

Resources for Spiritual Formation Mentors

*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect,
but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

-- Apostle Paul

Theological Field Education is designed to be a bridge between the academic/theoretical arena of the classroom and the practice of ministry in “real life” settings. The goal is for students to learn and grow not only in ministry skills, but also in their personhood and spirituality. As a student’s Spiritual Formation Mentor, you will assist the student in reflecting upon who they are as an individual and where they are in their relationship with God, and in implementing a strategy for growth in those areas. The following material is designed to help you in the task of journeying with the student during this crucial time in his/her ministry education. We’ve included an article by Dr. Doran McCarty that is an excellent resource for the Spiritual Mentor. Of special interest is his section that covers the introductory sessions with those who are being mentored.

A Spiritual Formation Mentor is a person who works with us on our continuing spiritual development. It is easy to focus on our intellectual and professional development and to lose sight of what gives our lives real meaning and depth. A Spiritual Formation Mentor reminds us that the “school for the heart” is crucial to our ministry, one we never outgrow. It is our goal to develop both the head, the heart, and the holy at Gateway Seminary.

Our best Spiritual Mentor is the Holy Spirit. Both the student and the person serving as a Spiritual Formation Mentor need to recognize spiritual growth is not a result of our own ingenuity, but results from our dependence upon the Holy Spirit. As both persons are sensitive to His direction, God will work through your relationships to Him and to each other to bring spiritual maturity to a new level.

The best athletes use trainers to enhance and improve their abilities. The Spiritual Formation Mentor is a type of spiritual coach. Other words that have been used to describe their role are: spiritual mentor, spiritual guide, spiritual counselor, spiritual friend or companion. It is not a dependency relationship or an “over/under” relationship, but a believer-to-believer fellowship. The other person is not responsible for your growth, but assists you in seeing yourself and your relationship with God, helps you discern the patterns in your life, and clarifies your particular methods of spiritual enrichment. Our society tends to oppose spiritual development or to distort it. A Spiritual Formation Mentor gives support and encouragement.

The task of spiritual guidance is to direct our hearts to love the only One who will ever satisfy us. We rightly deserve what is good and what is beautiful, but our craving is such that we easily mistake a plastic replica for the real thing. That is why it is important for us to be careful about the things we pay attention to, because that which catches our attention tends to shape and guide our lives.¹

¹Alan Jones, *Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1982), 30-31.

A Guide for Spiritual Formation Mentors

Dr. Doran McCarty

There is a spiritual hunger among us today. Spiritual energy is misdirected toward inordinate attention on sports, entertainment, and carnal excitement. The spiritual hunger is evident among the people of God. We have seen people turn to religious excesses and cynicism. There is spiritual hunger among the youth. In the 1960s they sought new states of consciousness through psychedelic drugs and communes. In the '70s they began to seek highs with less exotic drugs and joined more religiously oriented cults. Transcendental Meditation has impacted every age group.

Ministers suffer from spiritual hunger. Students attend seminaries under the guise of training for ministry but are trying to find their innermost selves. Experienced ministers burn out from spiritual malnourishment. Others practice the self-deceit of hollow but verbose “God-talk.” The hunger has driven some to compulsive building of religious monuments, development of organizations, denominational politics, and doctrinal inquisitions.

In this day of programs (computer and otherwise) some have sought to alleviate their spiritual hunger by following a standardized form of religious exercises and filling out mass-produced notebooks. But the hunger is personal – in the inner depths of a person’s own being where a person has his or her own relationship to God, own history, and own gifts.

As Paul said:

“For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law or sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:21-25)

No wonder a chapter later he could write the famous passage, “... in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us...” (Romans 8:37)

What is Spirituality?

Every human born in this world has (or is) a spirit, self, soul. A person has (or is) a spirit because he or she is made in the image of God. Spirituality has to do with the “inner person,” not the externals of religious exercises or religious language, for even base persons can learn these.

Spiritual formation is concerned with discernment of the inner self and God. Real prayer includes these: relating the soul to God and raising before God the concerns of one’s soul. The difference between religion and magic is that religion seeks to orient the “self” to God while magic seeks to orient God to self and the world to the desires of the self.

Spirituality is not external to us, but is what happens within the furnace of our soul. It is not a set of exterior disciplines although these may lead us into heightened spirituality. Spirituality is the stretching of our soul, self, and spirit.

