

The Congregation as Mentor

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(Mentoring: A Toolkit for Supervisor-Mentors in Theological Field Education, Senior and Floding)

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.ⁱ

The Church Mentors

I think my church tried to keep faith with their baptismal promises. I remember Mrs. Nelson teaching us about God who calls all Christians to ministry through the story of Samuel's call in my second grade Sunday School class. I remember vividly the passion with which our scout leader, Mr. Peterson, celebrated the Creator God at campfires and instilled in us a creation care ethic: "Pack it in, pack it out boys. Leave only footprints!" Later I received sage advice from elders as I discerned my call to ordained ministry during college. In field education the host church, by extension, honored those baptismal promises in their patient participation in my

formation. As a newly-minted clergy the church continued to be faithful in my ministerial formation. The church's members, the funeral director and a neighboring Presbyterian minister guided me through my first funeral two weeks after being installed. Sometime later, a wise elder drew me aside and counseled me to value people and process as much as the wonderful program goals I was pushing. On and on it goes.

When you reflect on your formation do you see God's people at work?

Recall how many times you have stood before God and the parent(s) of a little one being baptized and made promises like those above. Think of it, your pastoral intern was once the precious child for whom a congregation made promises. Your role is a significant part of the fulfillment of those promises! But not alone.

In the same way that it is unrealistic to expect that seminary students can be educated for ministerial service simply by going to classes, it would also be unfair to think that a pastor or ministerial leader is the only person that should mentor an intern in a broad range of ministerial activities. In fact, it would be denying 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.

Theological education is best done by the whole church—not just the ordained clergy and professors. Imagine a team of lay persons committed to mentoring your seminary student by engaging in intentional practices of ministerial reflection and vocational discernment. The theological field education program you collaborate with strongly encourages this. The seminary or divinity school may call the group Lay Mentors or a Lay Committee.

What Does it Look like?

Your congregation or other ministerial setting is providing a gift of inestimable worth to a seminary student: the place to practice ministry and spaces to reflect on that practice with you and members or participants in your context.

Laurent Parks Daloz, *et al* introduced two helpful concepts related to mentoring in their book *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*.ⁱⁱ

The first is the *hospitable space* that welcomes the learning-serving participation of your seminary student in all aspects of the congregation's or non-profit's ministry. This is critical to the formation of a person's ministerial identity. Try this thought experiment. Most congregations value preaching. Imagine that your seminary intern is only allowed to preach in their senior year, once per semester. This was the policy of one congregation. How does this policy help this soon-to-be-minister develop what most believe to be an important ministry competency? Sorry for the rhetorical question!

In our "Litany of Beginnings" (for use in congregational settings) at Duke Divinity School we try to make this notion of hospitable space explicit. Here's a portion of our recommended litany.

Ministerial Intern: I have come to serve and learn with this congregation.

Lay Mentors: We have been called as a congregation to be for (student's name) a teaching and learning community.

People: We welcome you into our community, (student's name), as God's representative. Our homes, our hospitals and nursing homes, our classrooms and programs, our sanctuary, our lives, are all open to you.

The second concept is *threshold persons*. These are trustworthy and transformational relationships with significant persons. It may be helpful to think of it this way. Your intern is on

the threshold of discovery, but they need a guide to show the way, support them in their efforts, and to reflect on their experience in order to learn and return to the activity with increased confidence and competency. You can probably name half a dozen persons easily from your context that could be that kind of person for your student.

Daloz and his colleagues discovered that a capacity for connection, for reflective, creative, strategic and committed engagement with complex issues is nurtured in environments that share these two qualities. If this is so, seminary and divinity school students who will certainly face complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity in their ministry will benefit by participation in these kinds of spaces and with these kinds of persons.

You can form a team of these persons. Three is a great number. Consider carefully who would best complement you in this mentoring opportunity. Can your seminarian read a balance sheet? No problem. Invite a CPA to share their knowledge and skills with your student. Would they like to grow in caregiving skills? Wonderful. You can provide pastoral care opportunities and mentor your student and extend that by inviting a therapist to serve as a lay mentor. They can explore additional dimensions of caregiving with your student. Teaching? Invite the middle-school master teacher to team teach with your student. You get the idea. By populating a group of Lay Mentors with committed members from your ministerial setting your student experiences the “varieties of services, but the same Lord.”

