New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

A RESPONSE TO
"MENTORING IN A SEMINARY ENVIRONMENT"

Ola Farmer Lenaz Faculty Lecture

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By

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Introduction

The presenter of "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment" has advocated that the seminary fully utilize the mentoring process to help achieve its mission. Three applications of mentoring were discussed which could be implemented within the seminary context: formal mentoring of students by faculty mentors, informal mentoring of students by faculty, and faculty peer-mentoring.[1]

In his paper, Thomas Strong notes both the values and challenges of the mentoring process. It touches upon the need for professors to go a step further than the classroom in order to impact the lives of students.[2] It suggests that mentoring can be implemented in various ways within the seminary context as a means to balance theory with application in preparing students for ministry vocations. Strong states: "If one of the purposes of theological education is to aid in the formation of the person who is to be the minister, the shift in education must continue to include a focus upon the person and not merely upon the dispensing of information."[3]

In an information-based economy, value is placed on knowledge. The academic community has implicitly held the *a priori* belief that the mastery of course content by a student is the formula for success. Even if this is not the belief of teachers in general, the assumption is present by default as evidenced in the structures of student evaluation in the academic environment. Indeed, much of the evaluation process related to higher education is based upon the student's demonstrated ability to recount the content of the course. Excellence in education,

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[1]L. Thomas Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 15.

[2]Ibid., 6.

[3]Ibid.

according to Patricia Cross, however, is not so much related to how much is learned or even how well a subject is understood. Rather, excellence is dependent on how learning changes the learner.[4]

The educational process for seminary students may be seen as a journey. In the course of this pilgrimage, students may benefit from interaction with professor-mentors who have struggled with the potential issues they may face in the course of their personal, academic, and spiritual development. The "shift in education" to which Strong refers is rooted in how professors see their respective roles in the education process. As mentors, they become guides. They appear near the beginning of a particular journey as helpers and equippers for what is to come for their students. To use Laurent Daloz's analogy, a mentor becomes a sort of "midwife" to the student's dreams.[5]   Within the seminary context, mentors may "provide encouragement, guidance, and accountability."[6]   They may also be helpful as the student assimilates and applies the knowledge gained in the classroom to practical application, both personally and vocationally.

Extending the concept of mentoring to a broader application within the seminary environment, the presenter suggests that mentors may also be helpful in integrating new faculty members into the life and community of the seminary. The mentoring process can be used to

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[4]K. Patricia Cross, foreward to *Effective Teaching and Mentoring: Realizing the Transformational Power of Adult Learning Experiences*, by Laurent A. Daloz (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1986), x.

[5]Ibid., 17.

[6]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 3.

help new faculty members contribute more effectively toward achieving the goals of the institution.

The Need for Mentoring in a Seminary Environment

The faculty of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, under the leadership of President Charles S. Kelley and Provost Steve Lemke, has developed and adopted a new curriculum for the Master of Divinity degree which is competency-based. Among the various competencies addressed in this curriculum of study is Spiritual and Character Formation, the goal of which is to equip the student "to provide moral leadership by modeling and mentoring Christian character and devotion."[7]

Studies in the field indicate that this is a component of minister development that has been missing far too often. In a survey conducted among Southern Baptist churches in Illinois, Sylvan Knobloch discovered three principal reasons for forced-termination of pastors: lack of relational skills, lack of leadership skills, and problems with character.[8] He indicated that the data from the survey pointed to a strong need for ministers who were "persons of integrity who would take initiative, have vision for leading, and demonstrate a strong congruence between what they teach and what they are."[9] Since seminaries are the institutions within the Southern Baptist denominational structure charged with the training of individuals for vocational ministry, it

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[7]New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, "The Seven Compentencies Now Guiding Curriculum at New Orleans Seminary," *The Gatekeeper* 28, no. 27 (29 March 1999): 2.

[8]Sylvan Knobloch, Director of Church-Minister Relations Services, Illinois Baptist Convention, interview by author, telephone, 8 August 1998.

