

MENTORING YOUTH

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Throughout the course of time, Greek mythology has played a significant role in the literary curriculum. One particular work that is studied by is Homer's *Odyssey*. This great epic describes the series of events that surrounded the Trojan War. The major figure in this story is king Odysseus.

As the king left to fight in the war, he wanted to be certain that his young son would be trained properly in his absence. Odysseus decided to place his son, Telemachus, in the care of an individual that he could trust completely. The man that received this crucial responsibility was Mentor. Over the next 20 years, Mentor would train young Telemachus in all of the crucial areas of his life. This close relationship revealed the ultimate intention of the king for his son.

This segment of Homer's *Odyssey* illustrates the process of mentoring in its truest form. When mentoring is implemented correctly, the results that follow for each participant are priceless. It is no coincidence that Telemachus became successful when he grew older. His mentoring experience was certainly the catalyst that contributed to his success.

THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

As a youth minister, this account in literature intrigues me. It captivates my mind and heart because the teens of today are in desperate need of this same experience in their lives. A significant number of teens are seeking for something that they see as real. They are not interested in empty promises that never produce significant results. In sharp contrast to this desire, is the fact that teens will go to great lengths to gain acceptance from their peers. The complex nature of the teenage personality provides a paradox which mentoring can remove. Mentoring has been defined in several different ways. The major component that surrounds the concept is relationships. In his article on church assimilation through mentoring, Dr. Allen Jackson defines mentoring as, "the process in which a new believer or church member is 'shown the ropes.'" There are many conclusions that can be drawn from this definition. The most obvious conclusion is that mentoring requires a certain amount of experience in everyday life. No one is able to "show the ropes" to someone else if he or she has not examined the ropes already.

The teenagers in today's society are crying out for adults to show them the truths that they have gained in life. *Group* magazine reveals several positive aspects that can be found in a mentoring relationship. Pamela Erwin, states that teens are more likely to stay in school, attend class, go to college, and possess hope about the future when they are exposed to a mentoring relationship.

Mentoring is obviously beneficial in the lives of teens. However, mentoring is a difficult concept to understand and implement. A major question that is often asked in regard to mentoring deals with the process of beginning and maintaining a mentoring program. Several authors have given an opinion on this subject. There are some basic principles that are universal when it comes to mentoring.

MENTORING PRINCIPLES

Prayer is the first and most important of these basic principles. The Bible says that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." It goes without saying that in order to gain clear direction and wisdom from God, you must seek Him in prayer. A mentoring

experience that has not been taken before God in prayer will be a powerless and empty experience.

In the book, *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, the authors list several initiatives that can be followed when starting a mentoring program. These initiatives are very specific, and they provide a great foundation for those wishing to begin such a program. The first initiative in this book deals with choosing the group that will be invited to participate. The author suggests that you begin with the younger students (6th, 7th, and 8th grades) in the youth ministry. This may be the best place to begin since the older students are usually very busy.

The second initiative involves constructing a list of responsibilities for those who will be mentors. These adult mentors need some measurable guidelines that will enable them to evaluate their progress as they embark on this commitment. If the responsibilities are unclear, then it will be extremely difficult for adults to realize his or her purpose in this process. The essential components of a quality mentor are support, interaction, guidance, communication, involvement, and time.

Another initiative is meeting with the parents to receive affirmation. The parents of each student can certainly strengthen or weaken this mentoring experience by how they respond to the program initially. If a parent is not willing to support this endeavor, then it should not take place because it will be a disastrous experience in the long run. Clear communication with parents will enable them to understand and reinforce the events that occur in the mentoring process. It is certainly possible that all parents may not be able to be reached because they are not actively involved in their children's lives anyway. In this case, a mentor should report frequently to the program coordinator for updates.

The next initiative addresses the target group of students that will be involved. A meeting should be held with these students to inform them of the expectations. This meeting can occur at any time, but it must be intentional in order to reach the objective of informing the students about mentoring. A commitment is not necessarily required at this time.

