

Mentoring for Ministry in Christian Traditions

John Senior¹

Mentoring for ministry in Christian traditions is the intentional joining of two vocational journeys in which a seasoned practitioner, drawing on their wisdom, experience, and expertise, aids a novice minister as they learn to live more fully into God's calling on their lives. The contours of mentoring are as complex and diverse as the vocational journeys joined together in mentoring relationships. One foundational theological trope resonates in Christian approaches to mentoring for ministry, namely, that God is a God of life. Suffering and death, while tragic and painful, are finally penultimate realities. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, suffering and death give way to new and abundant life, which is the ultimate condition of human experience.¹

The context of mentoring for ministry in Christian traditions is often shared lay or professional ministry experience. The mentor has worked in the same or similar ministry settings as the novice. Through intentional reflection on experience, the mentor shares their wisdom and expertise in ways that support the mentee as they navigate their own vocational journey.

Ministry in Christian traditions is not simply a job that can be atomized into a set of tasks. Rather, ministry is a way of being in the world that entails an ongoing formation of the self. Ministry is always a process of becoming for all who are called to it, seasoned ministers and novices alike. Of course, ministers do perform distinctive professional practices (preaching, worship leadership, pastoral care, Christian education, etc.) as well as practices that have analogs in other professional contexts (organizational leadership and administration, community organizing, fundraising, etc.). But these practices are not mere performances or tasks. They are always also expressions of a self who inhabits the world in a particular way.

Christian ministry as a particular way of being in the world has distinctive features. Through practices of discernment, ministers orient their sense of self and purpose around God's call to participate in the work of repair and reconciliation that God is about in the world. Discernment implies an openness to growth and change that emerges from the ministers' faithful attention to God's ongoing call both to them and the

John Senior is Assistant Dean of Vocational Formation and Director of the Art of Ministry Program at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Email: seniorje@wfu.edu.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry
 ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)
 © Copyright 2023 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
 All Rights Reserved

communities they serve. Ministers view and interpret the world through theological lenses that anticipate renewed and abundant life as the ultimate condition of creaturely experience, more real than suffering and death, and affirm that the community gathered as the body of Christ is the ultimate condition of human flourishing. Ministers are aware of the presence and work of God in all things, particularly in the lives of marginalized neighbors.

Much more could be said about Christian ministry as a way of being in the world. The implication of this view for the work of mentoring for ministry is that the latter cannot be reduced to the mentor's advice about technique, leadership strategy, or career development, among other pragmatic considerations. Rather, mentoring for ministry in Christian traditions is fundamentally an invitation for the experienced practitioner to join the vocational journey of a novice. Skillful mentors do not attempt to make novices over in their own image. Rather, drawing on their wisdom and expertise, skillful mentors support the novice as they explore the contours of their own vocational journey.

Because ministry is a formational process, a process of becoming, rather than simply a job or set of tasks, all ministers, seasoned ministers and novices alike, must be open to growth. Openness to growth means that ministers inevitably encounter conditions that threaten to impede or limit growth. At the heart of mentoring for ministry in the Christian tradition is the work of accompanying persons as they wrestle with the challenges of vocational formation. Mentors walk with novices as they encounter and navigate both the tomb spaces and resurrection moments of their vocational journeys and help them to discern pathways to new and abundant life.

Mentors invite novices to explore possibilities for new and abundant life in three interrelated dimensions of ministry: an ontological dimension, in which novices query questions of vocational formation, identity, and purpose through practices of discernment; a hermeneutical dimension, in which novices explore and hone their theological voice through practices of interpretation and theological meaning-making; and a practical dimension, in which novices develop contextually located forms of practical wisdom through practices of leadership relevant to the ministry settings in which they serve.

MENTORING FOR DISCERNMENT AND VOCATIONAL FORMATION

God calls all persons, in many different ways and contexts, to participate in God's work of repair and reconciliation. Human beings relate to God's call through practices of discernment that both hone their attentiveness to God's purposes and anticipate change and growth for themselves and the communities that they serve. God's call is never static, and the discernment of God's call is never complete. Discernment is a foundational disposition for ministry because it connects persons and communities not only to the call to participate in God's work but also to the growth and change that such invitations entail.