[9]Ibid.

would seem that the task should focus attention on the minister's character development in addition to academic training. As Gordon MacDonald observes: "Today, what passes for people development happens in a class room, and the certification of a person is by diploma from an institution rather than the stamp of approval from an overseer, a mentor. The criteria for the judgment of people usually rests upon knowledge rather than wisdom, achievement rather than character, profit rather than creativity. "[10]

Mentoring provides the vehicle through which an integration of textbook and real-life experiences can take place. The development of people is a holistic process which includes "the sculpting of people-values, the shaping of response patterns to crisis and opportunity, the acquisition of habits of work, the enlargement of one's hunger for God, and the expansion of our view of creation."[11]

Strong also notes that the processes used in the seminary training environment may later be used as a model by students in the leadership they provide in the local church setting. The suggestion is made that students may transfer into practice not only much of what they learn but the *methods* by which they learned. Strong states: "If theological education is impersonal, the ministry of students who are trained in this type of impersonal environment may reflect this same approach to ministry."[12] If the possibility exists that the medium can become the message, it will be important that seminary training be personal and life-changing. This may allow for those

[10]Gordon MacDonald, foreword to *The Fine Art of Mentoring,* by Ted Engstrom (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishers, Inc., 1989), x.

[11]Ibid.*,* xii.

[12]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 7.

effects to transfer to the local church. Mentoring, as Strong suggests, may be one solution to bridge the gap between theory and practice and offer a more complete education.[13]

A Response to the Proposed Mentoring of New Students

by Faculty Members

Though much of mentoring occurs on an informal level, Strong points out that a formal mentoring process in the seminary environment could be developed which would aid students in their spiritual and personal development. He suggests that new seminary students be assigned to small groups which would be under the direction of a faculty member. These students would be enrolled in a course with specific requirements to be met by each student and led by a designated faculty mentor. [14]

The success of such a program, as noted by Strong, is incumbent upon several factors: willingness of faculty to view the task of mentoring as more than the delivery of information, qualifications of the faculty-mentor, training of faculty members in the areas of small group dynamics, course structure, development of processes for dealing with difficulties in the mentoring process, credit for faculty load for faculty-mentors, process of assignment and orientation for students, care provided for faculty mentors, and a thorough evaluation of the program and its faculty-mentors. The responder sees these factors as specific tasks related to three distinct groups within the seminary context: administration, faculty-mentors, and students.

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[13]Ibid., 8.

[14]Students in the Master of Divinity program at NOBTS will be required to take two courses, *Spiritual Formation 1 and 2*, which have been adopted by the faculty for implementation during the 1999-2000 academic year.

Tasks for Administration

Tasks of the administration might include the selection and matching of mentors with mentorands, the training of faculty mentors, the provision of intervention guidelines during the process of formal mentoring, and an evaluation of the program and mentors. Some issues for the administration arising from these tasks may need to be addressed. First, what is the best process for selecting faculty mentors? Should faculty members volunteer, be nominated by administrators, or be conscripted into service? Are enough mentors available to provide the resources of guiding the course for all new students in small groups? How will the faculty be assigned, especially in lieu of the many characteristics a mentor should possess in order to be effective in the role?[15] Are faculty members to be self-nominated? If not, and they are asked to serve, would they have the opportunity to respond favorably or decline, given their perceived readiness for the role? How would current teaching load factor into the assignment as an issue relative to the time available in the faculty member's schedule for leading a group?

Second, how could a reasonably similar experience be gained by all students in such a program? Although the process would naturally vary depending upon students, faculty, and specific issues involved, a thorough orientation for faculty mentorands would be necessary. The orientation should include clear expectations of the mentoring process and the course objectives. An orientation would also offer clearly defined student outcomes for having participated in such a course and a clearly communicated process for the course. Because it is an academic course and credit must be gained for purposes of degree requirements, another challenge relates to

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[15]Effectiveness is discussed in "Mentoring in the Seminary Environment" (7-10) as dependent upon a number of characteristics a mentor should possess.

student evaluation. How should a student be "graded" for dealing with spiritual- and life-development issues? One solution may be a "pass/fail" evaluation based on completion of specific measurable course objectives. It should be recognized that much of what happens in a mentoring environment can be evaluated objectively, but much cannot due to the nature of "progress" in some domains. Applied music teachers and athletic coaches alike have struggled with this concept in evaluating those under their tutelage. Since spiritual growth is process-oriented, an objective evaluation must relate to the process itself. Students may be evaluated on the basis of completion of specific assignments.

