

The Importance of Mentorship for Education in Nigeria: A Case Study of Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate purpose of this essay is to recommend mentorship as a method of improving education in Nigeria. The immediate purpose, however, as reflected in the topic is to improve the quality of theological education. Therefore, although the ultimate aim is to improve the quality of all forms and types of education, the paper focuses primarily on theological education. The reasons for focusing on theological education are dual. First, it is the discipline that the two authors are experienced in most, and two because it is the type of education that is wholistic. The method used for the paper is ethnographical method. With this method, the authors reflected on their own experiences in evangelical theological education in Nigeria for three decades. Biases are acknowledged as may, perhaps affect the interpretation and analysis of the presentation. The paper recommends that experienced persons must be engaged to inspire and mentor individuals from the studentship through their working life. This is not to judge, but to help the mentee integrate their academic learning with their personal life. This can be adapted to other forms of education.

Keywords: Mentor, Theology, Education, Nigeria, Discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

‘Quality education’ is the description of an ideal type of education that is desired in Nigeria. It is the type of education that achieves its purpose. (Leading Guides, 2020; Rakum, 2017; United Nations, 2023). A keen observation of the Nigerian education system and the whole society at large, reveals that the stated purpose is no more the focus of education. This is particularly so for higher educational institutions. The stated purpose is for the graduate of an educational institution to be an expert in his or her specialisation, and thus be useful for society. Nowadays, however, the focus is on getting a certificate, a diploma or a degree. There is a difference between these different achievements. Adenekan, et al appropriately distinguish between the two thus:

A certificate is a document serving as evidence that a person has completed an educational course issued either by a school, college, universities or other educational centres. By implication, a certificate is an evidence that one has undergone an educational process Certificates are paper evidence of the knowledge gained via education/schooling. Certificates only raise the hope of Nigerian parents, employers and society at large that an individual is educated. The knowledge obtained will be the only means through which the certificate will be defended (Adenekan, et al, 2018).

However, in contemporary Nigeria, the quality of the graduate is no more in focus. What now determines the types and levels of appointment a graduate has are: the level of a certificate (diploma or degree), the

region that the candidate comes from and nepotism. Adenekan et al noted this:

However, it is disheartening that reports have shown that employers are greatly disappointed in the products of Nigerian tertiary institutions. In most cases actual performance of Nigerian graduates who have certificates raise doubts about the authenticity and workability of this philosophy. Nigerians who are products of universities are issued with beautiful certificates after passing prescribed courses, while employers complain that many university graduates are poorly prepared for work (Adenekan, et al, 2018).

The trend can be seen in many spheres of Nigerian society, and the repercussions are reflected in the quality of services.

The craze for certificates is also occurring in theological education. This paper argues that mentorship is an effective panacea to this lack of qualitative education. Mentorship is especially important in theological education because this type of education is the most holistic of all forms of education (Niemandt, et al, 2021). All aspects of the student, including mind, body and the spirit are involved. In evangelical theological education, with which these authors are conversant and concerned, the education begins with an encounter with God; it proceeds to formal theological education after an individual has received a 'call' into the ministry. But, formal theological education must not be merely 'academic'; supervised practical knowledge and skills are also included. And after all these, the theologically educated would need to continue to be supported and guided. The guide that would make sure all these elements are there and well-integrated is called the 'Mentor'.

The word, 'Mentor' is from an ancient Greek mythology, the drama, *Odyssey*, written by Homer, Mentor is a character who is a trusted friend and advisor to Odysseus (Murray, 1945). When Odysseus goes off to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusts Mentor with the care and education of his son Telemachus. Mentor is known for his wisdom, guidance, and ability to inspire and motivate others. Mentor is also known for his ability to change into various forms, such as an old man or a beautiful woman, which allows him to provide guidance and support to Odysseus and Telemachus without being recognised. This ability to change form was granted to him by the goddess, Athena who appears as Mentor at various points in the story to support and guide the hero. Overall, Mentor serves as a symbol of wisdom, guidance, and inspiration in the *Odyssey*. He represents the importance of having a trusted advisor and mentor-figure in one's life, someone who can provide guidance and support in times of difficulty and uncertainty. Theological education, especially in Nigeria, is the one type of education that can reveal the significance of mentorship for qualitative education.

This essay is the writers' reflection on three decades of involvement in theological education in Nigeria. Both writers taught primarily at UMCA Theological College, Ilorin, and some other theological institutions in Nigeria. Both also headed the Theological College as Provosts. Thus, the method used is an ethnographical method, which explores and analyses the personal experiences within theological institutions. The paper combines personal experiences with a broader analysis of theological education in Nigeria. It acknowledges personal biases in shaping the analysis, since the evangelical tradition of our seminary, our position and involvement may have influenced our perceptions, analysis and interpretations.

