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*KENLEY D. HALL*

## THE CRITICAL ROLE OF MENTORING FOR PASTORAL FORMATION

**Abstract:** Denominational leaders view the M.Div. as the gold standard in preparing young men and women for ministry. However, academic training alone does not prepare someone for ministry. It must be paired with mentoring, defined as the intentional relationship between an experienced pastoral mentor and a young pastoral mentee for the purpose of pastoral formation. This paper explores the mentoring relationships between Barnabas and Paul, and Paul and Timothy as instructive examples of the importance, process and impact of mentoring for pastoral formation. It concludes that Barnabas and Paul played a crucial role in the pastoral formation of their mentees.

**Keywords:** *Leadership development, mentoring, pastoral formation*

What man or woman is prepared for the demands of vocational ministry? Gregory of Nazianzus was unequivocal in his response:

No one, if he [or she] will listen to my judgment and accept my advice! This is of all things most to be feared, this is the extremist of dangers in the eyes of everyone who understands the magnitude of success and the utter ruin of failure. (Shaff & Wace, 1983, p. 224)

Gregory saw himself as being unprepared for the demands of vocational ministry and fled from the town where he was ordained and called to serve as a pastor. He would eventually return and take up his post seven months later, but the haunting question of his lack of preparedness for ministry continued to trouble his mind. Gregory's lingering question was not unique to him alone. As Williams (2005) points out, these "lucid and sobering questions that rang in his [Gregory's] heart reverberate in the heart of every would-be pastor" (p. 14). The question of preparedness for vocational ministry, and in particular how preparation takes place, is the core question of this paper. However, the principle of mentoring for pastoral formation is also applicable and essential to other forms of vocational formation.

For most denominational leaders the M.Div. is the gold standard in preparing young men and women for vocational ministry. The M.Div. degree is and

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should remain a vital and necessary part of preparation for ministry. However, “many [men and women] in ministry vocations have been left to find their own way once their formal education is complete. Highly motivated, well-intentioned and highly educated [young pastors] may struggle and even flounder in ministry after receiving stellar academic training” (Denver Seminary, p. 1). Denver Seminary’s mentoring handbook is not trying to negate the importance of formal academic training. However, it does make it clear that formal academic training alone does not prepare someone for ministry. What other component is necessary for ministerial preparation?

Ellen G. White, whose prophetic voice is considered to be authoritative in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, firmly believed that one of the crucial aspects of developing young pastors was pairing them with an experienced pastoral mentor:

Young workers should not be sent out alone. They should stand right by the side of older and experienced ministers, where they could educate them . . . I think this has been shown [to] me twenty times in my lifetime, and I have tried to tell it to the brethren; but the evil is not remedied. (White, 1890, *Manuscript 19b*)

White is arguing that mentoring for young pastors is not optional, but a necessity. In fact, for her the absence of a mentor for a young pastor is not an oversight but rather an evil that must be remedied.

I first came into ministry in a bygone era when at least larger local conferences in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America seemed committed to eradicating the evil Ellen G. White was bemoaning. In my first assignment after graduating with a B.A. in Ministerial Studies—Pastoral Emphasis from Loma Linda University, I was placed under the mentoring of an experienced pastor. That year was both extremely excruciating and immensely rewarding. Excruciating because my mentor forced me to see things about myself and about my approach to pastoral ministry that was painful.

Yet, rewarding because that early pastoral formation prepared me to face the challenges of ministry that awaited me when I moved into my own church. However, the practice of pairing an inexperienced pastor with an experienced pastor for pastoral formation is no longer the norm. Most of the men and women graduating from seminary will be placed into two or three church districts where they will either learn to swim on their own or drown.

Why is it so crucial for young pastors to be paired with a mentor? It is crucial because for pastors the end is determined by the beginning. As Williams (2005) argues:

We cannot simply decide one morning ten to fifteen years after graduation to reinvent ourselves as the humble and wise pastor we always envisioned. We have to become that person. And we become that person by

making decisions today, and in particular, at the beginning of our time in ministry. (p. 58)

Williams' contention is that *pastoral formation* takes place in the early years of ministry. During these first few years of ministry, patterns and ways of being and doing ministry are cut and determined. Without a mentor to help intentionally guide the formation of a young pastor, he or she will be "more vulnerable to the tacit and sometimes forceful shaping brought about by our socialization into a denominational ethos, a cultural or economic class, or other various sanctioned ways of being" (Williams, 2005, p. 58). What Williams is asserting is that a mentor either guides pastoral formation or it will be shaped by the surrounding ethos and culture. Thus, as Smith (2008a) claims, "the mentoring of [young] pastors may be the greatest single factor in determining their future success" (p. 339). Williams intensifies this importance declaring, "the health and sanity of the mentee's future pastoral ministry depends on forming patterns of work, rest, play, and prayer while the mold is still soft" (p. 108). Mentoring for pastoral formation is not optional; it is essential.

