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Mentoring That Makes a Difference

Encouragement can help people discern God's will for their lives.

by Earl Palmer

In our prophetic role, pastors need to challenge people to keep the faith, fight the good fight. And often that means giving a forceful word to the congregation.

The other side of being prophetic, the side that the mentor highlights, is being an encourager. The goal is the same—living faithfully a Christian lifestyle—but the means are different: encouragement, affirmation, praise.

As a mentor I don't want to tell people what God's will is for them; I want them to discover it for themselves. And that happens best, I've noticed, when I affirm what's going right with a person.

- *Express encouragement regularly.* A young lawyer in a class I taught recently wrote a paper on 1 Corinthians 15. He didn't just parrot back my lectures, however. He went beyond what I had taught, doing his own study and making his own breakthroughs. He grappled with issues we hadn't discussed in class; he dared to draw his own conclusions. It occurred to me as I read his work that I was learning from this student. So on his paper, along with his grade, I wrote a note saying his ideas had inspired me.

Sometime later he told me that little note had bolstered his confidence to work through his own thoughts and draw his own inclusions. I had confirmed that his thinking was sound, that his ideas were exciting and helpful to me. He began to have the confidence that he could teach.

I didn't plan for that one note to have that impact, but when I regularly encourage, some of my notes and words will.

- *Build trust.* People are vulnerable about things most precious to them. So poets don't want to share their poems with somebody bored by poetry; musicians don't enjoy playing their compositions for someone who doesn't care for their style of music.

So I can encourage another in the things that matter only if the person will share what's important to him with me. That means I have to attend to the slow business of building trust. And that involves listening with interest to what the person shares with me and affirming the good in what they say and do.

Gradually, the person I'm mentoring will share deeper thoughts and talk about their more exciting dreams. And that's when my encouragement will really count.

- *Don't qualify the affirmation.* I meet many people who are discouraged because what personal encouragement they have revived has been qualified: "Yes, that's

true enough. But you forgot about this." Some have been in a Christian atmosphere where leaders always corrected them or added, "You did that well, but you also need to improve in this area."

Instead, I look for ways to give simple, direct affirmations without the "buts," without having to add anything. "You know," I'll say, "you're doing some very good thinking about this." Period. Simply affirm the people for what they're doing right. Since the people I mentor are serious about their walk with Christ, I know in most cases they'll eventually figure out where they fall short. In the meantime, I'm giving them confidence that, when they do see a shortfall, they'll be able to do something about it.

I call this kind of prophetic mentoring the ministry of agreement. The Greek word for agree is *homologeia*, "to say the same word." When I agree with someone, I don't feel the need to add a single word—I say "the same word." I affirm what they've done well. This doesn't mean I never correct or take issue. It means I honor the discovery the person has made, acknowledging new footing that's been established.

- *Confront only when you've earned the right.* Naturally, as in any meaningful relationship, there comes a time when the mentor must confront the person being mentored.

For instance, I've been working with a young man for whom I have a great deal of respect. He has tremendous potential. But there is one area of his life in which he has been unrealistic: he has not been responsible in the financial support of his marriage. He's had trouble finding and keeping a job because he has set his sights way too high. His wife was supporting him and the family, but the bills kept piling up. One month recently their phone was cut off.

I had been encouraging him for months, trying to discern the direction God is calling. But at that point, if I said nothing about this problem, I would have become co-dependent to him, enabling his destructive patterns. So I had to help him see he needed to get a job: pump gas or wait on tables in a restaurant or sweep floors—anything. He needed to do something now for the sake of his wife and family, but also for himself.

I couldn't have done that at the beginning of our relationship. And I can't do that in every mentoring relationship I have—sufficient trust has not been established. But since I've been this man's friend for some time now, and since I've done nothing but encourage him up to this point, I've earned the right to tell him what I think he ought to do.

A mentor, then, offers encouragement, and sometimes direction, so that the person mentored can move ahead on his own with confidence. The goal of a mentor in medicine, for example, is to help another acquire the courage and independence of thought to do surgery alone, without needing the mentor looking over his or her shoulder. The goal in Christian mentoring is to help people discern and follow the will of God on their own.

Citation: Mastering Teaching; Earl Palmer, Roberta Hestenes, Howard Hendricks; Mentoring, pp 142-144.

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