

mentoring for women leaders: getting started

Even the most confident-appearing woman can struggle with a sense of low self-esteem. Stemming from one's skewed view of God's acceptance and delight in her, she questions her own worth and doubts who she is. She is a called woman leader who is clearly called of God, but who inwardly struggles with questions of self-doubt, personal shame, and quietly wonders whether God's delight in her is really true...

So writes Gretchen Englund, who mentors Christian leaders in the US. These days, nearly every book on leadership mentions mentoring as a key to developing as a leader. So what is mentoring?

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Mentoring involves a relationship where one person (normally more experienced, or senior, or with particular skills or wisdom to impart) seeks to guide the life of another with the aim of personal or professional growth, by mutual agreement.

Women often find it easier to talk about deep issues: 'men go into their caves and women talk'! So women make natural mentors and co-mentors, and enjoy the experience of being mentored.

For women leaders in the Church, mentoring is valuable on several different levels:

- It's a great as a way of growing as a Christian. Mentoring helps a person to recognise and respond to the grace of God in their lives. And to that extent it can overlap with what is often called spiritual direction.
- For Christian leaders mentoring can help in career development. It can be an opportunity to work with a more experienced leader, and to be supported, encouraged – and challenged.
- Recent research makes a strong case for women-specific mentoring. This is not because women and men lead differently (leadership style has more to do with personality than gender) but because women face different issues.

Many women struggle to be themselves when called to lead:

*Women leaders – again because of the many layers of a woman's life – need to address their inner anxiety before they can freely move to the next level...Women can have an internal tornado, full of questions and unfinished business: Am I okay? Am I really competent? What about being single? Are my kids doing well? Does my husband find delight in me? Am I doing life right?... (Gretchen Englund in *Mentoring Leaders* by Carson Pue, Baker Books, 2005)*

Mentoring can provide a place where women can work out how to lead authentically. Being linked with someone more experienced, and skilled in listening and asking good questions, enables a mentee to grow in skills and abilities, and to become more the person God has designed her to be.

Some definitions

I like this one by Robyn Claydon, who mentors women leaders in Australia:

- *Mentoring is running alongside someone else for as long as it takes.*

Another (anonymous) definition:

- *A mentor is someone who believes in you more than you believe in yourself.*

A definition from the business world:

- *A mentor is part warm bath, part cold shower...it is about enabling, helping people to celebrate their skills and success, but also about clarifying thinking, asking awkward questions, encouraging them to take risks. (Martin Kelly)*

The definition used on the Arrow Leadership Programme (where mentoring is a key component) is somewhat longer, but comprehensive:

- *Christian mentoring is a dynamic, intentional relationship of trust in which one person (mentor) enables another (mentee) to maximise the grace of God in their life through the Holy Spirit, in the service of God's kingdom purposes, by sharing their life, experience and resources.*

Benefits of mentoring

For Christians, mentoring is rooted in biblical principles – Priscilla mentoring Apollos, for example. While discipling has always encouraged Christians to journey together, one helping another, our society's individualism has often worked against such relationships. Hence the need to create structures for what for some people just happens naturally! We all need others to help us grow as Christians, and as leaders. Mentoring provides a structure for being intentional about it.

Mentoring (or coaching – sometimes the words are used interchangeably, or 'coaching' means the kind of process we are considering here) is a critical tool in the career development of women. According to some business research, mentors can be especially important in helping women early in their careers: to provide contacts, give key information, and help them to learn valuable skills. *Coaching Women to Lead* identifies the following themes as being particularly important for women:

Confidence; networking; role models; balancing career and family; resilience; navigating the labyrinth; playing the game; developing presence; developing into a leader.

Women sometimes struggle to understand church politics and power, or with some of the basics of church leadership, and mentoring can help with all these. It's great to talk things through with someone who has faced the same challenges and knows what it's like to be where we are.

Having a mentor can be like having one's own career development coach. 'A mentor goes beyond the call of obligation into the realm of guardian angelship'.

According to Carol Duff, 'you need women mentors to help you discover and develop your full potential as both a professional and a woman... With a woman you can open a dialogue that includes all aspects of our lives.'

