



WHAT IS A CELL CHURCH MENTOR?

“The word of God is not imprisoned.” – 2 Timothy 2:9

The Cell Church seeks to serve the prison church by pairing developing incarcerated ministers with mentors from local churches in the community. A mentor, as we use the term, is not someone who in any sense occupies an intrinsic position of superiority or authority. Rather, a mentor is a friend who we trust and invite to speak into our spiritual lives from their own wisdom and experience. Mentors hold us accountable, help us to think and grow through our experiences, call us to explore different perspectives and approaches, encourage us and pray with us, and give us new insight into our own ministries and spiritual lives. Many experienced ministers, including pastors, seek out mentors because they recognize the value of giving another mature Christian permission and access to speak spiritual truth, wisdom, exhortation, direction, and challenge into their lives.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF CELL CHURCH MENTORS?

The objective of The Cell Church mentor ministry is twofold:

1. To provide a relationship of open fellowship within which the incarcerated Christian leader can grow, develop, and mature in his or her walk and ministry.

Being in a position of spiritual leadership can be isolating. This is particularly true in the prison environment, where the community of faith is small and fixed, and it is often difficult to reach beyond the confines of the cell house to develop new relationships with other believers. The mentor ministry gives incarcerated Christian leaders access to fellowship with other mature believers who can be fellow travelers and catalysts for growth and sanctification.

2. To develop vital connections between incarcerated Christian leaders and local church bodies in order to establish a wider fellowship of Christian community which can continue when the person is released.

Many prisoners have lost all relationships with the people they knew before going to prison. Others became Christians in prison and have never had a personal connection with a church on the outside. To build these types of relationships from scratch while incarcerated is extremely difficult. Without a connection to Christian community outside the prison, when a believer is released they are abruptly cut off from the vital fellowship of the prison church, and find themselves suddenly isolated with nothing to fill the void. The prisoner's connection with a local church, initiated and strengthened through a mentor within the church body, can be an anchor of relational continuity during the transition from prison to the community and provide the hope and stability of a home of Christian fellowship which can receive the person upon release.

WHAT DOES A MENTOR DO?

One author describes the role of a Christian mentor as helping a fellow believer to live out “the unique consequences actualized by the personal encounter with, and the response to, Jesus Christ” (Houston 89). In other words, a Christian mentor comes alongside another and works with them as they try to learn, and put into practice, the implications of the gospel for their life and ministry. A mentor provides deeply personal, relational, interactive discipleship for the growing Christian leader. In the context of The Cell Church, this is accomplished through written letters, phone calls, or personal visits with the prisoner – or some combination of the three – depending upon the mentor’s comfort level and the stage of the mentoring relationship.

From the perspective of Christian leadership development, a mentor works toward three goals with the incarcerated minister:

- 1. “To encourage...maturing spirituality”;**
- 2. To help him or her integrate fragments of learning and experience “into a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith”;** and
- 3. To help him or her “integrate spirituality with intellect in order to produce continued growth in ministry skill, theological learning, and overall competence in the practice of ministry” (Pyle and Seals 13).**

These goals are accomplished by a mentor through a number of distinct approaches, including nurturing personal spirituality, developing relational skills, engaging in theological reflection, and practicing learning through relationships as well as through ministry events and experiences (14-17). In this way a mentor can help provide an encouraging and supportive environment within which a prison church leader can not only engage in ministry, but also reflect on and learn from that ministry experience (17).

WOULD I MAKE A GOOD MENTOR?

Good mentor candidates are spiritually mature Christians who are solidly grounded in their faith and in Scripture, and have experience in their own unique ministry field. Mentors do not need to be over a certain age (within reason), or have a degree from a Bible college or seminary, or work in a conventional “ministry” job. If you have spiritual gifts involving the ability to teach or provide encouragement, wisdom, guidance, or spiritual insight, you might be well suited as a mentor. We encourage you above all to be sensitive to the calling of the Spirit to this ministry. However, a few qualities are of great practical benefit (adapted from Pyle and Seals’ qualities of a good supervisor for theological field education):

- **Be a Model** – “Such persons relate how they do ministry. They share their concept and philosophy of ministry. They provide a positive demonstration of how they handle conflict, personality differences, and multiple demands on their time. They provide guidance about how to execute the basic functions of their vocation” (26).

- **Be Available** – “Availability not only includes physical presence, but emotional and spiritual presence” (26). Ensure that you can be accessible and have sufficient time to demonstrate commitment to the mentoring relationship.
- **Be Skillful** – A mentor should be able “to ask questions which enhance reflection” and to confront in a caring manner when necessary (27). A good mentor “also perceives issues that lie beneath the surface. This person has insight into the personal dynamics of ministry situations” and can help others discover them (27).
- **Be an Experiential Theologian** – “All ministry is filled with theology. Most persons behave, make decisions, and manifest attitudes based on theological concepts” (28). A mentor should be able to help the prison minister “reflect theologically on...ministry experiences. This person needs to have a clear understanding of theology and the theological basis for actions in ministry” (28).
- **Be Open and Vulnerable** – Mentors should “demonstrate self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. They know who they are as persons and as ministers. They are comfortable with themselves. As such, they can reveal their humanity. They can more readily identify [with others] and share their faults, failings, and frailties as a fellow pilgrim” (29).

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Remember that the prisoners selected by The Cell Church to have the opportunity to request a mentor are generally already in positions of leadership and are engaged in some type of ministry in the prison church. The best approach may be to think of the prison minister as a maturing Christian leader who ministers in a different culture. Trust and open fellowship are key, but have patience as the relationship naturally takes time to develop, and the prison ministry context will likely be unfamiliar and challenging to you.

Remember also that The Cell Church, due to our high theology of the church, intentionally plays only a facilitation and support role. The mentor ministry is ultimately your ministry, and a ministry of your local church body, to the prisoner(s) involved. The Cell Church will provide training and support services (pairing mentors, mail & phone call forwarding, helping you with any necessary paperwork for the prison, etc.), but as a mentor you represent your church first, not The Cell Church.

Finally, expect the Lord to bless you greatly during your ministry as a mentor to prisoners! You may be surprised to find you gain more than you give.

References:

Houston, James M. *The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood*. Colorado Springs: Navpress (2002).

Pyle, William T. and Mary Alice Seals, eds. *Experiencing Ministry Supervision: A Field-Based Approach*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman (1995).