Mentoring for discernment requires, first, that mentors model practices of discernment in their own lives. Good mentors never imagine that they or the communities they serve are finished products. Instead, they are always open to new ways in which God is calling them to new life. From their own practices of discernment, mentors hone their pastoral and theological imagination, allowing them to draw the novice's attention to the patterns and energies that signal God's invitation to the novice to join in God's work.

One's sense of self and vocational purpose are connected because what one is called to do is deeply rooted in who one is. Following the insights of Howard Thurman, Cole Arthur Riley writes: "Ask me what I want to be, but not before you ask me who I want to be. Ask me who I want to be, but not before you ask me the more searing question of who I am."² To hear the call of God is to listen to the self. The question of "who I am" is "searing" because it requires ministry leaders to wrestle with the complex experiences and narratives that inform their sense of self. Eileen Campbell-Reed uses the term "blueprint stories" to describe the "deeply seated beliefs and narratives" that often distort the "sound of the genuine."³ Self-awareness is in part the capacity to identify and sometimes "re-author" blueprint narratives that prevent a minister from becoming who God intended them to be.⁴ Good mentors support novices in wrestling with the blueprint narratives that inform their presence in and practice of ministry in ways that lead through tomb spaces into new and abundant life.

With a clearer awareness of self and purpose, novices more authentically inhabit their ministerial identity. Those who have a clear ministerial identity know what they are called to do, enabling them to draw healthy boundaries around their time, energy, and commitment. By knowing when to say yes, healthy ministers also know when to say no. They are aware of their gifts for ministry as well as opportunities for further growth. Those who craft and inhabit a ministerial identity are confident in their ability to serve, which positions them to respond in constructive ways to challenges to their authority as leaders. Mentors push novices who are overextended and overfunctioning to revisit questions of self and purpose so that they can better define and embrace their identity as ministry leaders.

Finally, faithful discernment implies change and growth. God calls persons and communities to new ways of responding to God's work in the world. Change generates anxiety. Mentors model proactive approaches to navigating change and growth both for themselves and the communities they serve. Mentors encourage mentees to develop self-awareness about their orientation to relational conflict and strategies for engaging in conflict responsibly.

MENTORING FOR THEOLOGICAL MEANING-MAKING

Religious leadership in any context is deeply engaged in the work of theological meaning-making. The focus of mentoring for theological reflection is the development of

the minister's theological voice and the theological frames through which the minister views and interprets experience. Mentees often come to the work of ministry with some formal theological training. Mentors not only help mentees operationalize their theological training in ways that resonate with their theological voice; they also draw attention to the ways in which the messiness and complexity of experience challenge, nuance, problematize, or even contradict elements of formal theological education. Theological meaning-making, in other words, is a two-way street in which interpretive resources and experiences of the world condition one another.

Theological meaning-making is always done in a place. Place is not simply a location in space; it is a site of corporate meaning-making that may also have a spatial location.⁵ Mentors share wisdom about the contexts of ministry in which they serve. They know how theological meaning-making works (or doesn't work) in a particular place. Mentors sharpen a mentee's attunement to place as a necessary condition of effective theological interpretation.

Mentors identify and query tensions between a mentee's formal and functional theologies, between what mentees *say* they believe, on the one hand, and what their behavior shows about what they *actually* believe, on the other. Mentors model the responsible movement from "embedded" theological reflection, which one learns implicitly through life experiences, to "deliberative theological reflection," an intentional modality of theological reflection operative when embedded theologies fail to interpret experience adequately.⁶

Finally, mentors challenge mentees to develop a critical awareness of their positionality. Critical awareness attends to the very conditions under which persons make meaning. Mentors encourage mentees to consider how their formation in families and communities of origin, significant life relationships, and experiences of marginalization and privilege and the like all shape one's point of view. Mentors also model taking responsibility for the harmful impacts of their meaning-making even when harm is not intended.

