



ATFE

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**TRAINING AND SUPPORTING
MENTORS**

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Training and Supporting Mentors

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Some observations about my context for doing theological field education underscore the need to focus on 1) theoretical foundations for good mentoring relationships, and 2) a rational supportive structure to our *Teaching Church* model employing learning covenants.

What I Assumed

- Fully cooperative and committed students.
- Fully cooperative and committed mentors.
- Learning should focus on *significant, new, ministry* experiences *reflected on theologically*.

What I Found

- A-F trumped P/F in terms of student priorities.
- Students--even the fully cooperative and committed--often lacked the experience for self-directed and self-designed learning.
- Mentors--even the fully cooperative and committed--often lacked 1) time and energy for mentoring, 2) skills for mentoring, 3) clear sense of direction in selecting guided experiences, and 4) full support from the congregation for the "Teaching Church" concept.

New Assumptions

- Assume Nothing!
- Remind students and mentors of the origins of mentoring.
- Affirm the notion of adult learners doing self-directed and self-designed learning within a structure.
- Get everyone on the same theoretical pages.
- Provide support through a simple and rationally structured program.
- Provide practical in-service equipping for effective mentoring.

After working through the above process (the new field educators' clinic at the Boston ATFE and my new network—particularly my Presbyterian colleagues were an enormous source of support) I began to research these issues and design a program that made sense to students and to their mentors.

I discerned a helpful way of thinking about the possibilities and challenges of the mentor-mentoree relationship from three theorists—Malcolm Knowles' adult learning theory, Erik Erikson's development theory, and Edward Cell's experiential learning theory. The following are thumbnail sketches of helpful insights and followed by a summary of what I call "the happy convergence."

Malcolm S. Knowles: Androgogy, Learning Theory Appropriate for Adults.

- 1) Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. They need to be free to direct themselves.

- 2) Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base.
- 3) Adults are *goal-oriented*. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements.
- 4) Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something.
- 5) Adults are *practical*, focusing on the aspects most useful to them in their work.
- 6) As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom.

Malcom S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III and Richard A. Swanson. *The Adult Learner*, Woburn, MA: Butterworth Heinemann.

Erik Erikson: Factors Facilitative of Identity Resolution

- 1) Experiences that help the individual clarify her or his interests, skill and attitudes.
- 2) Experiences which aid the individual in making commitments.
- 3) Experimentation with varied roles.
- 4) The experiencing of choice.
- 5) Meaningful achievement.
- 6) Freedom from excessive anxiety.
- 7) Time for reflection and introspection.

Knefelkamp, Parker and Widick. *New Directions for Student Services*, 4, 1978, pp. 6-7.

Edward Cell: How is it that We Learn from Experience?

Sometimes someone will say they've had twenty-five years of experience at something when the truth is they've had one year of experience repeated twenty-four times. (Bob Zeller, quoted in Cell, 3)

- Three skills we develop to help us organize and learn from experience: *Generalization, Selection and Interpretation*. (62f)
- The sum of these in our experience yields a *Map* which integrates our experiences, knowledge, beliefs and values so that when we encounter situations, we interpret, and have resulting expectations about outcomes for that situation.
- If we keep in mind that our maps are not the world, we can be more open to testing and revising them. We can also be more sensitive to differences between our maps and those used by others in our mutual transactions. (75)

We resist the learning process for two reasons:

- i) We don't want to change.
- ii) We both need and fear the truth.
 - We change our beliefs (about ourselves and the world) by reflecting on them and by checking these reflections against our ongoing experience. (82)
 - Reflection is necessary because we often manipulate our experience to fit our beliefs. (82)

- We may fail to learn from experience, then, because we mold our experience to fit our beliefs instead of letting our experience be what it is and testing our beliefs against it. (85)
- To break this pattern we need:
 - To check our perceptions and interpretations *with other persons* who do not share our personal biases and blind spots;
 - To obtain suggestions about questions it may be helpful to *ask*;
 - To look at our beliefs and experiences for a perspective that helps us gain new insight. (85-6)

Edward Cell. *Learning to Learn from Experience*, Albany: State University Press of New York.

A Happy Convergence: Knowles, Erikson and Cell

- 1) Identity resolution is a primary issue (ministerial formation).
- 2) Experience in ministry processed with a mentor reflectively is affirmed (action/reflection model, theological reflection).
- 3) Structures need to accommodate the adult learner's need for freedom while overcoming resistances (self-designed learning covenants).
- 4) Mentors need the support of a structure that insures that seminarians gain a variety of experiences (learning covenants with intentionality).
- 5) Reflection with others gives courage to change and grow (evaluation process, teaching church log, peer group and spiritual autobiography).
- 6) Effective as well as disastrous ministry experiences may sharpen one's sense of call (evaluation).

These theorists taken together affirm theological field education's approach of the supervised or mentored action/reflection model of education. Now the challenge I faced was to see these reflected in a rational and simple model of engaging the Teaching Church to maximally benefit that student, the mentor and the ministry setting. The following is a description of the basic unit of Western Theological Seminary's field education for credit that incorporates these valuable educational insights.

FM 115 Practice of Christian Ministry

FM 115 is the basic unit of Theological Field Education in Western Theological Seminary's curriculum. There are three components: A Teaching Church; A Learning Covenant; A Peer Group Commitment

- 1) The *Teaching Church* is a supervised ministry setting. More often than not it is a congregational setting. Depending on the needs of the student it could also be a variety of other settings including hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, etc. Each, however, will provide mentoring by an experienced person in ministry. 100 hours of supervised ministry is required to complete one unit of FM 115.
- 2) The *Learning Covenant* is a learning tool that is self-designed. It is tailored to your learning needs and is appropriate to the ministry context. A Learning Covenant is designed to explore one of seven ministerial themes. During your seminary experience you will register for FM 115 four times and FM 125 once which will provide opportunities to complete five learning covenants.

- The ministry of education and faith formation.
- The ministry of pastoral care.
- The ministry of preaching and worship.
- The ministry of leadership and administration.
- The ministry of social justice.
- The ministry of evangelism.
- The ministry of hospitality.

A successfully completed Learning Covenant has three components. The **planning** component is completed in designing the Learning Covenant with the guidance of a mentor. The **theological reflection** component is completed in the recording of insights and reflections in the Teaching Church Log, reflecting on specific ministry experiences in regular meetings with your mentor and adding an Addendum to your spiritual autobiography. The third component, **evaluation**, is conducted by you, your mentor and a site-team member after the execution of a Learning Covenant's plan using the Learning Covenant Evaluation forms provided.

- 3) The weekly *Peer Group* commitment, in addition to being a confidential space for personal support and prayer, is a neutral place for debriefing during the execution of the Learning Covenant and sharing your theological reflections and learning. It is also a place for you to provide feedback to peers as they share the fruit of their Learning Covenant experiences. The Peer Group will be facilitated by a ministry professional who will also be glad to share judiciously from their experiences.

Evidence for the successful completion of FM 115 will include 1) the Learning Covenant design signed off by you, your mentor, your site-team chair and formation for ministry faculty, 2) a Teaching Church log submitted after the completion of the Learning Covenant, 3) a completed addendum to the spiritual autobiography* and 4) evaluations of the Learning Covenant execution by you, your mentor and a member of the site-team.

*Choose one of the conversation partners below with whom to dialog in order to add an addendum to your spiritual autobiography each time you register either for FM 115 or FM 125.

- Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*
- Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love*
- Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*
- John Calvin, *Institutes, Book 3, chapters 1-10*
- Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*
- Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*
- Frederic Buechner, *Godric*
- Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless*; and view the video: *Romero*
- Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*