



ONE

# WHAT IS MENTORING?

*One generation commends your works to another;  
they tell of your mighty acts.  
Psalm 145:4*

Young and fresh out of college, I had my first opportunity to sink my teeth into vocational ministry. Prior to this, I was an intern at a small church plant in south central Pennsylvania. But now I was trading in my intern hat for the title of youth pastor. I was going to be the one responsible for leading a small group of young people in the college town of Shippensburg.

I wondered how to start. What should I do first?

I concluded that the best first steps would be to get to know the teens. I quickly organized activities, outings, Bible studies, and mid-week gatherings. These events gave me the opportunity to meet with the whole group. Yet I still needed time to get to know individuals. So I made a signup sheet asking teens to meet me before or after school, either one on one or in pairs (depending primarily on gender).

Since my budget was pretty strapped, I created the tongue-in-cheek slogan “Buy Mike a Coke.” *Sign up and Mike will pick you up after school and take you out so you can buy him a Coke.* The idea caught on. Surprisingly, almost every teen in the ministry signed up. These teens were interested in spending time with an adult who wanted to get to know them better. Of course, I usually was the one breaking out the wallet and buying the soda, coffee, or ice cream. But each time I met with teens, I got to know them better.

The investment paid off. Questions about their families, interests, hobbies, and friends helped me understand more of where they were coming from and how I could more effectively help them grow in their relationships with Christ. I asked them questions in order to get to know each teen as a person, and then I allowed them to ask me questions so they could get to know me. These conversations paved the path for many of my mentoring relationships for the next several years.

At its core, mentoring is a relationship cultivated between two people—namely, a mentor and a mentee for the personal growth of the mentee. Let’s break down that definition into bite-sized pieces.

First, mentoring is *a relationship cultivated between two people*. A mentoring connection has to have a healthy, growing-relationship factor as its foundation. In order for a mentor to speak effectively into the life of

a mentee, the mentor needs to get to know the mentee, and the mentee must get to know the mentor. The mutuality factor is fundamental.

Consider this phenomenon. Have you ever had two people speak to you about something in your life that needed work and you found you could more easily accept the words of the one person but resisted the words of the other? Why does this happen? This is the relationship factor. Trust, respect, and connectivity exist between you and the person you receive things from more easily, while one of these factors may be lacking in the relationship with the person you resist. The stronger and healthier the relationship, the more effective mentoring can become. Ideally, it's about walking with a person and allowing that person to see your life and learn from how you live it. The human factor is a key component to a healthy mentoring relationship. Without it, your purpose, goals, and the place you want to take your mentee can seem unattainable. But if your mentee sees you as a real person who cares, empathizes, and has experienced your own bumps, bruises, trials, and struggles—yet grown and persevered—then the place you challenge your mentee to go can seem more reasonable.

Dave was a youth leader in the senior high ministry when I was a junior in high school. To my pleasure, he took me under his wing in a mentoring relationship. As a volunteer youth leader, Dave often took me out after our church youth meetings for ice cream or coffee. In those times together, he asked me questions and got to know me better, and I did the same with him. Over time, I trusted Dave and respected his voice in my life.

One afternoon our youth ministry took a couple vans full of teens to the Jersey shore to hit the arcades and the beach for a few hours. Dave and I went for a short walk on the beach. My experience over the next thirty minutes was like that of King David in his encounter with the prophet Nathan after his sin with Bathsheba. Dave asked me, “Mike, do you think stealing is wrong?”

I was a new Christian, but I had been raised with strong ethical convictions. So I answered rather quickly, “Of course.”

Dave then proceeded to tell me a story of some teens going to a movie. When the movie was over they headed into a theater down the hall to get two movies for the price of one. He asked if I thought that was stealing. I knew immediately what Dave was referencing. I had been found out. A few weeks earlier, a few other guys from the youth ministry and I had done this exact thing. Dave was gently calling me on the carpet as we walked in the afternoon sun that day. Because I knew Dave cared about me and wanted to help me walk my talk as a new Christian, I took his confrontation as an act of constructive love. When Nathan confronts David about Bathsheba, he does so carefully and lovingly. Based on his relationship with David, he gently brings King David to see the error of his ways, and David repents. I did the same on that hot August day. The relationship was the conduit to speak into my life.

The second part of the definition for mentoring is *for the personal growth of the mentee*. While it is a relationship, it is important that we remember whom the focus is on in a mentoring relationship. This may seem minor, but let's look at another experience I had early in my ministry.

Shortly after I started in my first ministry, Sam approached me about his interest in working with teens. He told me he wanted to go to school to become a youth pastor like me and that he had, in fact, already completed two years at a local Bible college before taking a break to earn money. He had a quirky personality, but I told myself it takes different types of people to reach teens, and I was already spread thin. The ministry was growing, and I needed volunteers. So I gladly got Sam involved.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I noticed that Sam had some unhealthy perceptions of how a mentoring relationship should be shaped. While he was good at building relationships and getting teens to open up and share their lives, he seemed to expect too much in return. He became more of a buddy to teens than a mentor. His motivation was self-focused. He tried to make the playing field equal in the relationship, with mutual investment and mutual return. A healthy mentoring relationship must always be focused on the mentee. After a few meetings with Sam, I found him to be immature and emotionally unstable. My gut told me this was not a good fit and that teens could get hurt. I asked

Sam to step out of ministry and work on some personal matters before coming back. I wish I had done my homework in screening my volunteers. Sam was, in fact, on a self-destructive path that ended in a self-inflicted catastrophe in which he hurt himself and many other people. If I had not released him from ministry, several teens would have been wounded as well. But God protected those teens.

