

# ANCIENT ART FOR A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

*By Rick Lewis*

We maintain that spiritual mentoring is a thoroughly Christian discipline, and an ancient one at that. But if that is so, why has it not been on our radar until relatively recently?

Although the term mentoring wasn't used in its current sense until 1699 in the writings of Francois Fenelon, the practice of people journeying alongside someone else to help them discover and get onto God's agenda for their lives is well attested in the Bible and in literature from the early church, the Middle Ages, through the Reformation afterwards, right up to the time of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. At that point things began to change. What was it about the Enlightenment that inhibited the practice of what we call mentoring?

The Enlightenment stressed reason as the basis for authority. The authority of the Bible, of the church and of God was rejected in favour of what could be worked out through human reasoning. This challenge had a profound impact on the church and flowed through to influence the way discipleship and spiritual formation were pursued. In order to combat Enlightenment arguments, influential Christians fought fire with fire, using reason to establish the truth and authority of God and his Word.

Within 100 years, matters of spirituality and discipleship were being addressed through the exercise of reason alone, especially in the Protestant tradition to which most of us in the Mentoring Network belong. The ancient art of mentoring, with its prayerful processes of discernment and encouragement of the heart gave way to more 'rational' and 'scientific' approaches to Christian growth. Maturity in the faith came to be measured more by what was known in the head, rather than by a transformed inner life.

The Enlightenment formed the philosophical framework for the Modernist worldview – which has been the dominant worldview in the West for the past 200 years. Now, there is a new worldview emerging, called Post-modernism. There is a growing sensitivity to context, appreciation of wonder and mystery, craving for authenticity, openness to all kinds of spirituality, valuing of subjective experience and cherishing of community.

Once again in our time, just as at the time of the Enlightenment, the issue of authority is the hot potato. But this time, the suspicion is aimed at those who think they can claim authority on the basis of science and reason. Modernist Christian teaching often comes under the same suspicion.

When today's post-moderns are looking for a guide through life, they are not necessarily looking for teachers who have all the answers in terms of propositional truth. They are more likely to look for a mentor with integrity and practical wisdom who is prepared to walk a journey of discovery with them, and help them grapple with the questions. Now, that sounds a lot like the way Jesus brought his message of the kingdom of God and worked with the disciples to shape them for ministry and mission.

If you want to be involved in forming the next generation of disciples and leaders, it's time to look back to the way Jesus did it, the way Barnabas and Paul and Timothy related. This may be welcome news, or it may create waves as we re-tool for forming Christian leaders in a different way. But the message is unavoidable: we need to recover the ancient art of mentoring not only because it is Biblical but also because this generation is hungry for it.

Mentoring appeals to post-moderns because it goes beyond what a person knows to the condition of a person's soul. It gives people space and time, within the context of a sacred relationship, to journey toward transformation not by the power of propositional truth but by the power of the Spirit of truth. A spiritual mentor is not so much a person with the right answers as a person with the right questions who walks the road of discovery with others.

*Jer 6:16 This is what the Lord says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."*