

Mentoring for Discipleship and Spiritual Growth: An Assessment of Cases in Bentiu District of the SDA Church in South Sudan

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Abstract: This study sought to explore experiences in mentoring for discipleship and spiritual growth in Bentiu District of the SDA Church in South Sudan. The study involved three focus groups to receive data. There were two groups composed of seven participants each. The third group had eight participants, making a sample size of 22 respondents, selected randomly. Before venturing into the field to collect the data, the researcher secured permission from the Adventist church authority. Respondents signed the informed consent forms. Data analysis took place in the form of content analysis in the sense that the researcher assembled common themes to answer the research questions. Based on the findings, the study concludes that the youth in Bentiu District experienced mentoring for discipleship and spiritual growth through spiritual programs such as public evangelistic meetings, personal witnessing, small group meetings and through school programs. Women experienced mentoring through convention programs, association of younger women in various activities and through adult education programs. Special groups of people, also experienced the mentoring in various ways. The study recommends that church leaders need to explore more ways of mentoring the youth and the inexperienced by providing more trainings and involving them in spiritual programs. The church leaders should encourage disadvantaged women to enroll in adult education programs. Moreover, there is a need to integrate spiritual programs in the Adult Education programs so that women will be well equipped for service in the church and in the community.

Keywords: Mentoring; discipleship; spiritual; non-spiritual, relationship; development.

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Introduction

The New Oxford dictionary defines a mentor as an experienced and trusted adviser. It further describes the term as an experienced person who trains and counsels new employees or students. Mentoring then is the process of advising others or training employees and students by an experienced person. According to Renee Columbus (2018), tradition considered mentoring as relationship between a more experienced individual (mentor) and individuals with less experience (mentees). The definition of mentoring has continued to evolve over the years; however, its core function is still the

growth and development of the mentees through relationships with the mentor(s).

Mentoring can be of two types: formal and informal (Columbus, 2018), formal mentoring is defined as a developmental process that is planned and executed so that it facilitates and supports learning in the organizational context between two individuals. The purpose of the formal mentoring relationship is for the mentor to challenge and support the mentee as the mentee learns to recognize and work towards professional and personal goals. The author further argues that the informal mentoring is a relationship that occurs by chance, with no agenda or pre-arranged meeting to

achieve the goal. Relationships in informal mentoring are often spontaneous, with less structure, are self-directed, and they remain unrecognized. The informal mentoring relationship develops naturally and continues on a voluntary basis.

Mentoring can also be spiritual or non-spiritual. Spiritual mentoring is primarily based on biblical principles to impart virtues that will develop a more ethical, loyal and honest persons. Non-spiritual mentoring, on the other hand, uses non-biblical principles to train and teach individuals in organizations (Columbus (2018). Commenting on how spiritual mentoring plays a great role in the Christian Church, Rock (2006) states, "Just as people covenant together with a Christian Community for the purpose of edification and mission, spiritually-formative mentoring is covenantal in nature because it connects the mentee to the broader Christian Church" P43.

In the Benti District of the Seventh-day Adventist church, mentoring takes place in different forms, both formally and informally. It takes place through personal and public evangelistic programs, youth programs, women's ministries programs and through school activities. With regard to personal evangelistic programs, young people pair with older and experienced ones to do visitation in the homes of believers. The same is true with the Women Ministries programs where younger and inexperienced women pair with experienced ones to visit other women in their homes and at working places. In schools, teachers take turns in mentoring the pupils as teachers assign learners to lead prayer programs.

According to Blackaby (2011), "spiritual leaders don't sell vision; they share what God has revealed to them and trust the Holy Spirit to confirm the vision in the hearts of their people" (pp. 108-109) This was true in the relationship between the youth and the leaders of Benti District. The Youth were engaged in various public Evangelistic programs from which they learned how to lead such programs themselves.