Another administrative issue deals with the matching of mentor with mentorand. How will students be selected for small groups? Will they be assigned, or will they select a specific group based upon the scheduled time or who is leading it? The importance of the matching process is noted by English: "Effective matching is extremely challenging and will require considerable attention to the designated characteristics of the mentor and mentee, beginning with their potential for compatibility."[16] A further consideration would be the development of procedures to identify and adjust the pairing of mentor/mentorand when mismatches occur. Other procedures should be developed that inform how disruptive behaviors and difficult mentorands will be dealt with.[17]

Another important administrative issue is the need for an evaluation of the program, its processes, and the mentors. Feedback from both mentors and mentorands at the close of the

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[16]Leona M. English, *Mentoring in Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1998), 130.

[17]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 16.

process should be an important part of the future development of the program. Due to the unique nature of this course, it is suggested that the evaluation instruments be tailored specifically to this course rather than using the generic course evaluation form. Acquiring detailed feedback from all participants may be important in order to improve results of the program.

Tasks for Faculty Mentors

Tasks of faculty mentors might include a self-evaluation for mentor-readiness, participation in training sessions, involvement with students through the mentoring process of the course, and an evaluation of the program at the conclusion.

For the faculty mentor, additional issues may need to be confronted. First, the mentoring environment may provide a more personal interaction of students with the faculty member. The professor whose life is open to students in the mentoring process is subject to close scrutiny by the students with whom he or she is working. The very nature of this framework may seem at odds with the model of "expert teacher" who wishes to remain the "expert" behind the lectern. Providing leadership in a spiritual mentoring environment, however, places the teacher in the role of lead-learner.

Second, since the mentoring process is relational, what happens when a student does not wish to be mentored? One of the variables for success, according to Tim Stafford, is "the eagerness of the person to be mentored."[18] In a situation in which the mentorand is meeting with a pre-selected mentor within a group of other students in order to satisfy academic requirements for a degree, the "eagerness" (or *teachability*) of the mentorand cannot necessarily be predicted.

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[18]Engstrom, *The Fine Art of Mentoring*, 118.

This imposed setting could possibly diminish the effectiveness of such a relationship. Further

issues may surface if a student is resistant to the process itself, and this could affect the small

group dynamics. Issues such as these highlight the need for training in small group leadership.

If mentoring, as Strong suggests, is a process which requires a willingness of faculty

mentorands to give of their time in relation-building with mentorands,[19] what impact would this

have for faculty already teaching heavy loads? English argues that the mentors' personal and

professional investment in the mentoring relationship needs to be recognized, though there is

some debate over the most effective type of acknowledgment.[20] It would seem appropriate, as

Strong suggests, that the faculty mentor be encouraged by the recognition of the administration

that mentoring is a valid part of the teaching ministry and, as such, could be reflected on year-end

faculty evaluations.[21]

Tasks for Students

Tasks for the students might include participation in orientation, conscientious

participation in the learning activities through the course, and evaluation of the course and its

impact upon personal growth. Possible issues for students are those relating to openness to the

mentoring process, compatibility with mentors, and experiencing a positive small group

environment which would foster personal and spiritual growth. Murray and Owen suggest using

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[19]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 10.

[20]English, *Mentoring in Religious Education*, 158.

[21]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 19.

personality inventories in order to match mentors with mentorands.[22] English suggests that

mentor and mentorand self-assessment, along with individual interviews with the mentoring

team, may yield enough information to make good determinations in matching mentors with

mentorands. English goes on to say that matching issues are "very significant in religious

education where a shortage of religious education mentors is likely to exist."[23] Regarding

demographic considerations, she suggests that program planners remain open-minded about

possible matches, "given that little convincing research exists to support setting limits and

restrictions."[24]

<div align="center">Informal Mentoring</div>

A second mentoring process advocated by Strong is that faculty members assume the

role of informal mentors when the possibility arises.[25] The responder believes that many faculty

members at NOBTS already engage in this type of ministry with specific students, although the

depth of those mentoring relationships may be affected by the time constraints and motivation of

faculty members to pursue them.

