



Mentoring and the ministerial formation of seminary students

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Abstract

In this article I shall look at the role of mentoring and its relational nature in the ministerial formation of seminary students. Incorporating the relational nature of mentoring in ministerial formation it facilitates the integration of seminary students' classroom experiences and their intellectual imaginations into practical ministerial skills in both the church and community. It is argued that embracing the relational nature of mentoring for ministerial formation in theological seminaries will help seminary students develop an awareness of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective practical ministry. It will further help them develop an appreciation for their unique calling, gifting and skills. This article thus looks into how the relational nature of mentoring can foster the ministerial formation of seminary students.

Key words

Mentoring; ministerial formation; seminary students

1. Introduction

The assessment of ministerial preparation is a continuous challenge, especially in an academic setting such as the seminary, given the various shifts occurring in theological education today. Ministerial development is to be holistic, including the personal, spiritual, academic and social development of students. Effective ministry requires not only abstract theological and biblical knowledge, but also a certain level of ministerial competencies (e.g. the articulation of theological reflection and learning the practice of ministry, the transition from formal theological training into the work of ministry).

Seminary students' acquisition of certain practical ministerial skills is essential to their preparation for both current and future ministry. The place of mentoring for ministerial formation is therefore crucial for the future of the church. All seminaries need to prepare their students for practical ministry, whether this is full-time ordained ministry or part-time ministry through hands-on practical ministry. According to Mwangi and De Klerk (2001:1) ministerial preparation is of critical importance, since 'the seminary has come to be viewed as irrelevant in training people for church ministry'. Naidoo (2013:1) echoes this view, stating that 'theological education and ministerial formation have been in a state of flux and uncertainty globally for many years'.

In this paper I will argue that the ministerial formation of seminary students not only depends on the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom but also to a large extent on the quality of mentoring for ministerial formation involved.

In order to argue for the place of mentoring in ministerial formation convincingly, this article focuses on the question: How can the relational nature of mentoring contribute to the ministerial formation of seminary students? The article will first briefly consider the goals of theological education. Second, the definition of key concepts will receive attention, namely mentoring, ministerial formation and seminary students. Subsequently mentoring and the ministerial formation of seminary students will be explored, and finally some recommendations for embracing mentoring for ministerial formation in theological seminaries will be made.

This article is not in any way arguing that mentoring is the only avenue for ministerial formation; however it calls for consideration of how the relational nature of mentoring can be used in addition to other forms of ministerial formation.

2. Aims of theological education or training

Every educational process has explicit and implicit assumptions about its purposes, methods and intended outcomes for teaching and learning. Theological education is no exception. In some contexts the term

‘theological education’ is used almost exclusively for ministerial formation, often referring to graduate-level degree programs designed to prepare people for ministry of one form or another.

Historically theological education has been regarded as a means of preparing men and women for professional Christian service. According to TenElshof & Furrow (2000:99) the emphasis on theological education in the past was on practical professional skills, predominantly those of theological and biblical study. Consequently, following the establishment of professional schools in the nineteenth century, professional interests informed theological education. According to Banks (1999:22–23) theological education became a professional service where seminary students went about a practice, a skill, an art, and a craft in the service of others, much like law and medicine. Theological education at the time was rooted in the common practice of the day, namely apprenticeship. Hence this shift of apprenticeship impacted largely on the aim of theological education as it is practiced today. Theological education aims at developing a reflective Christian identity and practice, an informed and spiritually enriched access to biblical tradition, and at empowering people to participate in the mission of God in this world. It enables people to reflect critically on the relation between their own Christian identity, their church tradition and other Christian traditions, their relation to the world, and the tasks of God’s mission today.

