

Those who accompany us on our spiritual journey

Everyone who ministers in Jesus' name needs one or more people to help them reach their full potential, both in Christian growth and in ministry effectiveness. Timothy Jones, underlines this in his book *Mentor & Friend*:

Throughout Christian history one finds many terms that name or identify this special relationship: spiritual director, spiritual friend (or companion), soul friend (an old Irish tradition), guide, and spiritual father or mother. Terms such as *pastor*, *shepherd* and *priest* also suggest our need for others' insights and guidance. Some call such helpers *spiritual mentors*.

Whatever our vocabulary, the growing current interest in spiritual direction is based on a simple acknowledgement: To flourish, our relationship with God must be rooted in the soil of our daily relationships with others. There is no substitute for flesh-and-blood, kindred companions if we are to understand ourselves, grow in faith and compassion, and keep ourselves from losing our way.

"God has ordained things," wrote Alan Jones, "that we grow in the Spirit only through the frail instrumentality of one another." The fourth-century church leader Basil told his readers to find someone "who may serve you as a very sure guide in the work of leading a holy life," one who "knows the straight road to God." And he warned that "to believe that one does not need counsel is great pride." Augustine, a leader in the early days of the church, likewise emphasized that "no one can walk without a guide."

All this confirms what most of us know intuitively: we travel best when we have someone beside us. A companion can help us explore the spiritual journey's sometimes bewildering terrain and steer us from wrong turns. A friend can keep us from drowsily missing the sights and signposts along the road of faith.

For the sake of mutual understanding with those in your ministry setting, the following explanations of three specific categories of "spiritual helpers" may be useful:

Ministry coach

In some cases ministry coach is also referred to as a ministry supervisor. The emphasis is on finding someone who can assist you in developing your plan for ministry; counsel you as to how to make the adjustments necessary to see the ministry flourish; and, as you look ahead to the future, help you evaluate your ministry to see if you are accomplishing what you believe God has given you to do. It is a blessing when God provides someone(s) who can more objectively help you in these ways. Stanley and Clinton describe coaching like this (*Connecting: The Mentoring relationships you need to succeed in life* [NavPress, 1992]):

1. Impart skills (frequently knowledge is involved also).
2. Impart confidence and understanding in the use of those skills.
3. Motivate people so as to bring out the best in them, usually stretching them beyond what they thought they were capable of.
4. Model the importance of learning the basics of a skill, a process that will prove valuable in all of life.
5. Point the mentorees to other appropriate resources and link them up with them.
6. Observe the mentorees in action.
7. Evaluate the mentorees' experience and give feedback to enhance self-learning and development.

Growth partner

Sometimes it will not be appropriate or helpful for your ministry coach to also give accountability for your personal life. A growth partner is someone who has agreed to meet with you regularly to provide love and encouragement, prayer support, and accountability for those areas in which you have decided God wants you to grow. The Irish concept of *soul friend* is an example of this.

The *anmchara* (sometimes spelled "anamchara"), as the Irish called the soul friend, is

a combination of close friend, spiritual director and mentor. The soul friend relationship is a personal relationship rather than professional or technical. The soul friend relationship is not hierarchical. Although there are sometimes elements of the master-disciple relationship, the persons involved primarily consider themselves as companions along the way; it is a relationship. The soul friend also includes common vision. The soul friend relationship involves accountability. The willingness to challenge one another springs from the trust and affection of deep friendship, rather than from an unequal relationship. The relationships are centered on God, the soul friend in whom all other friendships are united. True soul friends do not depend on each other alone, but root their relationship in God. Finally, the soul friend is someone who seeks to discern with us where we are on that journey, what the Spirit is doing in our lives, and how God is leading us. (Adapted from Britannica.com)

Mentor

Finding a mentor often is perceived as a very difficult thing: either it seems impossible to find the right person or it is too threatening. You may doubt that anyone would want to invest her/his time and energy in your life and ministry. Stanley and Clinton outline 8 distinct types of mentors:

1. **Discipler** / Enablement in basics of following Christ.
2. **Spiritual Guide** / Accountability, direction, and insight for questions, commitments, and decisions affecting spirituality and maturity.
3. **Coach** / Motivation, skills, and application needed to meet a task, challenge.
4. **Counselor** / Timely advice and correct perspectives on viewing self, others, circumstances, and ministry.
5. **Teacher** / Knowledge and understanding of a particular subject.
6. **Sponsor** / Career guidance and protection as leader moves within an organization.
7. **Contemporary** / A living, personal model for life, ministry, or profession who is not only an example but also inspires emulation
8. **Historical** / A past life that teaches dynamic principles and values for life, ministry, and/or profession.

As you see, there is tremendous breadth in the use of this term which should help relieve some of the stress sometimes related to finding a mentor. You will probably have various mentors in many of the categories outlined above. A few mentors may be a part of your life over a long period of time. Other mentors you may never meet (historical). You, in turn, will be called upon by God to mentor others in one – or several – of these roles. Mentoring is a healthy and important process in the building up of the body and the self development of each believer.

Sprinkled throughout conversations, you will often hear - and read - these three terms (ministry coach, growth partner and mentor) used interchangeably. Although individual mentors may participate in your life (and you in theirs) in interchangeable roles, the terms describe three different functions that are all important to our personal and professional development in ministry. It is important to understand the difference so that you are open to a wide spectrum of mentors who are available to invest in your life and ministry.