

THE ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL FIELD EDUCATORS
BEST PRACTICE ESSAY

Fostering a Mentoring Environment

Matthew Floding

Perhaps you have made an observation similar to mine. The pastor in some settings is not the right person to mentor the intern based on the learning covenant that the student has carefully crafted. For example, an intern who recognized the need for gaining a basic level of competency in administration and management happened to be supervised by a pastor who did not care as deeply for this dimension of ministry. Her competencies lay elsewhere and she rightfully invested her time there. The intern had to seek out others to provide the level of mentoring that he hoped for. This awkward mismatch between intern interests and pastor's passions happens with regular frequency.

This led me to reflect on my first call experience. My first funeral came the second week as an ordained minister. By God's grace, the neighboring Presbyterian pastor was available and able to coach me through the experience. Soon after, a wise manager and elder in the church pulled me aside and offered to meet weekly for the first year to help me sort out my calendar. He knew that a new pastor was staring at a blank sheet of paper and needed help to organize work, self, and a young family. In relating to context and

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reading the congregation I was aided by an anthropology professor who provided me with alternative lenses to interpret what I was experiencing. I was, in fact, mentored by the church.

This is not a new pattern or practice. The New Testament provides clues indicating that the church was significant in Timothy's formation for ministry. The apostle Paul was a significant mentor, but in writing to Timothy there are others, whom Paul names, who were clearly important to Timothy's formation. His mother Lois, his grandmother Eunice, and elders are each named as important to his formation for ministry.¹ Each of us can imagine, extrapolating from our own experience, the kinds of influence each might have had on Timothy. In fact, doesn't our experience support the notion that we often grow through the influence and instruction of those further along than we are—clergy or not?

Why not make these observations explicit in a mentoring model? Why not purposefully employ the gifts of the people of God to mentor a minister-in-formation? Consider how this mentoring begins for many of us at baptism. The community of faith into which we are welcomed in baptism promise to mentor us in the faith.

*Do you promise
to instruct this child
in the truth of God's word,
in the way of salvation through Jesus Christ;
to pray for this child, to teach this child to pray;
and to train this one in Christ's way by your example,
through worship, and
in the nurture of the church?
We do, and we ask God to help us.²*

WHY A MENTORING TEAM?

Since the people of God have made these promises, it follows then that as the church nurtures and equips through a field education internship, this new context is an extension of the home congregation and is, in part, fulfilling baptismal promises.³

Seminary educators (and ATS, the accrediting agency for theological seminaries) understand that it is unrealistic to expect that seminary students can be educated for ministerial service simply by going to classes. Supervised field education experiences are required—creating places to practice

ministry and space and time for ministerial reflection on that ministry experience.⁴ Similarly, it is also unfair to think that a pastor is the only person that can or should mentor an intern in a broad range of ministerial activities.

Imagine building on existing field education structures to foster a mentoring environment. Picture a group of persons within a congregation who have responded to a call, based on recognized giftedness and service, to join a team to participate in the formation of a soon-to-be-minister. This would be an affirmation of scriptural teachings about the nature of the church. For example, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Employing a gifted and called team addresses two additional concerns that field educators struggle with. One has been previously alluded to, namely, that it is unrealistic to expect that the supervising pastor possess all of the gifts, time, and passion necessary to mentor in all areas of ministry in a consistent manner. Secondly, lay support teams or committees often wonder how best to engage their seminarian. This approach removes ambiguity about one's role. Each one serves as a mentor in an area of his or her recognized giftedness and service as well as reflecting with their student about her or his ministerial experience, providing helpful feedback and praying for him or her.

WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

The congregation or ministry site provides a gift of inestimable worth to a seminary student: a place to practice ministry and space to reflect on that practice in an intentional mentoring relationship with pastor(s) and, in this model, persons of recognized giftedness committed to participation on a ministerial mentoring team. The lay members of this team do not replace the pastor(s), but contribute their unique offering while supporting and enriching the whole experience. Should there be concern that the model leans heavily on laypersons engaged in this level of mentoring? In her book, *Becoming the Pastor You Hope to Be*, Barbara Blodgett makes this relevant comment about providing helpful feedback, based on her observations while directing the field education program at Yale Divinity School.