Graham (2002:228–36) stresses that the overall aim of theological education should be the development of theological learning; practical preparation for ministry; spiritual and ministerial formation; and growth in personal maturity. He (2003:58–77) further states that theological learning situations should be characterised by a combination of approaches that will enhance personal construction of knowledge, explicit and implicit instruction through modelling and practice, which, when combined, can be viewed as a process of mentoring. As seminary students develop their knowledge about theology, they should also understand and articulate their personal theology and begin to discern the activity of God in their personal lives and in the lives of others. Additionally, theological education needs to provide seminary students with the skills necessary to exercise their God-given ministries. These skills should form part of a complex competency

that includes elements of leadership and discipleship, collaboration, empowerment and mutuality (Graham 2003:58–77). As stated already, the aim of theological education includes spiritual formation and growth in personal maturity. Evidently, spiritual formation requires not only deepening spiritual awareness and growth in moral character, but also the development of self-awareness and an understanding of others. Speaking of the aims of theological education, McKinney (2003:2) emphasises that theological education should be characterised by commitment to the following aspects:

- *Biblical training*: Knowledge of the Bible must be central to theological education and a devotion to the word of God as the authority for all of life, both with respect to how theological students think and how they live.
- *The great commission*: The spread of the gospel must be incorporated in theological education. Theological students must be equipped to become world changers with a passion to win the world for Christ.
- *Holy living*: Issues of character, lifestyle, integrity, and godliness must form part of the ingredients of the aims of theological education. Seminary students must be taught how to integrate belief, behaviour, right thinking and right living.
- *Ministerial formation*: Theological students should be equipped for meaningful church-related ministries. There should be a connection between theory and practice that will produce meaningful ministerial praxis.

According to Graham (2002:228) the summative aim of theological training is the development of theological understanding. This requires a capacity for theological reflection and wisdom relating to a responsible life in faith and encompasses fostering a deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities required for exercising a ministry in that community. These goals, and the processes and practices leading to their realisation, are normally intertwined and should not be separated from one another. Stevens (2011:167) argues for biblical theological education when he says the following:

Biblical theological education is a complex reality involving many strands of learning, faith development and active ministry evoked by [an] authentic relationship with the living God... it is [an education that is] community-oriented (rather than individualistic), cooperative (rather than competitive), life-centred (rather than merely school-based), oriented towards obedience (rather than the mere accumulation of cognitive information) [and] lifelong (rather than concentrated in a degree programme).

From the above views of the aim of theological education it is evident that theological education is a multi-faceted, enormous endeavour. The formalisation of various categories in training are required if theological education is to meet its required goals. These categories should not be regarded as different entities, but must complement each other in order to foster the development of the whole person being educated. Naidoo (2013:2), citing (Overend 2007), states that ‘one of the recent advances has been the growing recognition that theological education should attend to the development of the whole person, that spiritual character formation and relational skills are as significant as cognitive development in preparing people for successful Christian ministry.’ However, recent trends in theological education in many seminaries seem to concentrate less on the ministerial formation of seminary students. In the most far-reaching study to date on pastors who have exited ministry, Hoge & Wenger (2005:265) highlight a gap between expectations formed in seminary and the realities of ministry. The study confirms that the ministry and pastors’ lives differed greatly from what respondents expected those experiences to be, based on their seminary experience. Hence seminary students’ preparation needs to balance its focus on both content and character, both academic preparation and ministerial formation.

3. Definitions

In order to facilitate further discussion, the three key concepts of mentoring, ministerial formation and theological students are defined as follows for the purposes of this article:

3.1 Mentoring

A general understanding of mentoring is that mentoring is a relational partnership through which one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the personal, spiritual and professional growth of someone else. In a phenomenological review of literature on mentoring, Roberts (2000:151) notes that there are certain ‘characteristics’ of mentoring that commonly appear in all literatures, namely, a relational process, an active relationship, a helping process, a reflective practice, a career and personal development process, and a formalised process.

Parks (2010:40) adds that mentoring in its classical sense is an intentional mutually demanding and meaningful relationship between two individuals. Effective mentoring provides the protégé with skills for caring, accepting and challenging when necessary. In this process, discernment also develops.

Zand (2010:434) summarises mentoring as the relational human support of one person guiding another, providing initiation into a new field of work, and coaching the person to become a competent professional. Mentoring as used in this article is thus defined as a relational partnership between two individuals with the goal of building, sharpening and empowering each other holistically.

3.2 Ministerial formation

Ministerial formation includes the training of the whole person for ministry by means of a combination of instruction, experience gained and reflection. Percy (2008:285) captures it well when he contends that at the core of seminary training and ministerial formation lies a commitment to intertwine theology with experience, usually in a kind of vibrant reflective practice, which he argues can take place through the exercise of ministry by observing, participating, leading and then reflecting.

