

Reflections on Mentoring: Rethinking my Expectations

By Bob Young

For most of my ministry, mentoring has been a part of my ministry vocabulary. I have sought mentors, I have sought to be a mentor to others. While mentoring has been my goal, formal mentoring has seldom occurred. This statement is true whether I was seeking a mentor or trying to be a mentor. In retrospect, I have described certain relationships as mentoring relationships, but according to traditional definitions, many of the relationships that I think of as “mentoring” relationships do not fit the expected pattern. Assuming that I am supposed to be involved in mentoring relationships, why do my explanations of how those relationships work seem so inconsistent with what I read in books?

The inconsistency I feel is both past and present—in the past, how mentoring actually worked in my life and how I thought it should be; in the present, in the relationships where I see myself primarily as learner, and also in the relationships where I seek to be a mentor.

Several factors come to mind when I think about mentoring—distance, demands, and definition. I do not get to spend a lot of time with the folks whom I consider my role models. Those who are close by geographically have lots of demands on their time, and they are helping a lot of other folks. Others live a long way off so our personal time together is limited, or we have to depend on a long-distance relationship that is buoyed from time to time by Skype, Facebook messenger, emails, and phone calls. The regular meetings, the regular shared coffee shop time, simply do not happen.

Also, there is often a hesitancy to formally define relationships as mentoring relationships. I am not inclined to ask others: Will you mentor me? Others seem equally unwillingly to ask me: Will you mentor me? Perhaps this is because formal mentoring relationships require a lot of time; or because expectations have to be worked out and schedules have to be coordinated; or because it is unclear what impact the commitment will have on my other responsibilities and relationships.

I decided it was time to reflect on my own experiences and rethink what I mean by “mentoring.” How do the things mentioned above influence my understanding of mentoring? As I think about my past experiences in “mentoring,” here’s some of what I see. First, I have not had many intentional mentoring relationships, either where I served as mentor or where I was mentored. Rather, my “mentoring” experiences have been occasional, at times random, and less than consistent. Second, the relationships I remember and cherish have occurred in the context of a nurturing fellowship of believers, at times in a local church, and more often in travels that put me in contact with lots of people in the global community of believers. Third, many of those relationships involve mutual mentoring, by which I mean that I am both giver and receiver, that I am investing in another person but that I am also being blessed with new insights, enthusiasm, and orientation. Fourth, mentoring at its best is simply an act of hospitality.

All of these dynamics mean that the receiving relationships I identify as mentoring relationships, where I have been mentored, are those in which I have found acceptance, friendship, brotherhood, motivation toward discipleship, spiritual insights, examples of service,

and demonstrations of Christian example. As I look back, none of them were formalized. Some of the relationships where I have served as a mentor—local ministry, university professor, and missionary travels—have been more formal. However, a good number of those mentoring relationships were also informal. My current efforts that may fit into the category of “mentoring” are certainly informal, although I can quickly tell you who the persons are that I am seeking to learn from, and I can quickly identify the persons I am trying to help fashion and mold into the image and ministry of Christ.

In my reflection and rethinking, I discovered three things.

Most of my mentoring experiences do not fit into the expected or normal model.

My richest and best mentoring relationships—both as receiver and as giver—have not occurred through regular, scheduled meetings.

My mentoring relationships are flexible, because my own needs and the needs of those I work with continually change. Sometimes, Timothy needs the fairly consistent presence of a Paul. Other times, Timothy needs to be left on his own to resolve the problems that arise, applying his own developing wisdom.

Mentoring relationships are at times sporadic, opportunities to spend time together come and go, but in healthy relationships, the other person is always present, available at a moment’s notice with today’s technology.

Mentoring does not always mean serving as a coach or seeking a coach.

My mentoring relationships are generally far removed from what I understand by coaching.

More often, we are co-laborers, welcoming one another to our shared tasks and enjoying the intimacy of fellowship in shared ministry or a shared mission. Often, both of us would describe ourselves as guests in the life of the other person.

Mentoring means shared relationship. Because all of us have unique experiences and unique insights, the relationships I share in the Christian community most often mean that I am both learner and teacher.

Mentoring is seldom private. Sharing time in meaningful ways means inviting others to share in the celebration and joy. Mentoring is dynamic, vibrant, flexible.

Mentoring relationships exist at various levels of closeness or fellowship. I am closer to some of my mentors than to others. I am closer to some of those I mentor than I am to others.

Mentoring is mutual. Christian brothers and sisters teach and learn and grow together. We are friends and coworkers. We grab a moment here and there, and the subject is always the same—what is God doing in our lives.

Mentoring means being an active part of the Christian community.

In the Christian community, mentoring often occurs informally, at unexpected moments, with unexpected people.

In the Christian community, mentoring occurs best by shared moments that easily turn the conversation to spiritual matters that encourage us all, buoy our spirits, and find us sharing common hearts. Listening to one another, we become a community capable of accomplishing God’s work in this world.