The essay begins by analysing the difference between discipleship and mentorship in theological education. It then presented the benefit of mentorship in theological education. The paper proceeds to present the type of knowledge and skills a mentor can offer to a mentee in theological education, before the conclusion.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISCIPLESHIP AND MENTORSHIP IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Discipleship and mentorship in theological education share a symbiotic relationship (Folarin, 2021).

Discipleship involves the holistic development of individuals in their spiritual journey, while mentorship provides structured, personalized guidance within this journey. Mentors often play a pivotal role in discipleship, offering theological insight, moral support, and practical wisdom. The disciple-mentor dynamic fosters a deep, intentional connection, enriching theological education by combining theoretical learning with the transformative power of relational guidance. Ultimately, mentorship is a key component of the broader discipleship process in theological education

Discipleship and mentorship are closely related concepts in theological education. Both involve a relational aspect where one person, the disciple or mentee, is being guided and taught by another person, the mentor or discipler. However, there are also some key differences between the two.

Discipleship is a broader concept that encompasses a lifelong journey of deepening one's faith and relationship with God. It involves being a learner and follower of Jesus Christ, seeking to imitate His life and teachings. In the context of theological education, discipleship involves the formation of students as they grow in their knowledge, understanding, and practice of their faith.

Mentorship, on the other hand, is a more specific and focused concept. It typically involves a more experienced person guiding and nurturing the development of another person's knowledge, skills, and character in a particular field of study or profession. In the context of theological education, mentorship involves a mentor providing guidance, support, and wisdom to a mentee as they navigate their theological studies and prepare for ministry.

In theological education, discipleship and mentorship often go hand-in-hand. Students are not only taught theological concepts and principles but also encouraged to grow spiritually and develop their character. This holistic approach combines classroom instruction with intentional relationships and practical experiences. Mentors play a crucial role in this process, providing guidance and support for students as they learn and live out their faith.

The relationship between discipleship and mentorship in theological education is characterized by a mutual commitment and a deep level of trust. Mentors are not only providing knowledge and practical advice but also modelling a mature and faithful Christian life. They help students integrate their theological knowledge into their personal lives and ministry contexts. Through this relationship, students are not only gaining knowledge but also being transformed and equipped for ministry.

In summary, discipleship and mentorship are closely intertwined in theological education. Discipleship provides the foundation for spiritual growth and formation, while mentorship provides specific guidance and support for students as they navigate their theological studies and prepare for ministry. Both are essential components of a holistic approach to theological education.

BENEFITS OF MENTORSHIP

Mentorship plays a crucial role in theological education, offering several benefits to both mentees and mentors (Chiroma, 2015). The most important benefit is the personal and spiritual growth of the mentee. Mentoring provides an opportunity for mentees to receive guidance and support in their personal and spiritual development. Mentors can offer wisdom, share experiences, and provide a safe space for mentees to explore their faith and theological questions. The mentee would learn from the personal experiences of the mentor. Furthermore, as the mentee develops, the mentor will continue to guide her, albeit the mentee will be allowed to explore for herself. In other words, she must be able to develop freely., and even make mistakes.

Apart from personal and spiritual growth, another advantage that a mentee can get from mentorship is

practical knowledge and practical skills. As in other fields such as Psychology, mentors are often experienced theologians or clergy (APA, 2012). As experienced elders, they can share practical knowledge and skills that are not always covered in formal education. They can offer insights into ministry, pastoral care, preaching, and various aspects of theological practice, helping mentees bridge the gap between theory and real-world application. Due to long-time experience in the ministry, a mentor can have an insight into how a pressing problem can be easily solved. An illustration of this in the Bible is the advice that Jethro gave to Moses in the administration of justice to the Israelites in the wilderness. (Exodus 18; 14-23). Another biblical instance is how Eli taught Samuel how to respond to the call of God. (I Samuel 13). Therefore, the practical knowledge and skills of the mentor can aid the mentee in understanding, contextualising and correcting some theoretical knowledge the mentee might have learnt in class, for as it is usually said, “Experience is the best teacher”.

Another benefit for the mentee is the provision of emotional support. Theological education can be intellectually and emotionally demanding. There may be items of faith that mentees had mistakenly interpreted and naively believed before they had theological education. After receiving some critical studies in the seminary, however, a mentee can be disturbed. Mentors can offer empathetic listening, encouragement, and guidance during challenging times. They can provide a supportive presence, helping mentees navigate personal and professional challenges with grace and resilience.