Harkness (2011:141) suggests that ministerial formation must include the conversion of the mind and the heart, which will lead to fostering integrative thinking, character formation, authentic discipleship, personal appropriation of faith and knowledge, and, at the same time, cultivate spirituality of the intellectual life. Ministerial formation integrates theology and ministerial practice in that it provides bridges that integrate

theoretical knowledge and ministerial practice. Ministerial formation provides practical engagement to theological students and prepares them for in-depth ministry and leadership of the church.

Naidoo (2013:1) articulates that ministerial formation is a key indicator of the character of seminary students: It shows how they were recruited, trained, equipped and morally formed towards their calling in Christian ministry. For the purpose of this article, the term ‘ministerial formation’ is regarded as a formative process that encourages the highest possible standards of theological training in students planning to enter vocational ministry.

3.3 Seminary students

The term ‘student,’ as referred to in this article, means any full-time or part-time student currently registered primarily at a theological seminary¹ studying with the aim of going into either full-time or part-time ministry in the church or in any para-church organisation.

4. Mentoring and the ministerial formation of seminary students

According to Jones and Jennings (2000:125) a seminary’s success or failure ought to be measured by how well the interrelations of learning and ministerial practices are articulated. Naidoo (2013:1–2) asserts that ‘a key indicator of the character of today’s Christianity is ministerial formation – it is precisely because of how Christian traditions recruit, train, equip and morally “form” their leadership candidates which may determine the quality and faithfulness towards their calling in Christian ministry.’

Hence Van Engen (1996:240) warns that ministerial formation for the twenty-first century should build on the best of integrating being, knowing and doing, without which, he argues, seminary students’ chances of being

1 Theological seminaries, for the purposes of this article, are defined as residential denominational institutions of higher learning, existing primarily to give theological and ministerial training, and are one of the tools God uses to carry out His work. By implication it means that a seminary is used by the church as a designated place or setting where candidates for ministry could be nourished and formed in their sacred calling – removed from distracting worldly influences. It must be noted that theological seminaries in this context operate differently from faculties of theology at universities.

effective in their vocational ministry will be highly minimised. In a recent study regarding the role of mentoring in ministerial formation conducted in seminaries in Nigeria², many of the respondents indicated that mentoring played a key role in their ministerial formation (Chiroma 2012:249):

The respondents identified that shared and practical ministry experiences with their mentors and with their protégés provided them with specific ministerial formation skills that they required for their ministry. Some of the ministerial formation skills mentioned by the respondents were: clarity of calling, preaching skills, communications skills, conflict management skills, and delegation skills.

Theological schools have been accused of being theoretical rather than practical in training for ministry. Clouzet (1997:268–274) has examined the effectiveness of the preparation of pastors at the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) theological seminary, and reveals that of the fifty items ranked lowest in preparation for ministry by SDA seminary graduates, 44 were ministerial skill items and none were scholarly skills. Two-thirds of the respondents appealed for more practical preparation. The results of Chiroma's more recent study (2012) of three seminaries in Nigeria show that nothing has changed dramatically since Clouzet's study.

How can the relational nature of mentoring contribute to the process of ministerial formation of seminary students? Mwangi and De Klerk (2011:9) argue as follows in this regard:

Mentoring will create an atmosphere of nurture in which students see ministry modelled before them... Modelling involves learning by observation and teachers model when they exhibit behaviour in the presence of students. Mentoring has much to offer because it provides both character and professional development.

Furthermore theological seminaries need to heed the following advice of Naidoo (2013:13):

2 The study was conducted in three theological seminaries in Jos, Kagoro and Ilorin in Nigeria.

Ministerial formation needs to hold the whole institutional environment in mind, and needs to take a holistic view to create a consistent context of learning... Ministerial formation needs to become more intentional within the curriculum and influence the content, method and outcomes of theological education.

The relational and nurturing nature of mentoring can foster the ministerial formation of seminary students greatly. Apprenticeship, modelling and clarity of ministerial focus are three ways in which this can be brought about. Each of these methods will now be discussed briefly.