A differentiation needs to be made between pastoral formation and pastoral training. Pastoral training assumes that the outcome of the process can be known in advance since pastoral training merely involves passing on to the mentee the "right skills" of pastoral ministry. As Lee (2011) points out:

While good technique is valuable, ministry is about more than skills. . . . [Too often mentors] are eager to teach those preparing for pastoral vocations to do these tasks properly and well; [mentors] want to ensure that a [mentee] has every opportunity to observe and practice skills such as preaching, assisting with wedding and funeral planning, leading a Bible study, following along on pastoral care visits, observing a session or board meeting . . . [assuming that] doing all of these tasks ensure one's readiness for a lifelong vocation in ministry. (p. 23)

Lee is asserting that there is more to ministry than just the acquisition of the right skills. While the procurement of these skills is necessary, they do not ensure one's readiness for ministry. The success or failure of a young minister is ultimately determined not by what they do, but by who they are.

Pastoral formation focuses on what the person is becoming. Ultimately as Smith (2008b) argues:

Mentors . . . are in the business of helping [mentees] be formed more and more into the image of Jesus so that [her/his] internal lives match the ministry acts they perform, and so that the [mentee's] external ministry acts are deeply rooted in their personal relationship with the Creator. (p. 118)

Smith is arguing that success in ministry is determined not by what skills a minister possesses, but rather the person a minister is becoming. Pastoral for-

mation emphasizes this process of becoming. That is why the outcomes of pastoral formation cannot be known in advance. The mentees' experience in the formation process, and not the process itself, determines the outcome (Lee, 2011, p. 23).

The New Testament church seems to have understood the crucial necessity of mentoring for pastoral formation. Scores of books and articles are devoted to the missionary and church planting exploits of the apostle Paul. However, as this paper will explore, Paul was just as focused and committed to mentoring for pastoral formation.

## **Paul the Mentee**

Paul gained his passion for and his devotion to mentoring young pastors from his own early experience in ministry. Paul received his call to ministry directly from Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-5). However, while it was Jesus who called Paul to ministry, God used Barnabas for Paul's pastoral formation. One wonders if Paul would have ever made that first missionary journey or planted that first church if not for Barnabas. He may have woken up ten to fifteen years later to discover he was not the minister he had envisioned when he first encountered Jesus on the road. When Paul first arrived in Jerusalem following his conversion experience (Acts 9:26-27), he discovered that all of the believers were afraid of the man whose hands only a short while ago had dripped with Christian blood. He would have been shut out of the church completely if Barnabas had not come along beside him, taken him to the apostles and assured them that Paul's conversion was genuine (Martin, para. 8).

Accepted by the apostles because of Barnabas, Paul began his ministry in Jerusalem but when an attempt was made on his life, the believers sent him away to his hometown of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). In Tarsus Paul disappears temporarily from the pages of Acts and may have disappeared from ministry if not for Barnabas. A number of years later, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him to Antioch where his pastoral formation would continue for one year under Barnabas' mentoring (Acts 11:25). Ultimately, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church in Antioch loosed Barnabas and Paul to undertake their first missionary journey. It seems significant that both the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:3) and the church (Acts 13:4) refer to Barnabas and Paul, perhaps denoting the mentor/mentee relationship between the two (Martin, 2003, para. 8).

At the conclusion of their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul would choose to separate. Their decision was driven by a disagreement that arose between the two when Barnabas sought to take John Mark along with them

(Acts 15:36-41). However, perhaps there was more going on here than meets the eye. Could it be that Barnabas realized that it was time to end their relationship as mentor and mentee? It was now time for the next step in Paul's pastoral formation; it was time for the mentee to find someone to mentor. Having poured himself into the pastoral formation of Paul, Barnabas was now ready to offer the same to John Mark.

It did not take long for the mentee to become the mentor. On his second missionary journey Paul began by going back to visit the cities where he and Barnabas had previously labored. One of the first stops was in Lystra.

Lystra, located in central Turkey, was a somewhat rustic market town. In Lystra there was a young disciple named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish believer and his father was a Greek. The fact that Timothy was not circumcised (Acts 16:3) suggests that he did not grow up in a pious or strictly observant Jewish home. However, 2 Timothy 1:5 reveals that the most powerful influences in the life of this young disciple were his mother (Eunice) and his grandmother (Lois). There is no indication anywhere about when his mother and grandmother first encountered the truth about Jesus Christ or who brought them to faith; however, it is usually assumed that it was through Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 14:8-18).