Biblical and Theological Framework in Mentoring

The word mentoring does not appear in the Bible, but its principles are implied. In the Bible, mentoring started with God Himself. After creating Adam and Eve, God took time to mentor them by explaining to them what to do and how to live. God directed them about the day of rest (Genesis 2:1-3), working

in the garden (Genesis 2:15), forbidden tree (Genesis 2:16, 17), naming the animals (Genesis 2:20) and marriage (Genesis 2:21-25).

With regard to God's work as a mentor in the Garden of Eden, Dube (2020) argue that God made work as part of man's existential purpose. The original work was neither grievous nor painful. It was light, compared with what it is after sin. Plants, flowers and trees of Eden stood in need of cultivation. They would speedily have degenerated without man's attention. God would not suffer man to live in indolence. Work safeguarded them against temptations and it guaranteed their happiness.

After the fall (Genesis 3:1-8), God formally took time to mentor Adam and Eve with regard to consequences of sin. He told them that they had to leave their garden home and make their own home outside the garden. He also told them that they would get their food through hard work and finally die because of the sin they had committed (Genesis 3:16-24). Moreover, the woman would have to suffer in childbirth and be under the administration of her husband. God gave them this information so that they would know the impact and consequence of the decision they had made. Though God pronounced a curse to the new family, there was still part of God's mentoring.

God did not leave Adam and Eve without hope. He also mentored them with regard to the plan of salvation in Christ Jesus who was the "Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Adam passed this message to his children, such as Abel, who was able to give acceptable sacrifice to God than his brother Cain (Genesis 4).

The biblical mentoring relationship has continued beyond the relationship of Adam and Eve with God in the Garden of Eden. Abraham was himself a mentor. He mentored Lot and his servant Eliezer as well as his son Isaac. He instructed Eliezer not to have a wife for his son from surrounding nations that did not believe in Yahweh (Genesis 24:1-9). Isaac later mentored Jacob who also mentored his twelve children that formed the twelve tribes of Israel. Explaining about the mentoring relationship in Bible times, Columbus (2018) reports: "The mentoring relationship is also evident in Biblical times; Moses mentored Joshua (Exodus 24:13; Numbers 27:18). Naomi mentored Ruth (Ruth 3:1-6). Jesus mentored His disciples (Matthew 13:10-23; John 1:37 – 2:12) and Paul mentored Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1Timothy 1:1; 2Timothy1:2).

The relationship between Priest Eli and Samuel is another example of a biblical model of mentoring. I Samuel 2:11 shows that Samuel was growing under Priest Eli as his apprentice. I Samuel 3:8 shows that priest Eli was training Samuel to listen to the voice of God. Eli gave advice and wisdom to Samuel that would help him to become a priest in the future. This is an ideal relationship between mentor and mentee.

Another biblical model of mentorship is that of Elijah and Elisha found in I Kings 17. Elijah found Elisha and threw his mantel on him, signifying his invitation for Elisha to become his spiritual mentee. Their relationship grew to the extent that Elisha was able to receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit when God took Elijah to heaven.

The New Testament also presents several biblical examples of mentoring. Prominent among these are those of Jesus, Barnabas and Paul. In Luke 5:1-11, Jesus mentored Peter and the other disciples spiritually and relationally after inviting them to follow Him. They left everything and followed Jesus as His disciples. Jesus gently trained them to grow spiritually so that they would be able to carry the gospel to the whole world.

Barnabas presents another biblical example of mentoring relationships in the New Testament. He was the mentor of Paul. After Paul's conversion, Barnabas took Paul and presented him to the apostles. Acts 9:26-27 records Barnabas' action of taking Paul and defending him before the apostles. As a result, the apostles accepted Paul as one of them. They gave Paul the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9).

Paul mentored many disciples. Prominent among them was Timothy whom he called his son according to I Corinthians 4:17. He used a relational way of mentoring in which mentors consider younger mentees as their sons. He urged Corinthians to be mentors themselves by copying his example of mentoring (I Corinthians 4:16-18). Paul was a good encourager and he used encouragement as one of his approaches in mentoring.