4.1 Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is an essentially social learning method with a long history of helping trainees become experts in fields as diverse as midwifery, construction and law. Dennen (2013:81) argues that at the heart of apprenticeship is the notion of more experienced people assisting less experienced ones, providing structure and examples to support the attainment of goals. Traditionally apprenticeship has been associated with learning in the context of becoming skilled in a trade or craft – a task that typically requires both the acquisition of knowledge, concepts, and perhaps psychomotor skills and the development of the ability to apply the knowledge and skills in a context-appropriate manner – and far predates formal schooling as it is known today.

Apprenticeship in ministerial training is as old as the church. For example, according to Nelson (1994:52), both Justin Martyr and Augustine of Hippo used a communal life apprenticeship of candidates for priesthood. And in the post-Reformation era, those preparing for pastoral ministry spent time with a revivalist or a preacher to prepare them for practical ministry. Similarly, in his essay on Jesus' role as teacher and rabbi and the role of the disciples as apprentice, Wenthe (2008:310) states that the role of the rabbi was not solely to impart factual knowledge to his disciples. Rather, he was to induct them into a new way of life: 'The disciple did not simply learn things; he was converted from one way of living to another.'

Smith & Bass (2011:83) adds that in this ancient model of instruction, the disciple would learn a new way of life – his rabbi's way of life – by accompanying his rabbi on his journeys and learning through observation and participation in the life of his rabbi. Yet, at other times, being inducted

into a new way of life called for the instruction of factual knowledge. Disciples not only watched their rabbi in action, they also sat at his feet, memorised his teachings, and ‘diligently absorbed everything he imparted’ (Cook 1987:209). Through the transmission of factual knowledge coupled with observing and participating in the life of their rabbi, disciples were to learn how to become full members of their master’s way of life.

Apprenticeship through mentoring, as argued by Van Engen (1996:250), provides seminary students with an in-ministry paradigm that seeks to develop close personal, emotional and spiritual relationships between those seminary students who are in the initial stages of the process of ministerial formation and those who have progressed further along the path in ministry. Through apprenticeship, seminary students will gain hands-on experience in ministry in a real-life context. Furthermore, seminary students could develop an appreciation for ministry in both the church and community by being involved in both types of settings. This is because through apprenticeship, seminary students will be exposed to different arenas of doing ministry in different contexts.

Thus, apprenticeship through the relational nature of mentoring provides seminary students with an opportunity to serve under the supervision of an experienced cleric (mentor) who will guide them through practical ministerial skills. Doing so enables them to engage what they learned theoretically. Mentoring for ministerial formation through apprenticeship emphasises learning through doing and moves theological training toward competence in the crafts, the skills and the art of ministry.

4.2 Modelling

The relational nature of mentoring supports the ministerial formation of seminary students through modelling. According to Dennen (2004:816), modelling is a form of demonstration followed by imitation, frequently used as a way of helping the learning progress through different stages in the learning process. Modelling has been largely attributed to the work of Albert Bandura (1977) in which he showed that modelling is a more efficient way of learning as opposed to trial and error. In the scope of ministerial formation, the predominant image for the modelling role as used by various authors (Anderson 1998; Engstrom 1991; Naidoo 2013) is one person looking over the shoulders of another.

Looking over a mentor's shoulders implies spending time together, communicating with one another, and sharing life and ministerial experience. Through modelling for ministerial formation, the mentor serves as a model to the seminary student in various areas. The mentor models both ministry and competence for the seminary student who is preparing for ministry. In research conducted by Chiroma (2012:202), several seminary graduates confirmed that mentoring played a vital role in their ministerial formation:

'My pastoral ministry is greatly shaped through my mentoring experience at the seminary; it was through mentoring that I have come to learn most of the needed skills that is now helping me in my current ministry. Like I mentioned earlier, my mentor exposed us to different types of mentoring settings, allowed us to participate and make mistakes and he later on helped us to correct those mistakes.'

'Through our involvement in various ministry activities with my mentor, I came to learn some more practical skills of ministry, like standing before people with confidence, like handling conflicts, like trying to strike a balance between family and ministry...'