The mentee's personal growth must always be the goal. That being said, a healthy mentor constantly learns and grows and should experience some benefit from the mentoring relationships. But this should be a residual effect and not the focus. I have learned more from my three children and all the young people I have pastored than I probably learned from most adults in twenty-five years of ministry. But, in a healthy mentoring relationship between a teen and adult, the benefits to the mentor must not become emotional or social in nature. In a peer relationship, whether between two adults or two teens, the mentor may appreciate the relationship and also learn from the mentee, but the mentor also needs to be confident that the relationship is focused on the benefits to the mentee.

Far too often, unhealthy mentors have done more harm than good, particularly in adult-to-teen relationships. In my ministry, I found it necessary, after my encounter with Sam, to incorporate a staff application process and a staff ethos to help me screen people wanting to work with teens in my ministry. This process also helps prospective volunteers understand our priorities and purposes in teen mentoring and thus protects our teens from improper or unhealthy approaches to mentoring. The application and ethos also helped me prevent potentially unhealthy volunteers from joining our team.

There are four types of mentoring relationships: life on life, circumstantial, indirect, and peer to peer.

Life-on-life mentoring is when a mentor and a mentee develop an ongoing relationship that continues for an extended period of time. In this type of mentoring relationship, the mentor may speak into many areas of life, just a few, or one. My college education gave me a solid biblical foundation and taught me how to think. These were both criti-

cal as I went into ministry. But one thing I lacked was a strategy and philosophical grid to shape my new ministry. I needed help in this area. So I sought out a ministry mentor.

Don was about twenty years my elder in ministry to teens. He graciously honored my request to be his mentee. Over the course of the next few years, Don coached me and helped me grow to understand a better way to make disciples of Jesus and how to develop a healthy and balanced ministry. Though I originally sought out Don for professional mentoring, his shepherd's heart bled into many other areas of my life. He challenged me to keep personal margins and balance in my schedule. He taught me the importance of not neglecting my call to first love and serve my wife and children. And he taught me the importance of humility, servanthood, and investing my life into other emerging leaders.

Twenty years later, my relationship with Don continues. Life-on-life mentoring extends over a period of time and often impacts significant areas of your life. People expecting to stay in ministry for the long haul will need to find a few life-on-life mentors. Life-on-life mentors for teens can help them, through the transitions of adolescence and its challenges, stay centered and healthy in their relationships with God and others.

Circumstantial mentoring tends to be more short term and not as far reaching. A circumstantial mentor helps with a focused or temporary area of need. For example, other youth pastors have asked me to meet with them to discuss particular challenges they faced in ministry.

I met Adam at a seminar I taught on youth ministry a few years ago. In the seminar, I referenced my trips to Europe with teens each summer as we partnered with and served a European church in its camp ministry. Adam had never taken a group of teens overseas, and he wanted help knowing where to get started and how to execute such a trip. We met for lunch, and Adam picked my brain for an hour. Over the course of the next few months, I heard from Adam two or three more times as he had questions. Although we talked to each other a lot after his trip, the mentoring aspect of our relationship was primarily complete.

Indirect mentoring does not completely meet the parameters of the previously cited definition for general mentoring. Yet it can play a sig-

nificant role in a person's life. I have several indirect mentors in my life. An indirect mentor is someone who coaches or guides through media, print, or the internet. I enjoy certain authors who help me in three areas of my life: spiritual formation, understanding Scripture, and leadership development. My bookshelves are filled with authors speaking to these three disciplines. Indirect mentoring provides the mentee with the opportunity to be mentored by people who are wise in their fields but inaccessible to the average person. It also gives the incredible opportunity to be mentored by dead guys. I have many Henri Nouwen, C.S. Lewis, Dale Carnegie, and Watchman Nee books on my shelves.

Peer-to-peer mentoring can happen between two friends or in the context of a small group where the goal is to help one another grow and hold one another accountable. This kind of mentoring relationship is helpful for teens and adults to incorporate into their lives, but in the case of teens, it can be helpful to have a trusted adult supervisor who keeps them from digressing or losing focus on their goals.



## Evaluation Questions:

1. Do you have a mentoring strategy in place in your ministry?
2. Have your volunteers been trained in how to have healthy mentoring relationships?
3. Do you have a staff ethos and application process in place for your volunteers?
4. Do you do criminal background checks prior to enlisting new volunteers?



## Action Steps:

- Consider the four mentoring styles mentioned in this chapter and evaluate. In which style is your ministry strongest?
- Develop a process for new volunteers to enter your ministry for mentoring. Include your philosophy of mentoring, staff ethos, an application, and a request for a criminal background check.
- Develop a staff training and equipping tool to help volunteers understand how healthy mentoring occurs.