Mentoring Team Model

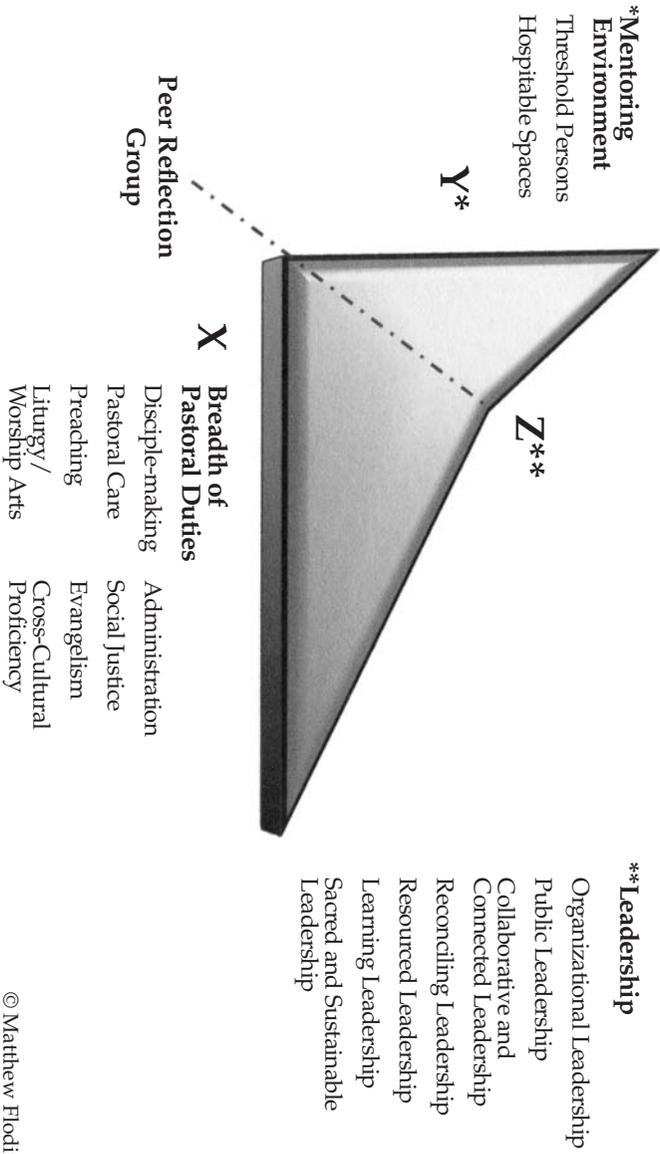


Figure. Mentoring Model

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It was interesting to note...that without exception,...non-clergy individuals gave more straightforward assessments that avoided praise-laden language...They also provided more detail.⁵

In the drawing above, the congregation and members of the mentoring team are represented on the **Y axis**. This picture will, in all likelihood, look different in a non-congregational setting. It portrays the *mentoring environment* that nurtures gifts and call. There are two key components.

The first is the *hospitable space* that welcomes the learning-serving participation of the seminary student in all aspects of the church's ministry. Breadth of experience is critical to the formation of a person's ministerial identity. Consider this example of hospitality. Most churches value good preaching. Imagine an internship site that only allowed an intern to preach in his or her senior year. This presents a real challenge for the soon-to-be minister to develop what most in the church believe to be an important ministry competency.

The second concept is *threshold persons*. It may be helpful to think of threshold persons in this way. Interns are on the threshold of discovery but need a guide to show the way, support them in their efforts, and to reflect with them on their experience in order to learn and return to the activity with increased competency and confidence. These are trustworthy and transformational relationships with significant persons.

The concepts of hospitable space and threshold persons are derived and adapted from the research of Laurent Parks Daloz, Sharon Daloz Parks, et al, and published in *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*. They discovered that a capacity for connected, reflective, creative, strategic, and committed engagement with complex issues is nurtured in environments that share these qualities. If this is so, seminary and divinity school students who will certainly face complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity in the ministries to which they are called will benefit from participation in these kinds of spaces and with these people (for more on this concept, see appendix 1).

