious house



and grounds were nothing more than props. He tells of calling on a king who made him wait in the hall, comparing him to a man in Thoreau's neighborhood who lived in a hollow tree but had manners that were truly regal.<sup>25</sup> To mentor is to offer a place of hospitality where young adults are welcome to dialogue, question, or sort through the questions they bring.

Thus, the mentor is less an advisor or director than a silent supporter. Mentors must relinquish their lofty status and sense of self-importance. In its place, there must be attentiveness and acceptance, an offering of a hospitable space where students and mentors can learn and grow together. This requires a deep sense of respect for others, a recognition that God dwells in every human heart and speaks to each of us in different ways. It means looking past the neediness and asking God to reveal what is needed in the mentee's life.

Finally, the mentor is called to a re-examination of dreams so that vision may be transformed and passion

deepened. Only then is the mentor prepared to share with the protégé. It calls for a reconnection with the Master of the soul, a coming together as a community of believers, held together through a network of belonging, trust, and commitment in which a positive vision can thrive.

When a religious institution offers a safe place for students to examine their values, young adults are able to come under the canopy and unpack their faith in the presence of trusted mentors. They can then recompose their lives and form a living engagement with God. They will learn to value the wisdom of the past as they step forward to embrace the challenges of the future.

As we become aware of the needs of the young adults on our campuses, this will awaken us to our own deepest needs. We will recognize the call to faithful participation in the sacred activities of the everyday. Our vocation calls for both interdependence and dependence. Frederick Buechner calls this place of service, a "place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>26</sup> This is what young adults are looking for—a beacon to guide their future, demonstrated in the lives of faithful mentoring adults. Together, as mentors and young adults in a spiritual community, we will be open to questions, willing to grow and learn, and passionate about a shared vision of the "Commonwealth of God."<sup>27</sup> ✍



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a Distinguished Faculty Lecture given at Walla Walla College.

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### Role of the Mentor

1. Practice the art of being present and attentive, discerning what the Spirit is already doing.
2. Immerse yourself in the Word of God so that truth can impact your own life.
3. Be honest but gentle, while clinging to the vision of what the mentee can become in Christ.
4. Listen with your whole heart to what is important that is NOT being said.
5. Avoid giving advice unless it is requested.
6. Recognize that all our hunger and deep longings arise from a thirst for God..
7. Discover and share the unshakable joy that can survive life's most crushing losses.
8. Share your personal encounters with God.
9. "Guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life" (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). This can only be wrought through constant dependence upon the Giver of life.