Since ministerial preparation involves the craft of ministry, seminary students preparing for ministry need a model who will teach and show them what ministry is all about. The mentor serving as model directs, instructs and responds to questions that the student may raise in the process. Observing a model on their ministerial journey teaches seminary students skills necessary for their own ministerial journeys. Therefore we must bear Selzer's (2008:25) warning in mind our efforts to prepare students for ministry. He warns that it can be disappointing to the congregation, ministry or parish that works with a graduate who is not adequately prepared for the demands of the actual ministry. Modelling can help to lower the risk of such disappointment.

4.3 Clarity of ministerial focus

The relational nature of mentoring in ministerial formation can promote clarity of ministerial focus for seminary students. The traditional assumption is that all those who enrol for training at the seminary do so in order to become pastors in congregations. However, this traditional belief

is challenged by the high influx of young people coming to seminary for different reasons nowadays.

Cetuk (1998:49) observes that considering the realities of current enrolment patterns in seminaries, many seminary students still enrol at seminaries with the desire to do ministry, but not as pastors in congregations. Many of the students who enrol at seminaries have a solid conviction of God's call in their lives, but often have a vague idea as to which particular ministry to focus on. In some denominational seminaries students who graduate are automatically posted to churches to become pastors of congregations, without finding out what their real gifting and calling for ministry are. Studies (Price 2009; Duke 2010; West 2012) have shown that many people enrol at seminaries not to become pastors in congregations but to pursue a ministry within the local church or with a para-church organisation. The relational nature of mentoring provides an avenue for ministerial formation through modelling and apprenticeship, creating opportunities for seminary students to explore and engage in various ministerial opportunities, which will eventually lead them to the one they feel most comfortable with. In Chiroma's research (2012) on the topic, respondents had the following to say:

'My mentoring experience gave my current ministry focus and vision. When I came to the seminary, I knew God has called me into ministry, but it was through mentoring that I came to see clearly what God wanted me do and how to do it. We discussed with our mentor a book by Randy Alcorn and in that book it discussed discovering your calling, and through that I came to discover what God wanted me to do and I am glad today I learnt that.'

'I discovered my calling through mentoring and my focus and vision were highly strengthened through mentoring.'

Through modelling and apprenticeship in mentoring as discussed above, seminary students may gain an appreciation for their unique calling, gifting and skills that will help them to commit to a process of life-long learning in developing their ministerial competencies and personal approach to ministry. Consequently, seminary students will, through practice and observation, identify the specific ministerial focus to which God has called them. Having experienced hands-on ministerial skills through modelling

and apprenticeship can help them to discern God's calling in their lives. Seminary students will also develop an awareness of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective ministry.

At the core of utilising the relational nature of mentoring for ministerial formation is a commitment to actualise theory and practice; to help seminary students to be adequately prepared at an academic level and for practical ministry. Stressing this point as part of the focus of practical theology, Osmer (2008) argues that ministerial formation demonstrates effectiveness in practical ministry within the context of relevant local and global challenges. Seminary students must gain exposure through mentoring to become aware of the various ministry opportunities in and outside the four corners of the church.

5. Suggestions for using mentoring for ministerial formation in theological seminaries

Mentors benefit from the relational nature of ministerial formation when they hear students share about their deep love for God and their commitment to serve the church and the world as a whole. Most students are sincerely seeking a clearer understanding of their vocational calling and how they can participate in what God is doing in the world. The relational nature of mentoring focused on ministerial formation can help theological seminaries become aware of the diverse issues and challenges that students face as they prepare for a life of ministry. We are constantly reminded that God is still calling young men and women to serve in the Church and they are looking for significant adults to mentor and guide them through this process.

The use of mentoring for spiritual formation provides an opportunity for staff and students to share in the broader narrative of God's story and calling. The Christian life is best lived in a covenant community – a community that cares deeply about their lives and calling. In the light of the above discussion, I would recommend the following practical steps that will help provide an effective ministerial formation of seminary students.

First, there is a need to create and awareness as to how the relational and nurturing nature of mentoring can assist seminaries in shaping the ministerial formation of seminary students. This could be done through

different platforms within the seminary community. There should also be initial assessment of the student's ministry vision and focus during the first year of enrolment. It is important that seminary students have a guide, mentor or teacher in their first year who accompanies them and helps them to learn from their experiences. This connection makes articulation of what has been acquired in theological readings and classrooms possible.