In all of these ways, mentors accompany mentees as they push against received theologies and interpretive strategies in order to develop a more expansive understanding of God's presence and work in the world. Through the emergence of a novice's particular theological voice, God's work of repair and reconciliation becomes intelligible in the communities to whom that voice is directed.

MENTORING FOR PRACTICAL WISDOM

For the last twenty years or more, much attention has been devoted to the idea of practical wisdom in practical theology. Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is, as Aristotle wrote, "deliberating well" in relationship to "human affairs," the "correctness regarding what is beneficial, the right thing, in the right way, at the right time."⁷ Practical wisdom arises in intentional forms of reflection on practice, aided by relationships with wise

mentors who themselves have cultivated practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is deeply embodied more than it is ideational and context responsive more than it is abstract. Practical theologians have explored practical wisdom in the framework of “pastoral imagination.”⁸

The challenge of mentoring for practical wisdom comes in facilitating a process whereby a novice develops pastoral imagination rooted in their unique pastoral identity, vocational purpose, and theological voice. Mentors help novices cultivate practical wisdom by challenging them to face the fears and insecurities they may have about doing ministry “the right way,” as though the right way is a technique that exists in a vacuum. Developing wisdom and skillfulness in the practice of ministry is not the simple mastery of technique; it is the capacity to exercise wise judgment in ways that reflect the practitioner’s unique pastoral imagination. The “right way” to do things, in other words, depends on who is doing them. Pastoral imagination is the medium through which God creates new and abundant life in unique ways through the minister’s life and work. By creating opportunities for critical and constructive reflection on the practice of ministry, mentors challenge novices to identify, own, and refine their own way of doing things. By helping novices to cultivate practical wisdom, mentors are instrumental in bringing God’s work to fruition.

Mentoring for ministry in the Christian tradition takes shape in the context of God’s work to create and sustain abundant life. It is animated by an openness to growth and change as well as self-giving service that both reveals the contours of the novice’s particular vocational pathway and accompanies them in traveling it.

¹ In focusing on the life-giving quality of Christian vocation in this article, I am inspired by Patrick Reyes’s understanding of vocation as “responding to the voice of God calling people to new life” in the face of death and destruction. Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016), 4.

² Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2022), 45.

³ Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 261.

⁴ Edward P. Wimberly develops the idea of “re-authoring” in his book *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

⁵ Tim Cresswell writes: ““Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning—a ‘fact of life’ which, like time, produces basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way), it becomes place.” Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 16.

⁶ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke distinguish between “embedded” and “deliberative” theological reflection in their book *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 11–26.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), VI.7.9-11; 28.

⁸ For Craig Dykstra, pastoral imagination is a learned capacity, developed over time through the ongoing practice of ministry “done faithfully and well and with an integrity reflected in the minister’s own life.” It is a kind of “unusual intelligence,” Dykstra argues, not simply a “cognitive phenomenon” but a capacity for deep seeing and interpreting “beyond the surface of things,” engaging “mind, spirit, and action,” and it is deeply rooted in emotion, affection, and the “reactions and movements of our own bodies.” While it is a disposition rather than a theological concept, pastoral imagination reflects a deep commitment to what he calls “the buoyancy of God,” “the knowledge that . . . in every possible circumstance and condition in life and in death—we are upheld by God’s own everlasting arms.” Craig Dykstra, “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 41. Dykstra developed the idea of pastoral imagination in an earlier article entitled “The Pastoral Imagination,” *Initiatives in Religion* 9 (2001):1.

Dykstra’s discussion has resonated deeply in practical theology and related fields. Indeed, very recent work in practical theology has sought to operationalize pastoral imagination in field-based research to understand ministry formation better and enrich field-based learning experiences. See, for example, Christian A. B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, “Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice,” *Auburn Studies* 21 (Winter 2016). See also Matthew Floding et al., “Engaging the Dynamics of Pastoral Imagination for Field Education,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 37 (2017): 229–41; James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, “By Virtue of Imagination,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 32 (2012): 22–35.