

The impact of mentoring on the formation and flourishing of ministry staff in the Presbyterian Church of NSW

Christian mentoring is a spiritual practice that facilitates the formation and flourishing of local church ministry staff. The spiritual formation and flourishing of Christian leaders are foundational for healthy churches. This qualitative study examines mentoring practices within the Presbyterian Church of NSW (PCNSW) using an inductive and theoretical analysis of six ministry staff interviews and one external mentor interview (Keith Farmer).

Terms

Formation Christian spiritual formation is the process of being increasingly inwardly transformed into Christlikeness that produces mature character, including fruits of the Spirit, for God's glory, the sake of others, and our own flourishing. It is the work of God in which believers participate through his grace.¹

Flourishing is a theme throughout Scripture that encapsulates God's call and provision for people to fulfil their created potential or personhood.²

Mentoring This study adopts Rick Lewis' definition for Christian mentoring: "Within intentional, empowering, unique relationships, Christian mentoring identifies and promotes the work of God's Spirit in others' lives, assisting them to access God's resources for their growth and strength in spirituality, character and ministry."³ Mentoring is one practice among others encouraged by the PCNSW Ministry and Mission arm (MM) for the formation and flourishing of ministry staff.

Interview results

PCNSW mentoring practices

Fresh development: Participants saw mentoring as a more recent development in the denomination. This may be a result of MM encouraging mentoring, and of early adopters' advocacy.

Self-organised approach: PCNSW ministry staff largely organise their own mentoring relationships. This approach is helpful for forming mentoring relationships that are safe, have a good "values-fit" and empower the mentoree.

Lower participation rates: 2016 NCLS data – 18% of PCNSW leaders (approximately 24) were in a formal, regular mentoring arrangement compared with 38% of protestant leaders in other denominations. 39% of PCNSW senior leaders were not in or seeking to be in a mentoring relationship compared with 13% senior leaders in other protestant denominations.

Interviewees reflected that mentoring was practiced by the minority of their peers. Participants were motivated to seek mentoring by both felt need (self-awareness and humility), and an understanding of mentoring.

Barriers to participation in mentoring include

- limited understanding of mentoring as a helpful, biblical practice for all ministry staff, not just the young, struggling, and students.
- belief that "it all hangs on us" resulting in a going solo approach to paid ministry.

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith (Sanctification). Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 2009. Ruth Hayley Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 2014.

² Peter Mudge and Dan Fleming in *Research-Led Learning and Teaching in Theological Education*, (Eds. Les Ball and Peter G. Bolt) 2018.

³ Rick Lewis, *Mentoring Matters*, 2009.

- financial costs.

Desire of ministry staff for interaction, intention, and integration

Three recurring themes that influence formation and flourishing surfaced in the data on challenges for paid ministry staff. These inter-connected themes are interaction, intention, and integration. They reflect the desire of participants to be interactively participating in God's kingdom (Eph 4:16), to be intentionally purposeful in their lives (Eph 2:10), and to be "all of life" integrated in their faith (Matt 22:37). All participants expressed that paid ministry challenges living out these desires.

Mentoring facilitates formation and flourishing

All participants expressed mentoring provides and facilitates interaction, intention and integration for formation and flourishing. Mentoring had a positive impact on emotional energy, relationship with God and others, and vocational capacity. Positive impacts in these areas counteract the components of burnout, i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and loss of self-efficacy.

Qualities of Effective mentoring for ministry staff

The primary theme that emerged in the data on qualities for effective mentoring was safety. Relational safety is vital for facilitating spiritual formation. Qualities identified as contributing to safety in mentoring were confidentiality, a sense of the mentor being for the mentoree, the mentor being relationally and spiritually mature, and ministry leadership experience.

'**Vocational safety**' is the name given to concerns about a mentor's perceived potential to influence mentoree's future appointments or opportunities. Some considered the character of the mentor was more important than their internal or external status for vocational safety. Some staff chose external mentors to enable them to speak more freely without dual relationships and conflicts of interest. This is particularly relevant in the presbytery system where internal mentors may influence judiciary proceedings of presbytery, and for denominational leaders. Conflicts of interest and dual relationships need to be proactively discerned and addressed for safety in mentoring relationships.

Sourcing mentors external to the PCNSW raised the issue of navigating **theological trust**. This can be addressed by developing an understanding of mature, effective mentoring that is differentiated, and by sourcing mentors from a similar theological framework.

Implications

There is untapped potential for mentoring ministry staff in the PCNSW. Increasing the uptake of mentoring may be assisted by

Clarifying terminology to help raise the understanding of mentoring for formation. One possibility is to label formation focussed mentoring as "spiritual mentoring," and to call assigned mentoring (the current practice for students and ministers undergoing restoration processes) "coaching," and to keep the label of "supervision" for professional pastoral supervision.

Mentoree testimonies at ministry staff gatherings. Several participants sought mentoring after hearing of their peers' mentoring experiences.

Provide information on mentoring and resources for accessing mentoring, including options for internal and external mentoring and financial assistance.

This document is a summary of a research essay presented to Sydney College of Divinity by Lisa Woolcott in August 2020.

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