Still, another benefit that mentees can get from mentors is networking and connections (Haynes, et al, 2008). Because mentors have been in the ministry longer, interact more and longer, and have more experience, they often have extensive networks within the theological community with which mentees can be linked up. Again, we have an instance of this in the Acts of the Apostles (18:24-28). Having mentored Apollos in the Gospel, the Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila gave him a recommendation letter to Achaia. In the same vein, through mentorship, mentees can gain access to valuable connections, such as potential job opportunities, internships, or collaborative projects. Mentors can open doors and introduce mentees to influential figures in the field.

There are many individuals in the ministry nowadays whose only way to assess themselves is the number of years they have been in the ministry. However, if such had had good mentors, they would have been taught accountability and feedback systems. A mentor serves as a trusted accountability partner, helping mentees set goals, track progress, and provide constructive feedback. They can offer guidance in areas where mentees may need improvement, helping them to develop the necessary skills and self-awareness for effective ministry or theological scholarship.

Another advantage of mentorship in theological education is the long-term relationship that is involved. Mentorship often leads to long-lasting relationships that continue beyond the formal mentoring period. Mentees can benefit from ongoing support, advice, and friendship as they progress in their theological journey and professional endeavours. But this factor is also an advantage for the mentor. When the mentor gets old, the mentee that he or she has developed will be his or her support. This is in line with a traditional general African belief that the greatest retirement benefits are one’s children, or whomever one has raised. Two Yoruba adages support this: *Bí òkété bá d’àgbà, ọmú ọmọ rẹ l’ó n mu.* (When a big rat has reached very old age, she sucks the baby’s breast; that is, it is the child that the big rat has nurtured that is nurtured by the baby in turn when the big rat becomes old). The second adage is: *Ọmọ tí a kò kọ ní yòò gbé ilé tí a kọ tà.* (If one fails to train/mentor the younger well, but rather preoccupied himself or herself with material things, such material things will be carelessly sold by the younger ones that were not well mentored).

Therefore, mentorship in theological education offers a multitude of benefits, including personal and spiritual growth, practical knowledge, emotional support, networking opportunities, accountability, and the potential for long-term relationships (Hall, 2017). It is a valuable and enriching experience that enhances the

overall educational journey of aspiring theologians, ministers, and scholars. Hence, it should be an essential part of theological education in Nigeria.

TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS MENTORS OFFER IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Practical Guidance (Hall, 2017)

The distinctive importance of a mentor in education, particularly theological education, is the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge. The integration even includes the personal life of the mentee with the professional life. Therefore, the first type of knowledge and skills that a mentor can offer to theological education is practical guidance. This includes the area of research and writing. Mentors can offer practical advice on conducting research, writing academic papers, and developing critical thinking skills. They can assist mentees in choosing research topics, developing research questions, and structuring their arguments. They may also provide feedback on writing style, grammar, and citation formats.

The area of theological knowledge is another area in which a mentor can offer guidance to a mentee. Ideally, mentors in theological education are theologians with experience of many years. Such mentors must have studied major Christian doctrines in-depth and reflected on them. Such doctrines include theology proper, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology. The knowledge of a mentor of these doctrines should necessarily include the historical origins and development of the doctrines, controversies and heresies that might have occurred in the church history about the doctrines and orthodox resolutions. Far more than mere theoretical knowledge of these doctrines, a mentor should have wrestled with the doctrines himself or herself, because, the belief of the church should be existential or experiential. In Tillich's expression, there must be 'the unity of union and detachment'. In other words, the mentor should have 'stood' where those who propose the doctrines stood when the doctrines were proposed. As Tillich explained this:

The unity of union and detachment is precisely described by the term "understanding". Its literal meaning, to stand under the place where the object of knowledge stands, implies intimate participation. In ordinary use, it points to the ability to grasp the logical meaning of something. Understanding another person or a historical figure, the life of an animal or a religious text involves an amalgamation of controlling and receiving knowledge, of union and attachment, of participation and analysis (Tillich, 1988).

Therefore, a mentor in theological education should have 'stood' where major expositors of the doctrines stood, to 'see' what they 'saw', and to be able to describe the same thing, from his or her context. It is in this context that the mentor would be able to provide a deeper understanding of theological concepts and traditions. And it is theologians of such experience that can help mentees navigate complex theological ideas, explore different perspectives, and develop a well-rounded theological foundation.

