

Introduction: When Setting out on a Long Journey

In 1976, midway through my freshman year of university, I was struggling, confused, no longer sure of myself, and depressed. I seldom prayed, and avoided going to church. My mind was packed with uncertainties and unanswered questions about spiritual matters. One day in the university center, I bumped into Mike, a man I had met earlier in the year, during fall term. Mike was on staff with InterVarsity, a Christian group that mentors university students and faculty on college campuses around the world. After Mike saw the confused look on my face, he came alongside my life, sat down next to me, and asked me how I was doing. I told him I was feeling spiritually dried up. He didn't seem surprised, and he asked me if I'd like to meet once a week to talk about matters of the heart. I jumped at the chance. Every week for the rest of that school year, we met to go through a workbook on the spiritual life. I often neglected to do the homework, but that didn't bother Mike. He asked good questions and listened. He seemed very interested in my life, my doubts, and my questions. I've often thought of the gift Mike gave me that spring, the gift of soul mentoring. I still consider one-on-one soul mentoring one of the finest gifts we can give to others to make our world a better place.

Three decades later, during my studies for a doctor of ministry degree in Christian spiritual formation from Fuller Theological Seminary,¹ I discovered Johann von Staupitz (1460–1524), soul mentor to Martin Luther. After hearing Dr. Jim Bradley's lecture on Staupitz and Luther, a fellow student in our cohort asked me, "Who is your Staupitz?" I admitted I didn't have anyone mentoring my soul at the time. He admitted the same problem in his life as executive pastor of a large, growing church in the Midwest. We

1. My doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary was published by Paraclete Press in 2010 under the title of *Ancient Paths: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way*.

agreed that we'd hold each other accountable until we found our Staupitzes. Later that same year, Bob Stephens agreed to meet with me weekly to challenge me, hold me accountable, listen to me talk about my life, and pray for me. Bob became my Staupitz, serving weekly in that vital role in my life for several years until his death in 2009. Every Monday morning, I went over to Bob's house overlooking Haystack Rock and the Pacific Ocean. We drank coffee and talked about life and faith. Bob asked me about my marriage, ministry, and inner life. Each time we met, he prayed for me and also told me that he was praying for me the other days of the week. Few realize what a lonely road a pastor walks. Thanks be to God for Bob Stephens who walked that road with me as my soul mentor.

During that same course of doctoral studies at Fuller, I first bumped into Gregory's ancient classic book, *Pastoral Care*. In the pages ahead, we'll explore ancient wisdom for mentoring illuminated in this guidebook written fourteen centuries ago. *Soul Mentoring* invites you to enter a well-worn classic from the old world, *Pastoral Care*, written by Gregory the Great in 591.² By reflecting on this book on mentoring from the past, I hope Gregory will speak to us anew in the twenty-first century, offering guidance and encouragement on the spiritual path of mentoring and being mentored. In reading and studying *Pastoral Care*, I am convinced Gregory reveals ancient wisdom applicable to our time, both for mentors and those seeking to be mentored.

This book is intended for anyone who finds themselves alongside another human seeking guidance or wisdom, including counselors, mentors, teachers, pastors, and coaches, as well as those who are actively involved in informal mentoring. In addition, mentees, those seeking to be mentored, will also find Gregory's wisdom invaluable in pursuing such personal encouragement and spiritual formation. The terms "mentor" and "mentee" will be used throughout, with mentor referring to anyone who provides person-to-person care of souls and mentee referring to anyone who receives such care; the terms "soul mentoring" and "soul care" are used interchangeably. This book is written for both mentors and mentees, offering wisdom and practical guidance for both in spiritual formation.³

2. For more information on the life of Gregory the Great, see Appendix A: "The Life and Legacy of Gregory the Great."

3. The origin of the term mentor can be traced to a character in Greek mythology in the *Odyssey*. Modern usage of the term may be traced to the lead character, Mentor, in *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, by François Fénelon, published in 1699.

To some looking in from the outside, mentoring may seem easy. Gregory wrote in part to explain how difficult this work can be. There was a time when Gregory wanted to escape the burden of mentoring. He wrote to keep some from entering into this calling carelessly. Maybe this writing will prevent a few from blindly rushing into soul mentoring. Some reading this are already serving as mentors, but are looking for wisdom for walking alongside another. Others are looking for someone to come alongside their life to guide them.

Just as Gregory's *Pastoral Care* is divided into four parts, so this book is divided into four parts:

- Part One: The Journey into Mentoring;
- Part Two: The Character of a Mentor;
- Part Three: The Practice of Mentoring;
- Part Four or Conclusion: Care of the Soul of a Mentor.

When setting out on a long journey, we are wise to consider carefully how to best prepare ourselves for the road ahead, including what to pack and what challenges might lay along the road ahead. Gregory begins his *Pastoral Care* with words of caution to all who embark on the journey of mentoring. When Gregory first heard he had been elected to serve as the bishop of Rome in 590, he fled from the calling, knowing well the heavy burden of caring for souls. He withdrew from Rome to avoid the election, seeking to “flee the burdens of pastoral care,” hiding in the contemplative life of the monastic cloister.⁴

Because of this personal crisis, Gregory opens his guidebook by warning people against rashly entering mentorship. Gregory was not the first to enter mentorship with fear and hesitation. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Paul all experienced fear and inadequacy when called into service. Gregory stands in a long line of people who reluctantly responded to the call to serve as a mentor to others, knowing the heaviness of the burden inherent in that call. In the opening words of *Pastoral Care*, Gregory warns against rushing into soul care, describing this kind of life's work as a burdensome and precipitous venture before which we should tremble with fear at our inadequacy and infirmity.

As St. Paul readily admits, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”⁵ By God's gift of grace, we

4. Gregory, *Pastoral Rule*, 27.

5. 1 Corinthians 15:10.

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are called to mentor others, even in the face of an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Looking back on my years in graduate school as I prepared for the ministry, I see a young man full of idealism and fear, feeling inadequate and underprepared to enter into full-time ministry. Like Gregory, I have always had a sense of hesitancy as I've walked alongside others, caring for their souls. My full name is David Gregory Robinson. When I became a Benedictine oblate at Mount Angel Abbey in February 2006, I took the name of Gregory as my oblate name, a name that comes from the Greek word *gregoros*, meaning "watchman." I've sought wisdom from Gregory the Great as a mentor and watchman in my ongoing spiritual journey.

By God's grace, we step out by faith along the journey into mentoring. By faith, we seek out mentors who can guide us along pathways of love. We do not begin on the first day in this calling fully equipped for the journey. We learn on the trail, growing, as Gregory tells us, "step by step". Like many before him and many who have come along since, Gregory hesitantly and humbly accepted the call to enter the journey of soul care, step by step, with fear and trembling. He is a reliable guide for both mentors and mentees on our shared journey into soul mentoring.