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# BULLETIN

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1983

Vol. 6, No. 3

\$2.00

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# Spiritual Formation in the Seminary Community

## Mentoring

by Dick Daniels

Recent inquiry related to faith development demonstrates that spiritual formation does occur in conjunction with the other dimensions of human development.<sup>1</sup> The crucial question for the seminary focuses on its responsibility for that development at the stage or level students bring to their theological education.

Daniel Levinson's research on adult development identifies the "novice" phase of adult life which includes the following periods: the early adult transition (17–22 years), entering the adult world (22–28 years), and the age 30 transition (28–31 years). Within the novice phase, Levinson postulates four tasks which are common and essential to the process of entry into adulthood:

1. Forming a dream and giving it a place in the life structure.
2. Forming an occupation.
3. Forming love relationships, marriage and family.
4. Forming mentoring relationships.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of mentoring is used by many writers in discussing spiritual development or formation. Kenneth Leech and Tilden Edwards have provided a historical review and numerous examples of individualized spiritual mentoring in the Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> Some writing has also described the corporate possibilities for spiritual guidance through small groups.<sup>4</sup> The seminary is a natural setting in which this can be made available.

Seminary faculty members fulfill many varied roles: teaching, advising, leading in worship/liturgy, research and writing, membership in professional organizations, leading small groups, participation in retreats and seminars, contributing to denominational and church life at all levels, and representing the institution off-campus. In addition to the classroom setting, though, the opportunity for faculty to relate to students is of primary importance for several reasons. Alexander Astin's significant work within undergraduate higher education demonstrated the importance of student involvement with faculty and staff for increased personality and behavioral changes.<sup>5</sup> He found that the frequency of faculty–student interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other single variable identified. The writing of Katz and Hartnett on graduate and professional education and Gordon E. Jackson on faith formation in professional clergy support this same conclusion: "The nature of the graduate student's relations with faculty is probably the single most salient feature of the graduate department climate."<sup>6</sup> "A conclusion we have reached from this study is that with few exceptions the most important people in the faith formation of our sample beyond early home life were seminary professors. . . . Perhaps one reason for this was the readiness of these soon-to-be clergy for clergy models. In the seminaries they found them."<sup>7</sup>

Several terms are used in the literature of spiritual formation, but the primary ones are spiritual direction and spiritual mentoring. Writers on the subject have suggested various definitions. Shawn McCarty has helped to distinguish between "spiritual" and "direction" and to clarify

some possible misunderstandings. "Spiritual direction is not 'spiritual' in the sense that it is concerned with the life of the spirit or the life of the soul as somehow disengaged from the mind and body. . . . There is a focus on the 'spiritual' dimension of the person, but with an awareness of and an attentiveness to the fact that other dimensions of the person's life can help or hinder growth in holiness. . . . Nor is spiritual direction 'direction' in the sense of being overly directive. . . . The direction does not tell who they should be or what they should do. And this fact . . . precludes fostering an unhealthy dependence of the directee or director."<sup>8</sup>

The following definitions offer additional insight into the meaning of mentoring and direction:

1. "In a word, [the spiritual director] is only God's usher, and must lead souls in God's way, and not his [or her] own."<sup>9</sup>
2. "Spiritual direction has been that form of pastoral care which offers direct help to another person to enable that person to let God relate personally to him or her, to respond to God personally, and to live the consequences of that relationship."<sup>10</sup>
3. "Spiritual direction is the particular discipline of listening with a soul friend to the ways the Spirit is uniquely moving through our whole life, deepening conversion into the joy and mission of God in Christ. The relationship also involves attention to the disciplines undertaken by a person to assist ongoing, daily listening. Such spiritual guidance personalizes theological education in terms of this person's gift, call, and need, in the context of the Body of Christ."<sup>11</sup>
4. "A 'good enough' mentor is a transitional figure who invites and welcomes a young [person] into the adult world. The mentor serves as a guide, teacher and sponsor, [and] represents skill, knowledge, virtue, accomplishment—the superior qualities a young [person] hopes someday to acquire."<sup>12</sup>

