

mentoring teenagers

Ruth Hassall

A new phenomenon or a passing phase?

It seems that 'mentoring' is the current buzz word in youth ministry circles and many people are wondering if this is a biblical model or just the latest fad.

If you were to look up the word 'mentor' in a Bible concordance, I can pretty much guarantee that you wouldn't find it. Even in the modern paraphrase *The Message*, it only appears three times! The word 'mentor' then isn't a biblical word but the concept of mentoring is woven right through the Bible, throughout the Old Testament in the lives of the Patriarchs and prophets and through the New Testament in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles – as well as in the instructions for the churches that we find in the epistles.

The stories of Jethro and Moses, Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Mordecai and Esther, Paul and Timothy are just a few key mentoring relationships that have been recorded for us in the Bible.

Discipleship with a kick

In previous generations, mentoring may well have been described as discipleship, and I think that discipleship still plays a large part in what we mean by mentoring in the Christian context. However, I think there is more to it than that. As Paul Wilcox puts it, 'Mentoring is discipleship with a kick!'

I first discovered mentoring as a youth pastor in a large city centre church. Early on I realised that if the young people in my care were going to be disciplined well, then I couldn't do this alone. Others would need to come on board.

So, I went to the young people and asked them if they would like to be linked with a mentor, and I went to the church congregation and asked if there were people who would be willing to spend an hour or two once a month with a young person.

I was overwhelmed by the response. Some of the young people were initially a bit reluctant but soon got on board, as they saw their friends really enjoying the time spent with mentors.

Many people who would never volunteer to be part of the youth team, offered themselves as mentors – in fact more than we needed (not a usual situation in youth ministry!).

And so we began, and the effects went beyond anything we could have imagined. Young people really growing in their faith, getting help in tackling difficult situations at school and in their homes and strong relationships being built between the generations within the church.

As I look back over my years as a youth pastor, I really believe that this what the single most effective thing that we did.



Mentoring is discipleship with a kick!
Paul Wilcox

Meeting safely

One of the main questions that comes up when talking about mentoring teenagers is how do we do this safely within a safeguarding policy. Is it possible to meet one-to-one with a young person and still be following child protection guidelines? The answer is most definitely yes, but it does require some careful thought. Procedures and accountability structures are a necessary part of mentoring in today's church. They are there to protect both adults and young people, not to prevent healthy and appropriate relationships between the generations. Rather than being seen as rules that constrain us, they should be seen as guidelines that free us to be safe and beyond reproach.

Fuller advice on how this can be done can be found in *Growing Young Leaders* by Ruth Hassall or *Can We Have a Chat* by Jon Langford (Grove Books).

Practical tips on meeting

Be overseen but not overheard

When meeting you need to be in a place where you can have a good conversation without being overheard but safeguarding policies make it very clear that you and your mentee should never be alone in a non-public place. So find a place where you can have a private conversation but be seen by others – coffee shops, the

Mentoring is a relationship in which one person helps another to grow in their faith and gifts by sharing the God given resources of skills, wisdom, knowledge and experience.



family home, public parks are all good places.

Involve parents/carers

Wherever you meet, always make sure that your mentee's parents or carers know where they are and that they are with you.

Keep a record of conversations

This doesn't mean keep a complete script but it's a good idea to keep a short record of topics that you covered, and anything that struck you during your meeting about your mentee's mood etc.

The role of the mentor

Love God, love young people

These really are the two main requirements for being a mentor. Your own relationship with God is what you have to offer to a young

person. This doesn't mean that you need to be perfect, but it does mean that you need to be growing in your own relationship, practicing spiritual disciplines for yourself and being involved with a local church. You don't need to be an expert on youth culture, but having an interest in their world is really important, and having a genuine care for young people is right at the heart of the mentoring relationship.

Pray for those you mentor

This can't be stressed enough. Mentoring in the Christian context is about God doing his transforming work in the hearts and lives of those that you mentor. Take time to pray, daily if possible and trust God with their lives and to guide you as you meet together.

Don't force your own agenda

This requires a lot of discipline! It's often easy to think that we know best for the person we're mentoring, but take time to step back, listen to God and work out whether this is an issue that needs pursuing or whether it's just a particular pet issue for you. The key is to help young people make good decisions for themselves rather than making decisions for them.



Being overseen but not overheard is a good way of thinking about where to meet.

For help with what a meeting could look like, please see the training article *A plan for meeting*.