As Barnabas had intentionally sought out Paul and poured his life into mentoring him, Paul now intentionally seeks out Timothy and invites him to come along on the journey with him as his mentee. Why Timothy? Paul heard a good report about Timothy from all of the believers in Lystra. They all saw potential in this young disciple and Paul wanted to be intentional about Timothy's pastoral formation (Acts 16:2-3).

It should not be overlooked that before leaving on their missionary journey Paul had Timothy circumcised. This may seem peculiar and even somewhat hypocritical since Paul believed that true circumcision was of the heart not the flesh (Col. 2:11-13). However, Paul understood that unless he regulated Timothy's religious status with the Jews, Timothy could not work in that ministry context. Timothy's first lesson in ministry was literally a painful one. He learned the self-sacrificial lengths to which a minister must go to become all things to all people for the sake of winning some to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Timothy would stay by Paul's side throughout Paul's second missionary journey. He experienced with Paul the journey to, and conflict in, Philippi (Acts 16:6-40). From Philippi he traveled with Paul to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-8). He then journeyed with Paul to Berea (Acts 17:14-15). Paul understood that:

[Mentors] mentor by the very act of ministering. . . . [he or she] does not put on the [mentoring] hat for a weekly meeting or when he [or she] observes a [mentee] making her [or his] first pastoral care visit. . . .

Rather, active [mentoring] takes place when a [mentoring] pastor engages

in ministry: when she [or he] leads worship, prays for congregants, teaches young people [etc.] All of these ministry acts are vital parts of [mentoring]. However, [mentoring] is more than modeling . . . it is living. (Lee, 2011, p. 21)

At this first level Paul mentored Timothy just by inviting Timothy to come along beside him and observe. Timothy was invited to witness the way that Paul did ministry and, on an even deeper level, to observe how Paul lived. At its core pastoral formation is about more than just imparting knowledge and skills. Shaping people into the image of Christ is at the heart of pastoral formation. Smith (2008a) reminds both mentors and mentees that “pastors fail in ministry because their spiritual and personal lives fall apart—rarely do they fail because their skills were inadequate” (p. 341). Paul did not just offer his knowledge and ministry competencies to Timothy. Paul invited Timothy to observe Paul’s way of life in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 4:16). Timothy saw Paul at work, rest, play, study and prayer. Timothy was able to observe the congruency of Paul’s external ministry acts with his internal personal relationship with Jesus. He got to witness Paul’s personal walk with Christ and received an invitation to be an imitator of Paul, just as Paul was an imitator of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

While in Athens, Paul determined it was time to give Timothy his first solo experience in Christian praxis, so Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2). After a stay of unknown length in Thessalonica, Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). The path of Timothy over the next number of years and how long he remained with Paul in Corinth is uncertain. What is clear is that Timothy was with Paul as he began his third missionary journey in Ephesus, and that Paul then sent him out on another mission, this time back to Corinth with a Pauline letter to share (1 Cor. 16:10-11). Included in that letter was Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian believers about Timothy. Paul urged them not to intimidate Timothy when he came because he was doing the Lord’s work, as was Paul. Commentators question whether Paul here shows doubts about Timothy, or the Corinthian believers, or both.

Perhaps what it demonstrates is that mentoring for pastoral formation also requires something of churches and church members. Paul expected the Corinthian congregation to come alongside Timothy and offer him support and encouragement. They were to offer him a place where he could practice ministry without the pressure of getting everything right. This is necessary because as Williams (2005) points out:

New pastors have been known to stand in the wrong place during the Eucharist and fumble the words of the liturgy. New pastors (and not only new ones!) have been known to preach sermons both ponderous and facile. (p. 87)

Paul expected the church in Corinth to support and stand beside Timothy even as he went through the typical growing pains described by Williams above. Paul was asking the church in Corinth to be a “teaching church” for Timothy. Paul was calling them to create a space where Timothy could grow through trial and error. Ultimately, he was calling them to develop a new ecclesiology that saw the local churches’ privilege and responsibility to the larger body of Christ in the pastoral formation of the next generation of ministers (Williams, 2005, p. 88).