Another part in the process must be to match each student with his or her adult mentor. This procedure can be done in many different ways. One way to match the pairs is simply allow the students to pick who they want. A second way, and perhaps the most conducive to success, is to schedule a specific event that is geared toward this match taking place. The most important factor to remember when seeking to match students with mentors is that it is best when it happens naturally. The more input the students are able to have in this process, the more likely they will be to carry through with it once it begins.

Another initiative that Lavon Welty suggests is to allow the mentors to find encouragement and motivation through regularly scheduled meetings. These meetings should be designed to increase the confidence and ability of each mentor. Questions that arise through this mentoring process can be dealt with in these meetings. Each mentor will find security as well as opportunity in share times like these.

The final initiative that can be implemented in the mentoring program as it begins is an evaluation opportunity. As the year comes to an end, each pair should be evaluated according to the criteria that was developed from the beginning. This evaluation should be thorough, and feedback must be timely. If at any point a mentoring pair is not functioning correctly, then it must be dealt with as quickly as possible. These evaluation sessions can be the avenue that enables you to solve the problems of the mentoring process. A report can also be developed that can be compiled for parental information.

MENTORING MODELS

There are some models for mentoring that congregations have adopted, and these models can be studied for ideas and insight. One model that is being used is the M-team concept that the Shadow Mountain Community Church in El Cajon, California has implemented. Another model to be studied is the Adopt-a-Teenager program that Grace Christian Church in Warren, Michigan has started. The youth ministers at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church in Moraga, California have started a mentoring program that coincides with the church's confirmation program. Mentoring communities are another option for developing this concept of mentoring relationships in a church setting as well. These communities are based on small group mentoring situations rather than mentoring pairs.

The mentoring process known as M-team is now in its third year of existence. This program has been designed as a supplement to the existing youth ministry. It is announced to the entire congregation weekly through an advertisement in the church bulletin. There are also several training opportunities for the adults in the church throughout the year. The focal point of this ministry is to give adults the chance to become friends with the youth in the church. M-team is a very low profile ministry with a vision for the future. The goal of this ministry is to match every young person in the church with one or more adults.

Danielle Bernock started a simple, but effective Adopt-a-Teenager program at her church. Adopt-a-Teenager has the same characteristics as any mentoring program, but it never uses the word mentor. Danielle believes that this has the potential to make some adults feel unqualified. The main objective of the program is find adults who are willing to pray for specific teens and provide support in other ways when necessary. This particular program is a simple program that has various levels of interaction. There is the anonymous prayer level, the notified prayer level, the limited contact level, and the deep relationship level. All of these levels are decided upon by the teens individually.

The youth pastors at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church have initiated a four-month mentoring program. This program is directly connected to the confirmation process that students attend. Confirmation is designed as a study time for each student in the areas of doctrine, theology, and church creeds. The youth pastors believed that they could revitalize this process of confirmation if they enlisted several adults to hold the teens accountable. It has been successful because it is a short-term commitment and the responsibilities are specific.

Certain churches have designed several small group communities within their congregation. This approach to mentoring seeks to eliminate such barriers as burnout, frustration, and members who move. Mark Cannister writes in *Youthworker*, "A mentoring community supports students' faith while challenging them in new, deeper ways of understanding and expressing their faith." The model for this program is the relationship that Jesus had with His twelve disciples. The small group setting such as this eliminates several hassles that are part of the one on one experience. Today's society is not the stable society of the past, and mentoring communities make certain concessions for this new phenomenon.

Mentoring youth is more crucial than ever. A recent study that appeared on American Family Radio affirms the positive influence of the mentoring process. When 249 teenagers from New Jersey were surveyed, two thirds of them indicated that they were currently involved in a mentoring experience. This same study also revealed that there was a decline in premarital sex, cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug use, and weapon possession for these teens that replied yes to the mentoring question. The success of mentoring is certainly apparent, and the youth ministers of today must be wise enough to incorporate this concept into their everyday ministry philosophy.

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