The Apostle Paul reflects the heart of spirituality:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches in glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19 RSV)

When we commune with God, our spirits commune with God's Spirit. In the Christian tradition spirituality is to be open to God's Spirit, to be centered in truth and be aware of what transcends us and what is within us. Spirituality also happens within the context of community.

The goal of our spirituality is not to become God but to become more fully human – the person God would have us to be. God has not called us into the Godhead but to fulfill the image of God. Our struggle is not to disdain our humanity but to fulfill what God intended humanity to be.

Why a Spiritual Formation Mentor?

The third chapter of I Samuel contains the beautiful story of the old priest, Eli, and the young boy, Samuel. The Lord called out, "Samuel, Samuel" and the boy thought it was Eli who called. Eli perceived the Lord was calling to Samuel and told Samuel to answer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." A Spiritual Formation Mentor helps another to hear and respond to the voice of the Lord. The Spiritual Formation Mentor does not speak for the Lord but sensitizes and helps another to listen for the voice of God.

A Spiritual Formation Mentor who is wise and has had a long pilgrimage with God can be very helpful to another Christian pilgrim. A Spiritual Formation Mentor will help us if he or she keeps asking questions that drive us deeper into our inner selves where we meet God. Without such a person, we may avoid the struggle of looking so deeply within ourselves.

Spiritual formation is personal; spirituality is not just individual but intensely personal. The Spiritual Formation Mentor is not the organizer of a program or the moderator of a group nor the monitor of a set of materials but the "soul friend" of the student. This is personal and can be done in no impersonal manner regardless of the excellence of written materials or a program.

The Spiritual Formation Mentor is necessary for accountability. A human failing is to miss opportunities if someone does not hold us accountable. This accountability does not come from the position or privilege of the mentor but the permission of the student.

It is important to have a Spiritual Formation Mentor who is a fellow pilgrim on the road of discipleship. The mentor is one who feels the vulnerability, who hurts and doubts like any human but is aware of human frailty and is thereby able to guide another pilgrim from time to time, encourage them and prop them up when it is needed.

Qualities of a Good Spiritual Formation Mentor

If someone has asked you to be his or her Spiritual Formation Mentor, you possess some qualities necessary for this role. You may be capable of growing to be a better Spiritual Formation Mentor but someone has seen qualities in your life that he or she believes will be of benefit.

There are some qualities to keep in mind. The first is that you have experienced grace in your life. You have experienced God's saving grace. Particularly you need to have experienced grace in the midst of your human brokenness. You are able to bring healing when you have experienced (or are experiencing) healing. You can become what Henri Nouwen has called a *wounded healer*.

Another helpful quality of a Spiritual Formation Mentor is to have passed beyond a messianic stage where you think, "everybody needs this." You are willing to "let Thy will be done" without the anticipation of where a person should go.

A good quality of a Spiritual Formation Mentor is discernment. A discerning person is sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and can create the environment so that another person can discern the Spirit.

A good Spiritual Formation Mentor is able to bless another person. Affirmation heightens the confidence of the inner being of a person.

The good Spiritual Formation Mentor is a spiritually and emotionally healthy person. Healthy persons emphasize grace, forgiveness, love, and hope. Unhealthy persons make those around them unhealthy with emphasis on judgment, hate, prejudice, sin, and law.

The list of qualities may be endless: humility, graciousness, trust, true piety, etc. The Scriptures are filled with suggestions.

Above all the Spiritual Formation Mentor must care for their own interior lives because they cannot give to another what they do not possess.

What Does a Spiritual Formation Mentor Do?

The Spiritual Formation Mentor has been called "spiritual friend,"² and "Soul Friend."³ Both titles speak more of a relationship than a task. The Spiritual Formation Mentor does not train someone the way a dance instructor teaches a pupil a dance step. The Spiritual Formation Mentor is one who is "with" another, helping that person find out about his or her inner self and how the Spirit deals with his or her spirit. This is why I describe spiritual formation as "soul rubbing." Tilden Edwards said,

Being a spiritual friend is being the physician of a wounded soul. And what does a physician do when someone comes with a bleeding wound?

Three things: He or she cleanses the wound, aligns the sundered parts, and gives it rest. That's all. The physician does not *heal*. He or she provided an *environment* for the dominant natural process of healing to take its course. The physician really is midwife rather than a healer.

The physician of souls explicitly is a midwife, providing an environment for the birthing and nourishment of a whole soul.⁴

²Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*.

³Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend*.

⁴Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, p. 125.