Methodology

The study involved three focus groups in Bentiu District of the North-Central Upper Nile Field to collect data on mentoring for discipleship and spiritual growth. There were two groups composed of seven participants each. The third group had

eight participants, making a sample size of 22 respondents, selected randomly. The majority were men while one-third were women. Each focus group discussion took place for a period of three hours.

Before venturing into the field to collect the data, official permission the researcher secured permission from the church authority. Respondents signed the informed consent forms. Eleven questions guided the discussions in each focus group and the researchers analyzed the responses thematically.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the results of the study, guided by research questions.

Research Question 1: How did mentoring take place among the Youth in Bentiu District?

The first research question sought to establish how the mentoring took place in the Bentiu District in South Sudan. The district had 57% young people. These young people were willing to receive mentoring as Disciples of Christ. Most of them were interested in witnessing and attending spiritual programs. The study revealed that mentoring for discipleship and spiritual growth took place among the youth of the Bentiu District through various activities in the church. The youths received the mentoring from old members of the church as potential Bible teachers and evangelists. Twenty of the youths served as Bible teachers and ten as evangelists. The Bible teachers received mentoring through the teaching of Sabbath School Bible study guides. This experience gave the youth an opportunity to grow spiritually and to help others to grow spiritually. As mentees, the youth developed character that is compatible with the Bible. According to Columbus (2018), mentoring develops Christian values within the mentees. Rock (2006, p. 41) adds, "While mentoring is nothing new to the Christian church, it is a task that has been somewhat neglected in recent years, but which is being returned to in an attempt to foster greater spirituality in the community of faith."

Mentoring youth to become evangelists is important in the church, following the example of Paul and Timothy. Paul urged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (II Timothy 4:5). In Bentiu District, mentoring the youth took place through the influence of experienced elders. The mentorship involved two public evangelism campaigns. The public evangelism resulted into the baptism of ten new souls who joined the church as members.

Furthermore, ten youths went to Guit County to preach and build churches. In this trip, both spiritual and leadership mentoring took place. According to Columbus (2018), spiritual mentoring and leadership are essential to transform the new practitioners.

According to Williamson and Hood Jr. (2013), mentoring relationship must involve motivation and inspiration of the mentees through provision of spiritual values and a vision in the field. They further state,

Intense mentoring relationships are those that require a great deal of involvement of the mentor in the mentee's life. Such mentoring relationships include the Discippler, who helps mentees acquire spiritual discipline ... the Spiritual Guide... helps mentees cultivate spiritual sensitivity in their quest for Christian maturity (p. 137).

Furthermore, mentoring of the youth took place through other witnessing activities such as personal witnessing where experienced members worked with young people in the churches. After several months of pairing together, the younger youth learned how to tell who are interested in Bible studies. In addition, they learnt how to give Bible studies on their own. In other words, experienced members acted as models, educators and supporters. Speaking about the roles of mentors, Dube (2020, p. 60) states,

The mentor as a model inspires and demonstrates to the mentee how they ought to behave. As an acculturator, the mentor is involved in showing the mentee the ropes, helping the mentees get used to a particular culture. As a sponsor, the mentor opens doors, introducing the mentee to the right people.... The mentor as a supporter focuses on emotional aspects and on the effective elements of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Research Question 2: How did mentoring take place among the women in the Bentiu District?

This research question sought to establish the mentoring of women, who make up sixty percent of the membership in the Bentiu District of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Therefore, mentoring women is very important for the future growth and development of the church. Mentoring took place through women ministries leaders, deaconesses and

other experienced women in the district. The mentorship took place through the Naomi-Ruth model where older women are associated with younger ones in various aspects of life just as Naomi and Ruth worked together.

In the process of mentoring, two Women Ministries Conventions took place in a year. The first convention took place in the month of February, at Rubkona Church, about five kilometers outside the Bentiu Town, where 150 women attended the convention. Seventy of these women were young, invited to gain spiritual experience. As Columbus (2018, p. 4) states, transformation takes place through spiritual mentoring.

The second Women Ministries Convention took place at the Quit County in the month of October 2023. Here, 80 women attended the Convention. Thirty-five of these were young women who, invited for mentoring them spiritually. During this convention, twenty women accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and joined the church membership through baptism.