This type of deep and existential knowledge goes hand-in-hand with sound biblical interpretations. Sound biblical interpretation is the basis of deep theological knowledge. Therefore, sound knowledge of biblical interpretation is a primary type of knowledge that a mentor must inculcate into a mentee. The context and cultural background of each of the biblical books, the ascertaining of the text (textual criticism) or biblical passages in their original languages and the diverse translations of important passages are very important. Again, it needs to be emphasised, that the nature of theological education, which requires personal involvement, makes it very important that the knowledge be more than theoretical. Thus practical illustrations of biblical passages (in the form of comparison with the context of the reader) in the lives of the mentor, the mentee and their context are very important. Mentors can guide mentees in the art of biblical interpretation, helping them develop critical thinking skills, understand historical and cultural contexts, and

apply biblical principles to contemporary issues. They can share insights into various methods of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

Mentors can also provide support in the area of preaching and teaching. They can guide in sermon preparation, teaching methodologies, and public speaking skills. Mentors can offer tips on crafting engaging sermons or lessons, using visual aids effectively, and connecting with the audience. They may also encourage mentees to practice their preaching or teaching skills in a supportive environment. In addition, they can help mentees develop practical ministry skills, such as pastoral care, counselling, and conducting rituals and sacraments. They can share their experiences, provide case studies, and offer guidance on ethical considerations and best practices in ministry. Mentors can also facilitate opportunities for mentees to gain practical ministry experiences, such as internships, community service projects, or mission trips. They can provide guidance and support during these experiences, helping mentees reflect on their learnings and integrate theory with practice.

They can assist mentees in developing leadership skills such as leadership skills, including team-building, conflict resolution, and strategic planning. They can offer guidance on personal growth, self-reflection, and cultivating resilience and emotional intelligence.

In addition, mentors play a vital role in shaping the ethical and moral development of mentees. They can guide in ethical decision-making, help mentees navigate ethical dilemmas, and model integrity and ethical behaviour in their own lives and ministries.

It is important to note that the specific knowledge and skills offered by mentors may vary depending on their expertise, background, and the mentees' specific areas of interest. Mentorship is a personalized process that aims to address the individual needs and goals of the mentees, providing guidance and support in their unique theological journey.

Mentors can advise mentees on building professional networks, attending conferences, and engaging in ongoing professional development. They can offer insights into relevant organizations, journals, and resources in the field, and may even facilitate introductions to influential individuals within the theological community.

Most intimately and relevant to theological education is when a mentor can help a mentee in balancing personal and professional life. Mentors can help mentees navigate the challenges of balancing personal and professional responsibilities. They can offer guidance on self-care, maintaining healthy boundaries, and managing stress in the demanding field of theological education and ministry.

It is important to note that the specific practical guidance offered by mentors may vary depending on the mentees' needs, interests, and stage of theological education. Mentors tailor their guidance to help mentees develop the necessary skills and competencies for their unique ministry contexts and career aspirations.

Effective Study Techniques and Time Management Skills (Philipps-Jone, 2013)

Mentorship started from the time a theological student entered the seminary, or even before. However, the education does not end when the mentee has completed his or her theological education. Theological education is a life-long learning profession. Moreover, throughout one's life, it is always good to have a mentor who will guide and pray with the mentee. An area in this regard is when a mentor helps a mentee in developing effective study techniques and time management skills through various means. Here are some ways mentors can guide in these areas:

This begins with learning to set goals. Mentors can help mentees set specific, achievable goals for their

studies. By breaking down their coursework into manageable tasks from time the mentees were students, and setting deadlines for each, mentees can develop a clear roadmap for their studies and stay organised. But they should also learn how to prioritise their tasks. Mentors can teach mentees how to prioritize their tasks based on importance and urgency. They can help mentees identify high-priority assignments and allocate time accordingly, ensuring that critical tasks are completed first.

Mentees would also have to learn from mentors how to allocate a period for a specific task. Mentors can guide mentees in using time-blocking techniques to allocate dedicated time slots for studying. By creating a schedule that includes specific study periods, mentees can establish a structured routine and minimize distractions.

Mentors can also advise mentees on creating an optimal study and meditation environment. They can recommend strategies like finding a quiet space, minimizing distractions (such as turning off notifications), and creating a comfortable workspace conducive to concentration. This is especially important for those in the ministry. Classical religious figures like Hebrew prophets and Jesus knew the importance of quiet time. But even in contemporary Nigeria, the value of this was well-known to important religious functionaries. Indigenous church founders like Ayo Babalola, S.B.. Oshoffa and Moses Orimolade were well-known for having quiet time, in 'mountains', rivers and wilderness. It was there that many of these received their call.