Specific characteristics have been cited which describe the kind of people who are effective spiritual mentors. Tilden Edwards conducted a study concerning spiritual growth through the Alban Institute. A representative group of clergy were asked to identify individuals in their congregations whom they felt were the most spiritually mature. Through in-depth interviews it was discovered that "the most consistently important stimulus to spiritual growth were particular people who were trusted, and who were perceived as caring, durable in their faith, and wise."<sup>13</sup>

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***The accountability of the seminary to the church demands more than the cognitive acquisition of theological insights and ministry skills.***

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More specifically, Gordon E. Jackson's study offered a profile of the effective mentor–faculty member as one who is "academically competent and intellectually alive, sharing convictions with a quiet confidence and personal authority, and caring with a sensitivity that is able and

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willing to be empathetic and remembers details."<sup>14</sup>

The functions of the mentor include several roles. While not specifically focused on spiritual formation, Levinson has included these: (1) A teacher, who enhances the person's skills and intellectual developments; (2) A sponsor, who uses influence to facilitate the person's entry and advancement; (3) A host/guide, who welcomes the person into a new occupation and social world, acquainting him or her with its values, customs, resources, etc.; (4) An exemplar, who offers a model to admire and emulate in terms of virtues, achievements, and the way of living; (5) A counselor, who also offers moral support in times of crisis.<sup>15</sup>

McCarty adds the following functions to Levinson's: listening, affirmation, confrontation, accountability, clarification, integration, and discernment.<sup>16</sup> Within the literature of student development in higher education is this summary: "The mentor wears many hats—consultant, instructor, counselor, administrator, researcher, evaluator, referral agent, and liaison with other faculty and staff. Most importantly, however, the mentor is a significant and concerned person who effectively facilitates self-responsibility, self-directedness, and developmental task achievement in students."<sup>17</sup>

In describing the mentor's role, several writers have distinguished between mentoring and counseling. At times the mentor may counsel, but the role includes other functions as well. When the directee needs counseling on issues related to spiritual formation, the mentor may or may not feel qualified to work with the person in that counseling role. Referral might be necessary.

The functions of serving as a spiritual mentor have important implications for already busy faculty members. McCarty said that "the lack of availability of willing and able spiritual directors is a universal complaint."<sup>18</sup> He cites some valid reasons for this. Many are already over-extended, have unrealistic role expectations for mentoring, or fear the involvement or the risk of dependency. Katz and Hartnett are incisive about the implications of serving as a mentor when they say that the most important elements in student-faculty relationships are accessibility and availability.<sup>19</sup> Paul Hoon has concurred: "The big words here are 'availability, freedom, and accountability.' That is, first, formational faculty will take care to be present to students with a posture that will personalize spiritual concern. They will be there, and they will be available."<sup>20</sup>

In the role of mentor, faculty must continually recognize that growth is slow and gradual. It depends upon the student's readiness and capacity for growth. Thus the availability and accessibility of faculty members is essential to this process of spiritual formation.

In seeking a "spiritual friend" (i.e., director or directee), Tilden Edwards suggests several areas for consideration: age, sex, experience, personality, spiritual path, faith tradition, situation in life (e.g., lay, clergy, seminarian), opportunity, and exploration (i.e., of options for spiritual direction).<sup>21</sup> Four basic issues must be clarified in establishing a mentoring relationship which Edwards refers to as a covenant.<sup>22</sup>

- (1) Frequency and regularity of meeting: there needs to be "mutual commitment in terms of definite periods wherein direction will find the space and time to happen."
- (2) "Clarification of specific areas that will be dealt with in future ses-

sions:" the covenant must be "mutually agreed upon. It then becomes the basis of accountability."

- (3) Assessment provision: there need to be "periodic evaluations of what is happening or not happening in the spiritual direction relationship."
- (4) Journal keeping: the context for participants to be "articulating their spiritual autobiography."<sup>13</sup>

One of the results of the recent project on spiritual formation by the Association of Theological Schools refers to the need for "assistance in the deepening of the gifts of faculty who feel called to be spiritual mentors of students."<sup>24</sup> A report from the National Federation of Spiritual Directors notes that "the work of spiritual direction in seminaries requires special training for those who will exercise this role. Their preparation should be on a level comparable to the preparation of those who assume other important tasks for the seminary enterprise."<sup>25</sup> Others comment that "it is unrealistic to expect that all mentors will communicate effectively, possess adequate knowledge of institutional relationships, and understand a variety of techniques that enhance students' development. In-service training provides mentors with the opportunity to improve present skills and to share effective approaches with each other."<sup>26</sup>