Many ministerial leaders acknowledge that specific mentors have had an impact upon

their lives. In the experience of the responder, much was learned from specific mentors during

seminary training in which interacting with those faculty mentors took place both inside and

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[22]Margo Murray and Marna Owen, *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring: How to Facilitate an Effective Mentor Program* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 144-45.

[23] English, *Mentoring in Religious Education*, 135.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Strong, "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment," 18.

outside the classroom. A great deal of learning was gained by observing the life and work of the

mentor and by posing questions born out of current issues.

The responder agrees with Strong that informal faculty-student mentoring has enormous

potential for helping students achieve greater personal and spiritual growth. The idea will be

fostered, however, only as faculty members accept the role of mentor as a part of the ministry of

teaching and intentionally approach the task of informal nurturing of students. The fact that a

formal mentoring process is being instigated through faculty-led spiritual formation groups may

encourage more mentoring of students by faculty on an informal level.

A Response to Peer-Mentoring by Faculty

The third area mentioned by Strong in which mentoring could be incorporated into a

seminary setting is that of peer mentoring among faculty members. His recommendation is to

pair those faculty members who have experience at the institution with new incoming faculty

members in order to facilitate a smooth introduction and integration into the seminary

environment. Although the recommendation focuses on the emotional and psychological support

for the new faculty member during a time of transition to the seminary community, the scope of

peer mentoring could also extend to professional development in teaching and research as well.

According to Thayer, peer mentoring is a common means of building a community of

scholars in the academic environment. He notes that senior faculty could model teaching

methodology to junior faculty members. Inviting another faculty member to observe one's

teaching has the potential to improve the observer's teaching as it "provides a mirror for

improving teaching methods."[26] With some orientation toward the mentoring process, senior

faculty could guide their newer counterparts with clearly defined goals of integration and

assimilation into the life and work of the institution and division. Having access to experienced

persons in a mentoring relationship could be of great value to the newer faculty members in

terms of their discovery of institutional expectations regarding their newly-acquired roles. An

understanding of the seminary culture, including issues which might be outside the scope of the

faculty manual could be fostered through peer-mentoring.

This process could extend beyond the professional domain to include the new faculty

member's family as well. The new family will need to gather a great deal of information and

create a network as they move to a new community. Information about schools, shopping,

medical facilities, and many other areas will be sought. Having a program in place to assist new

faculty and their families informally would go a long way toward integrating them into the

seminary community.

An example of this type of mentoring is found among Southern Baptist missionaries

who attend language school in Costa Rica. Organized as a "Big Brother/Sister" program,

language school students who have lived in San Jose, Costa Rica for a few months become

mentors for incoming students.[27] The new students benefit from being assigned a Big

Brother/Sister, essentially a peer mentor who will help the family through orientation to the new

environment. Feeling particularly vulnerable due to language limitations, new arrivals find an

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[26]David D. Thayer, "Riding the Whirlwind: The Community of Scholars as a Response
to the Changing Face of Theological Education," *Theological Education* 31, no. 2 (1995): 72.

[27]The author and his family participated in this program as mentorands, and later as
mentors, during 1989 and found the program to be helpful in adjusting to life in another culture.

immediate comfort in knowing that someone is available to help them in the transition. Afterward, the mentorands become mentors for the next group of arriving students. The process of transition becomes much easier as a result of the Big Brother/Sister program

Conclusion

The presenter of "Mentoring in a Seminary Environment" has suggested three forms of mentoring which could be done in the context of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and other similar institutions: formal and informal faculty-mentoring of students, and faculty peer-mentoring. The process of formal mentoring at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary will begin to be implemented in the 1999-2000 academic year through the course *Spiritual Formation*. The successful implementation of formal and informal faculty mentoring of students will be dependent upon the investment of resources by the administration and individual faculty-mentors. It should include a thorough orientation to the formal mentoring process.

Strong has touched upon the heartbeat of theological education; that is, providing men and women with an environment within which they may integrate theory with practice regarding ministry in the local church. As the presenter has advocated, mentoring is a powerful tool to enable seminaries to accomplish this task through direct and personal interaction of faculty members in the lives of their students.

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