

Mentoring, Spiritual Direction, or Discipleship

One of the most important dynamics in living churches is that of intentional one-on-one relationships that help individuals mature in their faith. We have our Sunday gathered worship times, and our small groups, and prayer triplets and things like that, but intentional personal *investment* is invaluable. Many of us can reflect on the individuals who have invested in us over the years, be it formally or informally; they are invariably God's gift to us.



These *investing* relationships, however, are not all alike. There are a number of words and phrases that we use to describe them. The three I want to pick up on here are “discipleship”, “mentoring”, and “spiritual direction”.

Understanding the differences between these is important. There is a lot of overlap, but the semantics informs the intention of the relationship. And the intention helps guide the expectations of those who are entering into it. It also allows each form of relationship to be valued in its own way.

Here, then, is how I would describe these three forms of investing relationships:

MENTORING: This is a broad category and the word has a high semantical overload. It is also the word that most readily overlaps with secular domains.

Broadly speaking, the mentoring relationship is a *reflecting* one. A mentor helps you to analyse and articulate what is already there. In mentoring, goals are clarified, actions are identified, resources are suggested. A mentor is someone to “bounce off”, to run ideas past, to seek

advice from, and to approach with questions. They willingly allow their experience to be tapped.

The process is driven and shaped by the person being mentored.

The mentor does not direct, and will not even provide accountability unless it is requested. The scope of mentoring can be quite small, focussing on professional life, or a particular issue or obstacle.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: The key to this form of relationship is in the phrase itself. It is *spiritual* in that it considers life holistically and deeply, and with particular attention to our relationship with God. It explores matters of conscience and calling, prayerfulness and petition.

It is *direction* in that the relationship is “directive.” This is not in the sense of a manipulation or domination, but in the sense that a doctor can be directive in pursuit of increased health for the patient. The direction is cooperative and always constructive.

The spiritual direction relationship is about *shared discernment*. The spiritual director assists with self-reflection but also speaks truth from a shared source of inspiration such as Scripture. The director can bring spiritual exercises, or directions to explore: forms of prayer, actions of repentance that need to be considered.

DISCIPLESHIP: For many “discipleship” is not easily grasped. It is sometimes an empty phrase that is used as a churchified version of “mentoring” or a hipper version of “spiritual direction.” However, the best framework for considering discipleship is “apprenticeship”, in the older sense in which a more experienced person shares *life* and *purpose* with an apprentice, not just vocational skills.

Jesus was a discipler. His disciples travelled with him, ate with him, argued with him, and learned from him. Only rarely did he exclude them from his activities and his time.

Discipleship is about *sharing life*.

The relationship is shaped by vulnerability and openness. A way of life, and necessary skills, are passed on through allowing the other to observe and participate in the inner life that is then expressed outwardly. Vocation is not just about skills but about foundational motivations and values, about *what moves and guides and what is done in response*.

Someone who is discipling needs to be willing to open their lives and explain and demonstrate what moves and shapes them.

They will find themselves challenged by the relationship, as much as they invest in the other person.

In this way the Christian discipler is not making their own disciples, but disciples of Jesus. They bring another into both the interior and exterior of how they follow Christ, and so bring others into that same "fellowship" where Jesus is the guide. Paul's "*imitate me as I imitate Christ*" expresses this dynamic. Good discipleship therefore doesn't create dependence, it creates *community at which Christ is the centre*.

Similarly, propagation is *inherent* to discipleship. The sharing of life includes the sharing of the discipling dynamic itself. Discipled people will find themselves discipling others, in their own way. There was wisdom in Jesus' ways, his discipling ended up founding a movement and changing culture.

I am heartened that the Church of England, and Anglicanism in general, is (re)embracing the language of discipleship.

The General Synod report, *Developing Discipleship*, (written by Bp. Steven Croft, soon to be the Bishop of our Diocese of Oxford), approaches it with an understanding of the depths and breadths of what it means. Likewise, when we use the phrase we must realise that it is not about lipservice to a trend, nor even about advancing oneself: discipleship allows us to put all things, together, at Christ's feet. It is therefore

costly, requires courage, challenges our character, and changes church culture. We should not use the word lightly, but we should certainly pursue it.