The **X axis** represents the breadth of pastoral competencies. It is not a complete list. In her new book, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, Kathleen Cahalan lists six ministries.⁶ Christie Cozad Neuger addresses seven ministry areas in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*.⁷ Those listed in the diagram are suggestive in order to consider how one might populate a mentoring team around particular areas of competence. Depending upon the requirements of the field education program, the team will have more or

less time to participate in the intern's formation experience. This will require of the team creativity, and perhaps inventiveness, in providing consistent support across the spectrum of competencies.

Consider this example. Perhaps you are the person on the team who will mentor the intern in the area of administration and management. You manage a non-profit organization and so come with a wealth of skills and experience. You choose a useful companion book, John Wimberly's *The Business of the Church*, in which the author explores managing congregational systems, personnel, facilities, and church finances.⁸ You can walk with your intern by engaging this book together, design hands-on experiences and schedule appropriate conversations with various leaders so that the intern gains a basic level of competency in administration and management for a ministry context.

Your intern will also be carefully developing learning covenants in collaboration with a mentor and field educator as part of the field education program (this could include the administration example above). These will likely be areas of special interest to the intern. The areas not chosen by the intern can be creatively engaged by others on the mentoring team. The net result should yield growth towards a basic level of competency in a broad range of ministerial responsibilities.

This leaves the **Z Axis**, which addresses leadership skills. Not only do ministers need to be skilled and smart in lots of interesting ways, they also need to be apt leaders. ATS president Daniel Aleshire has often remarked that upon ordination a minister is immediately regarded as a leader. This has been identified in most schools as an important attribute to cultivate.

Good leadership is situational and exercised personally and thus begins with a person who possesses keen self and social awareness. The Z Axis pictures leaders who are secure in their identity and are therefore able to celebrate and receive from other's giftedness. This is important because, while not explicit in the diagram though strongly implied in the category of sacred and sustainable leadership, good leadership has first learned the virtue of followership. A Christian leader is called and therefore follows the leader, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. "He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:4)." Appendix 2 describes in more detail each of the seven aspects of leadership listed here.

Each of these will be practiced in the exercise of ministerial leadership and are good beginning points in reflecting on ministry experience: "What kind of leadership did you find yourself exercising in this situation?"

For example, imagine a mentor working with an intern helping a church consider how to undertake a food pantry ministry. The mentor might ask a good question like: “Who are the stakeholders?” In mapping this out in expanding concentric circles, other churches or ministries in the neighborhood might be named. The intern would be exercising *collaborative and connected leadership* by communicating plans with other leaders and agency heads in the community and inviting their participation. She or he would be exercising *organizational leadership* by suggesting a structure that empowered those being served to serve and give leadership for the ministry. Intentionally reflecting on these with the intern makes provision for a richer understanding of how leadership is exercised. These examples also underscore that, on a human level, any ministerial skill requires its twin—leadership—to be effective.

Notice that the **Z axis** extends beyond the shaded portion of the diagram. This extension of the leadership axis is a reminder that what a mentoring team will contribute to an intern’s learning may have a larger impact than one can imagine. In most field education programs students on internship join together in facilitated peer groups and reflect on what they are learning. Often this is done in the form of discussing case studies or critical incidents that each write on leadership experiences they have had. These peer reflection groups provide the opportunity for multiplying the learning benefit that a mentoring team has had with their intern.

This proposal to foster a mentoring environment by employing teams to supervise and mentor interns may reflect what, in reality, often happens as a student becomes part of a congregation or ministry. Making this explicit will allow for intentional training and equipping of these mentoring teams as a component in the field education program. It will also affirm the truth that the people of God have an important role in the formation of persons for ministry. In a covenantal understanding it will even mean the joyful and satisfying keeping of promises.

Finally, two additional consequences may result. First, ministers entering their first call may be more likely to seek out mentors to continue growing in proficiency. If the experience of mentoring during internship is positive, there will be a greater likelihood that a new minister will continue this practice. Second, ministers who have experienced a mentoring team approach—including gifted laypersons—may quite naturally seek to call out, affirm and celebrate the gifts of the people of God throughout their ministry career for the good of the church and the world.