For the persons you recruit, this could be one of the most deeply satisfying ministry commitments they have ever made.

It also underscores an important value that you’ve learned as a ministerial leader. Do not go it alone. Do not try to be a hero. To this point Samuel Wells writes,

Of those sixty-four references to saints in the New Testament, every one is in the plural. Saints are never alone. They assume, demand, require community—a special kind of community, the communion of saints. Heroes have learned to depend on themselves; saints learn to depend on God and the community of faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

Your student has the opportunity to experience the communion of saints. This in turn can encourage them to be non-defensive as a ministerial leader and empower them to lean into the “varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.”

Students Report^{iv}

Students complete evaluations at the end of their field education experience. In ours they evaluate Self, Supervisor-Mentor, and Site. Related to the site there are a series of numerically scored questions like,

- This community helped bring clarity to my call, gifts, and pastoral identity.
- This community is a “teaching community” where my competencies were cultivated.

Some speak directly to the role of the Lay Mentors.

- The Lay Mentors took an interest in what I hoped to practice and learn about ministry.

Then there is space for a personal statement. Here are five.

- My Lay Mentors were very encouraging of me throughout the summer. Each were intentional about asking questions, sharing affirmations, and suggesting areas for growth. This went a long way in making me feel supported in my ministry. The entire congregation was very hospitable. From the first day to the last, they made me feel like part of their church family by including me in their lives, inviting me to dinner or other events, and sharing with me their joys and struggles. If the congregation had told me they had been helping form interns for 50 years, I would have believed it; that’s how second-nature it is for them to welcome in strangers, love them well, and form them for Christian service. It is absolutely necessary that this community continue to be a place where students are formed for ministry.
- I found the corporate environment of this non-profit to be wonderfully educational. This context allowed me to reconsider my own vision of what church administration and finances should look like. I loved getting to learn more about publishing, distribution, marketing, writing, editing, pastoral care, and everything in between. I learned more

about compassion and pastoral care here than I have ever learned inside the walls of a church. This non-profit is an incredible place filled with beautiful, highly educated, brilliant, and caring people.

- I have so loved this community! They are extremely active and committed to serving their community in the name of Jesus. My critique of them is also one of their greatest strengths: they are very capable on their own. I sometimes learned of ministry opportunities after the congregation had already completed the tasks. This seems like a good problem to have! I think they had to slow down to make space for me to practice! James was especially helpful in navigating the organizational side of ministry and learning how to manage or work with it. They are a wonderful and supportive bunch, they just move very quickly!
- All four Lay Mentors were kind, hospitable, welcoming and generous. I took note and was blessed to see lay leadership modeled so well. I felt as though each walked alongside me and my ministry competencies were sharpened and nurtured, especially teaching. I experienced the joy of a great teacher. No wonder she's been doing it for more than twenty years!
- I loved being placed in this agency. This agency provides multidimensional and nuanced perspectives of ministry and the praxis of ministry outside of four walls. This placement will open the eyes of Divinity students, if they allow it, to injustice and oppression right in our backyard. It will challenge students to reconsider what "welcoming the neighbor" actually looks like in the field. The staff taught and modeled so many skills that engaged a variety of publics theologically. I will be a better advocate for it. I highly recommend this placement for future students.

As you read these you can sense the character of these ministries. Hospitable spaces welcome student to formational possibilities. Threshold persons stand ready to make experiences of all kinds accessible, to coach, and to cheer their student on. Your student will experience the communion of saints forming them for ministry. You can make it so in your ministerial context!

ⁱ This liturgy for infant baptism comes from the Reformed Church in America. For those practicing believers baptism it may be helpful to frame this within the Church's commitment to disciple and empower for ministry all baptized believers.

ⁱⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 44.

^{iv} Statements from Duke Divinity School students evaluating their placements, edited to preserve confidentiality and used with permission.