Cross-gender mentoring and peer mentoring

While mentoring often involves one more experienced woman mentoring another, for many women in church leadership, there are few women who are 'out in front' – and who have enough time to commit to mentoring.

In a business context, aspiring women leaders have often been mentored by men, and while there are disadvantages in this, it may be a good solution for women who want to learn to lead. If this seems appropriate, there are some extra safeguards which it would be useful to take:

- Both parties inform their spouses or close Christian friends of their relationship and purpose.
- Both parties commit to meeting in public places only, and not in private homes.
- Both parties welcome regular enquiries from some outside person as to the state of the relationship.
- Both parties consider if the mentoring might work well if one or two others were involved.

Another alternative is peer mentoring. This is 'an equal relationship between two people who value and respect each other and believe each can enrich the other' (John Mallison). The relationship is usually less formal and more flexible than the other form of mentoring. Often it simply involves making more of a present friendship, while retaining the enjoyable, easygoing fun dimension of a close relationship.

Getting started

It can take just a simple conversation to get started. 'I'm looking for a mentor, particularly to focus on ... Would you be willing to be my mentor?'

'Let's meet to talk about it, and then see how we feel.'

For most women the first session will be quite intuitive, but here is a rough guide:

- Getting to know you - 'Tell me about yourself' (background, present situation, visions, dreams and challenges).
- Identify needs – 'How do you think I can help you?' (discuss and clarify).

If this looks promising, the next step is to agree practicalities:

- A time (frequency and length).
- A venue.
- Who is responsible for setting up meetings; it may be good to put several dates in the diary if both parties are busy!
- A time to review and evaluate if the relationship is working.
- An informal contract – e.g. what sort of preparation the mentee will do before each meeting, what material she can provide to help the mentor understand her context.
- Discuss issues of trust and confidentiality.

Issues for women leaders

Many women in church leadership face particular challenges which are not faced by men, or not in the same way. Mentoring may be a good way of dealing with some of these, and the following list indicates some areas which may particularly affect women leaders in the Church:

- Coping with discrimination, open or hidden, towards a woman in her ministry position.
- Wrestling with 'What does it mean to be a woman in ministry?'
- Collaborative skills may be unrecognised and unrewarded.
- Feeling excluded from informal networks.
- Lack of role models.
- Lack of a clear road map for being a successful woman leader (or a 'leader' at all).
- Competing expectations, juggling home and work responsibilities.
- Handling ambition, and power.
- Handling positive and negative feedback.
- Different norms apply to women in demonstrating vulnerability.
- Coping with loneliness: in ministry, at home, or both.
- For some women, coping with singleness, especially in the early 30s onwards
- Appropriate assertiveness in a Christian context when this is perceived negatively.

There is lots more which could be said about mentoring. This short article aims to introduce the principle and make some suggestions about how to get started. Some churches, dioceses and networks are promoting mentoring and providing training and resources.

But if the idea of having a mentor excites you, don't wait for someone else to take the initiative. Read a bit more about it (see resources below). Prayerfully think about what areas you'd want to focus on, and the kind of person you'd find helpful as a mentor. Then go for it!

And finally

Another quotation from Robyn Claydon:

Mentoring is rather like running an Olympic relay race. The older, more experienced leaders running the Christian race are - or will be - in the process of handing the baton on to those coming up behind. They don't suddenly hand the baton on, for the other person may not be ready and drop it. For a time, as in the race, one runs alongside the other, giving him or her strength and encouragement and handing on the baton when they know they are ready.

Further information

Ruth Hassall, *Growing Young Leaders: a practical guide to mentoring teens* (BRF/CPAS, 2009).

Nick Helm and Philip Allin (eds), *Finding Support in Ministry* (Grove P90, 2002).

Bob Hopkins and Freddy Hedley, *Coaching Missional Leaders* (ACPI Books, 2008)

Bryn Hughes, *Discipling, Coaching, Mentoring* (Kingsway, 2003).

Averil Leimon, François Moscovici and Helen Goodier, *Coaching Women to Lead* (Routledge, 2011)

Carson Pue, *Mentoring Leaders* (Baker, 2005).

Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS, 2008).

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