Spiritual mentoring is important in preparation for spiritual leadership. The mentoring can take place through the mentor's association with the mentees. Rock (2006, p. 35) agrees when he states, "mentoring mitigates against leadership burnout and allows current leaders to instill specific values and ideals into up-and-coming leaders in the church." As the mentor associates with the mentee, a relationship is developed that can sustain for a long time. Columbus (2018) echoes this relationship when she states, "The use of spiritual mentoring in the relationship development of females is important due to the increase in responsibility that females have been given in the workplace, homes and community" (p. 13).

Another important mentoring program for women involved Adult Education Programs in the month of April 2023. This program aimed at improving the reading and writing skills of women. The women engaged in two levels (Levels 1 and Level 2) of studying in the year. Forty-five women registered for this program and after such experience, they moved to advanced levels. According to World Bank (2022), only 28.9% of women in South Sudan are literate compared to 40.3% of men. When it comes to states like Bentiu, the percentage can even go lower. That is why Adult Education program is very important for the women of Bentiu District. The Adult Education program goes hand in hand with

mentoring processes that enable the women to learn leadership skills for future leadership positions in the church.

Research Question 3: What are the other forms of mentoring programs that took place in the District?

This research question sought to establish other forms of mentoring programs that took place in the District. These included mentoring new couples, students and people with special needs. These programs took place through special types of mentors that suited specific requirements.

With regard to new couples with little experience in marital relationships, older couples became mentors. They frequently visited the less experienced ones and gave appropriate instructions that helped those with limited experience to build their marital relationships. The mentors helped them understand that their relationship is a lifelong and only death can break it. The mentorship took place through the reading of the bible and other spiritual books together.

As Rock (2006, p. 4) observes, "Mentoring is increasingly being recognized as tool for advancing the God-initiated life-long quest for spiritual formation in new believers." Columbus (2018) also speaks about this kind of mentoring when she says, "Mentoring can take place in numerous environments and locations, which provides flexibility. While professional mentoring occurs during work hours, there are times when the transference of character and skills occurs within a social context."

In one primary school, mentoring took place with pupils as mentees and teachers as the mentors. The teachers taught the pupils to love God and work for Him. The teachers further conducted Bible studies for the pupils and taught the learners in different ways such as weeks of spiritual emphasis, guidance and counseling. According to Columbus (2018), provides counseling, role modeling, friendship, acceptance, and confirmation leads to enhancement and development of mentees in a very special way.

According to Dube (2020), teachers can build the relationship that eventually brings comfort to those who feel alone in their suffering. This is especially true with disadvantaged younger learners who might have gone through the bullying of the older ones. It also applies to learners who are sick and

need the teachers support during the time of sickness.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the study findings, the study gives the following conclusions:

The youth in Bentiu District experienced mentoring for discipleship and spiritual growth through spiritual programs such as public evangelistic meetings, personal witnessing, small group meetings and through school programs. These mentoring programs resulted into spiritual growth and ability to make appropriate decisions where some youth made decisions to join the church as members through baptisms.

Women of Bentiu District experienced mentoring through convention programs, association of younger women with older ones in various activities of the church and through adult education programs. The programs helped the women to grow spiritually and become strong Disciples of Christ.

Special groups of people, such as the newly married couples, students and persons with special needs experienced mentoring through older couples, teachers in schools and other experienced people with special knowledge. These mentoring programs took place through Bible study programs and special supports given by teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study recommends that church leaders in Bentiu District explore more ways of mentoring the youth and the inexperienced by providing more trainings for them, involving them in spiritual programs, thus helping them grow spiritually. The church leaders should encourage women who are disadvantaged educationally to enroll in adult education programs of the church. Moreover, there is a need to integrate spiritual programs in the Adult Education programs so that women will be well equipped for service in the church and in the community. Students and other social groups should be given more attention so that they can grow as effective Disciples of Christ and become mentors themselves in the future.

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