In 1975 the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation developed colleague groups of spiritual directors. This led to the A.T.S.-Shalem Institute two-year spiritual guidance program to prepare spiritual mentors in 1977. This was funded through a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The grant specified Shalem to begin this experiment in spiritual direction under the auspices of the A.T.S. and in cooperation with the Washington Theological Union.<sup>27</sup> The program includes seminars, readings, peer groups, mentoring, being mentored, and personal discipline. The Shalem Institute also sponsors a four-day conference-retreat on the spiritual life of spiritual leaders. Tilden Edwards has drawn together a selected list of programs that offer assistance in becoming a more effective spiritual mentor.<sup>28</sup>

The use of mentors in a developmental program of spiritual formation can be expanded to include others beyond the seminary community. They also are in need of training in this role. "At the same time as faculty are helped in this area, schools could reach out to those clergy and laity in the larger community who have special gifts for spiritual guidance. An available resource pool of such persons, who themselves are occasionally brought together for mutual reflection and further learning about this ministry, could significantly broaden the kinds and richness of people available for spiritual counsel. Such a larger clergy-laity mix of gifted spiritual mentors also would model the collegial ministry of the church in the preparation of its pastoral leadership."<sup>29</sup>

The task of theological education is much easier if we merely limit the seminary's responsibility to the cognitive acquisition of theological insight and ministry skills. The accountability of the seminary to the church demands a broader focus. These years can stifle or foster the spiritual growth of students. Whether provided by formal seminary offices or through the initiative of student groups, mentoring should be available to provide the spiritual direction desired by some and needed by all.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. See the writing of James W. Fowler, John J. Gleason, Sam Keen, Mary M. Wilcox, and John H. Westerhoff.
2. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of A Man's Life* (Knopf, 1978), pp. 90-111.
3. Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist, 1980); Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: The Practices of Christian Spirituality* (Harper & Row, 1980).
4. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 150-162.
5. Alexander W. Astin, *Four Critical Years* (Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 223.
6. Joseph Katz and Rodney T. Hartnett, *Scholars in the Making: The Development of Graduate and Professional Students* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1976), p. 59.
7. Gordon E. Jackson, "They Rode The Music: A Story of the Faith Journey of Sixty Clergy," pp. 78-79.
8. Shawn McCarty, "On Entering Spiritual Direction," *Review for Religious* v.35 (1976): 856-857.
9. Foster, p. 159.
10. William A. Barry, "Spiritual Director and Pastoral Counseling," *Pastoral Psychology* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1977), p. 6.
11. Tilden Edwards, Jr. "Spiritual Formation in Theological Schools: Ferment and Challenge," *Theological Education* (Dayton, Ohio: Association of Theological Schools, Autumn 1980), p. 11.

12. Levinson, p. 333.
13. Tilden Edwards, Jr., *Spiritual Growth: An Empirical Exploration of Its Meaning, Sources, and Implications* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute Publication), p. 7.
14. Jackson, p. 79.
15. Levinson, p. 98.
16. McCarty, pp. 859-863.
17. Fred B. Newton and Kenneth L. Ender, eds., *Student Development Practices* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1980), p. 192.
18. McCarty, p. 855. Also see, Edwards, *Theological Education*, p. 21.
19. Katz and Hartnett, p. 64.
20. Paul W. Hoon, "Report of the Task Force on Spiritual Formation," *Theological Education* (Dayton, Ohio: Association of Theological Schools, Autumn 1972), p. 46.
21. Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, pp. 107ff.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-124.
23. McCarty, pp. 865-866.
24. Edwards, *Theological Education*, p. 44.
25. *Seminary Spiritual Formation: Current Issues*, Task Force Report of the National Federation of Spiritual Directors (June 1979), p. 1.
26. Newton and Ender, p. 203.
27. Edwards, *Theological Education*, pp. 38-42, and *Spiritual Friend*, pp. 194-231.
28. Edwards, *Theological Education*, p. 42.
29. *Ibid.*