We have a difficult time determining the movement of the Spirit of God in our own souls, so genuine humility keeps us from speaking in absolutes about the movement of the Spirit in another soul. Paul said, “For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (I Corinthians 2:11)

The Spiritual Formation Mentor confronts the student to clarify what is going on in him or her. The Spiritual Formation Mentor does not create spirituality in the person but serves only as the midwife to help the birthing process. How does the mentor know how to guess and to choose hunches? Because the Spiritual Formation Mentor has had a pilgrimage of his or her own and has become sensitive to the movement of the Spirit – which is discernment. As Paul prayed, “It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.” (Philippians 1:9)

The Spiritual Formation Mentor as a midwife means helping a person examine him or her rather than giving wise answers. A wise person often shows wisdom by asking wise questions rather than giving wise answers. In providing spiritual formation, I have found some specific ways to stimulate a person to examine the inner self.

Helps for the Spiritual Formation Mentor

Spiritual Formation Mentors have often asked for ideas in doing their task. There are many helpful approaches and each individual will find a pattern that is comfortable after serving in this role a few times. However, there are some areas that the Spiritual Formation Mentor may find profitable to pursue in conversation with the student as well as some exercises and simulations. These are addressed below.

Introductory Sessions

The first meetings will be times to get acquainted. Although the mentor and student may know each other, they have related in different situations than focusing on spiritual formation.

1. ***Pilgrimages.*** Both persons can share their pilgrimages. Ask each other questions that will cause reflection. Find out what the person learned from and felt about events in their lives.
2. ***Covenant.*** The Spiritual Formation Mentor and student need to begin with a covenant about their relationship and expectations. This helps the student to examine the areas with which he or she needs to struggle.

Areas to Examine

There are areas in each life that need spiritual examination. These are not areas for psychiatric therapy but spiritual evaluation. While the list is not exhaustive, these represent areas that are the environments of humanity and either help or hinder us from becoming what God intended. They are listed alphabetically in order not to imply any order of agenda or inherent importance. Each life produces its own priorities.

1. ***Attachments.*** Attachments refer to a person’s feeling the need of possessing, identification with or being part of to such a degree that there is some enslavement. These enslavements may be jobs, ideas, movements, possessions, feelings, or persons.
2. ***Beauty.*** Part of spiritual health is the ability to see beauty, even though we live in a marred world disfigured by pollution, natural tragedy, disease, and sin. A beautiful soul sees beauty.

3. **Blessing.** Blessings and curses were part of biblical tradition. Since it is God's desire to bless us, it is important to be able to recognize and receive blessings. What blessings have they experienced in life? Which persons blessed them? Whom have they blessed?
4. **Calling.** What is your calling? Does the person see the Christian life as a calling or only a ministerial profession? What is the relation of their calling to their spiritual inner life?
5. **Caring.** A basic virtue necessary for Christian maturity is caring. How sensitive is the person to the hurts of others? How is talk about caring translated into caring action?
6. **Compulsions.** How does the person handle compulsion? Are they driven? Are they out of control in some areas of their lives? Do they have to spend much energy restraining their compulsions? Do they spend much energy feeding their compulsions? Do their compulsions feed greed and their sexuality?
7. **Covenant with God.** Each person has a covenant with God whether that covenant has ever been spoken aloud or brought to the surface of consciousness. For example, some made covenants with God that if God got them out of a difficult situation (let them live, escape getting caught), they would be ministers, missionaries, etc.
8. **Destiny.** How are they dealing with their final destiny? Have they come to grips emotionally with death and beyond?
9. **Discipline.** Discipline is the intentional living a structured life. Is the person unable to accept or initiate discipline? Is that true with their time, body, habits, study, etc.? Is a person so compulsive about discipline that they don't allow themselves to "play?"
10. **Doubts.** How do they handle doubts – denial, brooding, or boasting? Are they able to doubt their doubts?
11. **Emotional Life.** Since a healthy person is dependent on a healthy emotional life, examination of a person's emotional maturity is important to their spirituality. Are emotions on the surface quickly triggered? Are the emotions dampened and seldom expressed? Are the emotions under control or controlling the person? Is the person so controlled that there is little spontaneity?
12. **Faith.** Is the person one who can trust the "unseen?" Does the person seek to replace reason by faith? Is faith a doctrinal statement or an interior experience?
13. **Grace.** Do they see their relationships with God being one of grace? Do they try to be worthy of grace and miss the gifts of grace? Are they gracious?
14. **Guilt.** How does the person handle their guilt? Can they accept grace to deal with guilt? Is the person able to talk about guilt but does not really "feel" any? Do they manipulate with guilt?
15. **Holy and Sacred.** What is holy and sacred to the person? What would they not trade or sell? What brings a sense of awe? What are the person's sacred places, things, persons, words, books, and memories?