Appendix 1 Mentoring Environments*

Mentoring

Laurent Daloz, et al, defines mentoring as “a somewhat more experienced person of either gender who enables young adults to make the transition from the adolescent’s dependence upon (and resistance to) authority, to the adult’s ability to include him or herself in the arena of authority and responsibility.

Threshold Persons

Trustworthy and transformational relationships with significant persons—*threshold persons*—within a hospitable space foster maturity and nurture a capacity for commitment that endures in the midst of life’s complexity.

Here are some examples:

- Loving parents who model a faith that works through tangible acts of love, mercy, justice, and witness;
- Welcoming and diverse neighbors, teachers, and coaches that take a personal interest over time or at critical moments;
- Mentors who challenge, support, and inspire;
- Kindred spirits who provide good company and invigorate vision.

It may be helpful to think of it this way. Mentees are on the threshold of discovery but they need a guide to show the way, or support them in their efforts, or to reflect with them on their experience in order to learn and return to the activity with greater competency and confidence.

Hospitable Spaces

Here are some examples:

- A home where trust and healthy independence are nourished, hospitality is practiced, and the wider world is present.
- A neighborhood where it is safe to explore.
- Intensive learning or work environments in which group interaction is cultivated, responsibility is learned from shared tasks, and each person’s contribution is celebrated.
- Institutional environments (including churches and seminaries) that build community, foster a variety of forms of learning, cultivate a larger awareness, and teach that it is possible to make a difference.

*The concept of mentoring environments is explored in Laurent Parks Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

Appendix 2

Leadership Elements**

*The measure of leadership is not the quality of the head, but the tone of the body.
The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers.*

—Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*⁹

- **Organizational Leadership:** Able to clearly describe collective goals so that each member understands any initiative's purpose and direction and is empowered to determine what to do and why. The leader is skillful in strategic planning and developing clear action plans in collaboration with key stakeholders.
- **Public Leadership:** Able to interact with, speak to, and provide leadership in the broader, non-congregational community.
- **Collaborative and Connected Leadership:** Able to cultivate congregations and ministries committed to God's work in the world by encouraging, equipping, empowering, and celebrating members and their accomplishments. The leader is committed to be connected with peers and mentors for personal support and guidance, and seeks out multi-church/ministry partnerships.
- **Reconciling Leadership:** Able to effectively engage and resolve conflict and to reconcile conflicting parties.
- **Resourced Leadership:** Able to integrate Scripture, theology and tradition, local history, and personal stories in addressing ongoing leadership challenges with pastoral imagination.
- **Learning Leadership:** Able to persistently engage in ongoing formal and informal learning through reading, writing, reflecting, and conferencing with colleagues and peers. Capable of a self and social-awareness that benefits from feedback.
- **Sacred and Sustainable Leadership:** Able to engage in practices through a Rule of Life that grounds leadership in a deep spiritual rootedness that is life-giving, "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season..."

** With additions and adapted from Kyle Small, "Successful Leadership in the Early Years of Ministry: Reflections for Leadership Formation in Theological Education," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011).

NOTES

1. 2 Timothy 1:4-6.
2. From James R. Esther and Donald J. Bruggink, eds., *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1987).
3. For the reader who does not practice infant baptism, it may be helpful to think instead of the host church embracing its call to make disciples and nurture gifts and call.
4. Emily Click provides a rich description of this method of reflection which includes giving attention to theological, personal and competency concerns in chapter three, "Ministerial Reflection," in Matthew Floding, ed., *Welcome to Theological Field Education* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).
5. Barbara Blodgett, *Becoming the Pastor You Hope to Be: Four Practices for Improving Ministry* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2011), 23.
6. Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010). Cahalan includes in her book: teaching, preaching, leading worship and prayer, pastoral care, social ministry and administration.
7. Christie Cozad Neuger, *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996). Neuger includes in her book: Christian education, pastoral care, preaching, pastoral counseling, administration, ethics and mentoring.
8. John Wimberly, *The Business of the Church: The Uncomfortable Truth that Faithful Ministry Requires Effective Management* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).
9. Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1989).