Second, staff members at the various seminaries have the task of mentoring and coaching students for ministerial formation. Mwangi & De Klerk (2011:9) suggest that 'faculty (staff) members should be required to have visible personal interests in the students and in their welfare. To understand the needs of the students, the relationship between them and the faculty should be one of dealing with a friend, a mentor, and a colleague.' Staff mentors have the unique opportunity to leave a legacy by investing in the lives of seminary students. Through apprenticeship and modelling of ministry in various churches, these students are prepared to serve and lead these churches in the future. When regarded in this light, the task of mentoring seminary students for ministerial formation becomes a very exciting and humbling endeavour.

Third, seminaries must enter into partnership with churches regarding mentoring for the ministerial formation of seminary students. Seminaries should stimulate churches by supporting them wherever necessary. Churches should assist seminaries to move further in their theological endeavour by indicating to the seminaries what needs exist regarding ministerial formation. For this to take place effectively, Litfin (2004:78) states that 'theological educators should comprehend theology not merely as an academic discipline, but as having a message relevant to the world and especially the church today.'

The churches and the seminaries must come together to design and develop a ministerial formation guide that will meet both the needs of the students and the need of the church and related organisations. Seminaries need regular contact with the existing realities of church life. The pertinent question will be: How can both knowledge acquisition and ministerial practice be strengthened in partnership with the places where seminary graduates will serve? The future ministry of our students deserves such a conversation.

Fourth, seminary staff should be encouraged to be actively involved in a local church where they can serve in the various leadership teams. Churches must regard the support for seminaries, especially in the area of mentoring, as one of their most important obligations. Staff members should be encouraged to get involved in the ministries of local churches in some capacity. This will enhance the use of knowledge in ministerial practice and the use of that practice in their classrooms. Foster et al. (2006:90) warn that ‘when such associations are absent, an action-reflection style of teaching cannot take place.’

Fifth, seminary students must be encouraged to get involved in ministerial service in local churches and ministerial organisation early in their educational cycle. Killinger (2006:89) contends that seminary students should not expect local congregations and ministerial organisations to welcome them with open arms without first exhibiting some form of responsibility to the church or ministerial organisation. Hence I would suggest that weekly, short-term and long-term field ministries should occupy an important part in the seminary curriculum. This should be related to the various theological courses and the ministerial period should be closely supervised by either faculty mentors or experienced cleric and ministerial leaders. Seminary students should be encouraged to gain hands-on experience in different situations such as student’s ministry, rural congregational work, work camps, hospitals, old age homes and prisons.

Seminaries must promote dialogue between the theological and non-theological communities, as this will provide seminary students with a comprehensive view of ministerial realities. Naidoo (2013:9) rightly notes that ‘theological education must have a critical-prophetic role to articulate the public role and responsibility of Christian witness in relation to current trends, challenges and shortcomings in society.’ Hence the ministerial formation of seminary students must help those students to acquire a wider worldview of ministry – both in and outside the church setting. If need be, on special occasions in seminaries, political leaders, natural scientists and representatives of other religions could be invited. This will safeguard students from developing a dislike of social affairs and the community around them, and it will give them a more informed and comprehensive view of ministry.

Utilising the relational nature of mentoring for the ministerial formation of seminary students, as argued above, is crucial in every theological seminary. Theological seminaries are encouraged to give consideration to the above recommendations.

6. Conclusion

In order to enhance an effective ministerial formation for seminary students, the use of the relational nature of mentoring will be of great value. In this article I have demonstrated that the ministerial formation of seminary students is not only important, but also necessary. Harnessing the relational nature of mentoring for ministerial formation can provide seminary students with opportunities for apprenticeship and modelling and it can help them to obtain clarity of ministry. Mentoring for ministerial formation will help seminary students to gain a better understanding of the differences between church life and seminary life, and help them to integrate those differences in their lives. The relational nature of mentoring for ministerial formation will also provide seminary students with real-time experience, which will assist them to develop a comprehensive worldview of ministry. Hence, it is imperative that theological seminaries reshape their ministerial training in order to accommodate the use of mentoring and its relational nature for the ministerial formation of seminary students.

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