In addition, mentors can share different note-taking strategies, such as mind-mapping and outlining techniques. They can help mentees identify which method works best for them and provide tips on organizing and reviewing their notes effectively.

They can encourage mentees to form or join study groups with fellow students and ministers. Collaborative learning can enhance understanding, provide peer support, and improve time management by sharing the workload and discussing difficult concepts.

In conclusion, mentors can provide constructive feedback on mentees' study techniques and time management strategies. By reviewing study plans, schedules, and completed assignments, mentors can help mentees identify areas for improvement and suggest adjustments as needed.

By providing structured guidance and ongoing support, mentors can help mentees cultivate effective study techniques and time management skills, leading to more efficient and successful theological education experiences.

Cultural Competency

Nigeria is a country of over two hundred ethnic groups. Therefore, there are hundreds of cultures that anyone in the ministry must be aware and tolerant of. Indeed, cultural exclusivism is a major cause of conflicts in Nigeria. Because people in the ministry can be posted to work anywhere, candidates for the ministry ought to learn to accommodate to the differing cultures. Mentorship in theological education can contribute to this cultural competency in several ways.

The first to be mentioned here is exposure to different perspectives: Mentors with diverse backgrounds can expose mentees to different cultural, ethnic, and theological perspectives. By engaging with these perspectives, mentees develop a broader understanding of various cultures and learn to appreciate the richness of diversity within the theological community.

Mentorship can also help the mentee acquire cross-cultural communication skills. Mentors can guide effective cross-cultural communication, helping mentees navigate cultural differences and engage in respectful and meaningful dialogue with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This enhances mentees'

ability to minister to people from different cultures of the country and effectively address their spiritual needs.

Mentors can also assist the mentee acquire contextual understanding. Mentors can help mentees develop a deep understanding of the cultural and social contexts in which they will be ministering. They can provide insights into the specific challenges, values, and beliefs of different communities, enabling mentees to tailor their ministry approaches to be culturally sensitive and relevant.

They provide an opportunity for mentees to challenge their own implicit biases and assumptions. Mentors can help mentees recognize and confront any biases they may hold, encouraging them to approach theological education with an open mind and a willingness to learn from diverse perspectives.

Mentors can also encourage mentees to actively engage with individuals from different cultures within the theological community. This can involve participating in intercultural events, forming cross-cultural study groups, or engaging in interfaith dialogue. Such engagement fosters empathy, understanding, and respect for diverse cultures.

In addition, mentors can help mentees identify and address their cultural blind spots, which are areas where they may have limited awareness or understanding of cultural differences. By highlighting these blind spots, mentors assist mentees in developing a more nuanced and comprehensive cultural competency.

The most important of these is that the mentors can serve as role models for mentees. By observing their mentors' inclusive practices, respectful engagement with diverse individuals, and commitment to cross-cultural understanding, mentees can learn valuable lessons about how to cultivate cultural competency within their ministry.

Overall, mentorship in theological education plays a crucial role in developing cultural competency by exposing mentees to diverse perspectives, challenging biases, fostering intercultural engagement, and providing guidance on effective cross-cultural communication. This enables mentees to minister effectively in culturally diverse contexts and engage with individuals from different backgrounds respectfully and inclusively.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that quality education can be properly achieved by introducing mentorship to the system. This means that each student would be monitored from the beginning of his or her education for which the student is studying. However, the monitoring would be a life-long one, continuing after the student has graduated.

The particular education system used in the paper is theological education. The choice of theological education is for two reasons. First, the two authors had participated in theological education for three decades. , the two are experienced in this type of religious education. But, second, and most importantly, theological education, more than any other type of education requires the suggestion of this paper – mentorship. The importance of mentorship for theological education is the fact that this type of education is expected to be holistic. It is not expected to be a theoretical, mere craze for certificate, appointment and promotion, as is common nowadays.

It was argued that the benefit of mentorship includes the personal and spiritual growth of the mentee. It also provides emotional support, networking and connections, accountability and feedback, for the mentee. For both the mentee and the mentor, mentorship has the advantage of a long-term relationship. It was also argued that mentors can provide practical guidance on research and writing, preaching and teaching,

practical ministry skills, and balancing personal and professional development. Mentors can also guide mentees in effective study techniques and time-management skills. It is argued that mentors can help mentees to be culturally competent in an ethnically and religiously pluralistic Nigeria.

These arguments and suggestions can be applied to other forms of education in Nigeria, apart from theological education. By applying and adapting them to other systems and types of education, the quality of education in Nigeria would improve. This, of course, would be for the benefit of the whole Nigerian system as a whole.

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