16. **Prayer.** You will want to share prayer time together. Examine what prayer means to the person. Find out their philosophy and habit of prayer. How much is prayer making themselves available to God and how much is demanding God's availability to them?
17. **Providence.** Does the person see himself or herself fulfilling the purpose of the Kingdom of God in the world? Do they have any sense of divine purpose? Can they accept providence and still accept responsibility for success or failure?
18. **Relationships.** How do they relate to others? Can they incarnate the grace of God to others? Are they nourished from relationships? Can they initiate relationships and sustain them?
19. **Service.** How have they served others? What is their need for reward in service? Does the service tend to be in conversation, example, or direct service?
20. **Significant Others.** Who have been the "significant others" in their lives? Which ones mediated the presence of God to them? Who are their "significant others" now? Are they able to express that to them?
21. **Spiritual Resources.** What are the spiritual resources the person depends upon? The Bible? Hymns? Literature? Conversations with others? Worship? Nature?
22. **Stages of Faith.** If they are not aware of work done by James Fowler on stages of faith, they may want to read books by him. They may also want to examine Laurence O'Connell's articles in *Pastoral Hermeneutics and Ministry* (Beisswenger and McCarty, editors). The mentor can gain some sense of their stage of faith.
23. **View of God.** Each person has a view of God that is a mixture of their cultural and family background, their study, and religious experiences. The student can be led to unfold their view of God that is below the surface of creedal confession.

Exercises for Spiritual Formation

There are some exercises that have been used in spiritual formation and may prove beneficial with some students. These exercises are designed to develop understanding rather than be spiritual exercises themselves.

1. **Silence.** In an activist and auditory world, so few times people reflect with long periods of silence. An hour of silence together and a discussion about what happened may help reflection.
2. **Blessing.** Ask the student to "bless" three people each day intentionally and verbally.
3. **Scriptures They Identify With.** These are not necessarily their favorite Scriptures but the ones that describe the struggles they have gone through or are going through.
4. **Lifestyle.** Have them describe their lifestyle. Are they conscious of what elements they choose to reveal? Are they conscious of the sources of their lifestyles?
5. **Confession.** You may use a session as a time of confession. The invitation to confession may help purge the soul. You will want to end the session with a reminder of God's forgiveness.

6. **Journal.** The daily journal is one of the best ways to get in touch with inner self. Several good books on journal keeping are available. (See Morton Kelsey's *Adventure Inward* or Kelsey's articles in *Pastoral Hermeneutics and Ministry*, Beisswenger and McCarty, editors.)
7. **Dreams.** Dreams often code our inner conditions. Our hidden fears, frustrations, and desires are expressed in dreams. The place of dreams in the Bible is not incidental.
8. **Sharing Scriptures.** Take a passage of Scripture and both share what the Scripture means to you. There is a place for analysis of Scripture, but this is an exercise in how it touches your inner self.
9. **Biographies.** Biographies and autobiographies (especially the latter) give insight into us. How do we identify with the struggles, failures, and victories in the life of the one in the book?
10. **Models of Spirituality.** The student can reflect on the persons who have been spiritual models for him or her and articulate why they were.

Simulations

Simulations are "what if" situations or "games." The person imagines what they would do if placed in certain situations in order to determine some of their spiritual inner resources.

1. **One Hour to Live.** The student knows that he or she has but one hour to live. What will they do with that hour? With whom will they want to speak? Whom will they wish to see? What difference does this information make with their values?
2. **Banished.** Imagine that the country is overrun and being occupied by a hostile enemy. They demand that you leave your house and town for a distant place. You can only take what you can carry. What will that be?
3. **I Wish ...** Three wishes will be granted; what will they be?
4. **Brother Job.** Imagine undergoing Job's affliction losing all your property, your family, and your health. What will you do to rebuild or will you?
5. **A Million Dollars.** You have just received a bequest of \$1,000,000.00. Describe your next 48 hours. What you will do with the money?

These are exercises that you may find helpful to use in sessions where you are a Spiritual Formation Mentor. You will have other ways to help a person examine himself/herself. May the Spirit give you discernment in the noble task of serving as a Spiritual Formation Mentor.