Timothy would later rejoin Paul on his journey to Jerusalem and would remain with him at least as far as Troas (Acts 20:4). At some point before reaching Jerusalem, Paul would once again dispatch Timothy on a mission, back to the city of Ephesus. Note the pattern that is developing. Time spent with Paul followed by a sending out to do ministry, return to Paul, and a resending out to do ministry. This pattern has similarities to Smith’s equation for building ministry skill excellence:

Prepare the mentee for a ministry event + Place the mentee into the ministry situation + Evaluate the event + Ask for the mentee’s learning + Discuss a more excellent way + Give additional student practice if necessary for the situation + Reinsert the mentee into a similar situation = Ministry Skill Excellence. (Smith, 2008b, p. 109)

While Timothy ministers in Ephesus, Paul continues to pour himself into Timothy’s pastoral formation. No longer able to be with Timothy in person, Paul continues to mentor him through two personal letters that, along with the one written to Titus, are referred to as the *Pastoral Epistles*. Both letters allow the reader or hearer to eavesdrop on the conversation between a mentor and a mentee. Within these written conversations are insights about mentoring for pastoral formation.

## Mentoring for Pastoral Formation

Paul’s two letters to Timothy underscore the significance of Timothy to Paul. Paul refers to Timothy as his “true son” (1 Tim. 1:2) and his “dear son” (2 Tim. 1:2). As Williams (2005) points out, “the importance of Timothy’s close friendship with Paul for his own preparation and formation cannot be overstated” (p. 186). Paul understood that “to be successful as a mentor, one must be committed to giving away his or her life for the benefit of the [mentee]” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 142). Paul not only invested his time and energy into Timothy, but also gave him his heart. Paul’s willingness to make this costly investment was driven by three loves that are central to a good mentor: “a love for God, for ministry and for [the mentee]” (Witmer, 2008, p. 42). A good mentor doesn’t just display one of these passions. An effective mentor must clearly manifest in



word and action all three passions.

Part of the heart investment of mentoring is embracing its autobiographical nature. Paul was always transparent and authentic about his own sinfulness and Christ's unmerited grace in his life (1 Tim. 1:12–16). Paul's authenticity and transparency with Timothy was foundational to creating a safe environment for Timothy to share the truth about himself. Only mentors who are honest about the reflection they see in their own mirrors can effectively help their mentee to honestly see his or her reflection.

Part of Paul's role in Timothy's pastoral formation was serving as a ministry role model. He modeled for Timothy how ministry is carried out in real life situations (2 Tim. 1:3; 2:8–10; and 3:10–12). However, effective ministry role modeling involves both observation and reflective conversations. As Smith (2008b) argues: "A major portion of the weekly [communication] between the mentor and the [mentee] should focus on real issues of ministry and how to work through them in biblical, theological and healthy ways." (p. 107) An effective pastoral mentor embraces her or his role as a pastor theologian and models the important connection between theology and praxis by serving as a facilitator of theological reflection.

Paul turns his attention to instruction in Christian praxis through the lens of reflective theology in 1 Timothy 2–4. He reflects theologically on public worship (1 Tim. 2:1–3:1a), and the qualifications for those who serve as elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1b–13). He does not just focus on what and how, but more importantly, converses with Timothy on the why. Paul does not want to merely tell Timothy how ministry should be done but rather to model how to reflect theologically on real issues and circumstances in ministry. Paul understands the important "connection between theology and pastoral ministry . . . [and desires to develop Timothy as a] pastor-theologian" (Hiestand & Wilson, 2015, back cover). Paul comprehends that the role of the pastor and the role of the theologian are not mutually exclusive tasks. Rather, he sees the inseparable connection between pastoral ministry and theology. As Hiestand and Wilson point out, pastoral ministry without theological reflection leaves the church "theologically anemic," while theology removed from the context of pastoral ministry makes theology "ecclesially anemic" (p. 14). Paul not only models reflective theology to Timothy, he also facilitates reflective theology with Timothy not only about current issues in ministry, but also how to walk through the "what ifs" before they arise (see 1 Tim. 4). For Paul, "theological reflection [was] not an intellectual exercise for the sheer delight of playing with interesting ideas. Its aim [was] not only religious insight but insightful religious action" (Coll, 1992, p. 98). Paul wanted to ensure that neither he nor Timothy was guilty of making uniformed ministerial decisions. In order to

facilitate reflective theology, Paul gave to Timothy what Williams (2005) refers to as the “gifts of place and space” (p. 60). The gift of place is giving a local context in which the mentee can practice ministry. The gift of space refers to the ongoing opportunity for the mentee to reflect theologically with the mentor about ministry (p. 60).

In addition to being a ministry role model, Paul was also a ministry skills coach (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:15 & 4:2). As Timothy’s mentor it was Paul’s responsibility to train Timothy in the basic skills of pastoral ministry. As previously noted, Paul understood that the spiritual/Christian formation of Timothy was his primary responsibility as Timothy’s pastoral mentor. However, he recognized that this did not absolve him of his duty to help Timothy develop the pastoral skills necessary for effective ministry. As Smith (2008b) argues:

Spiritual formation and ministry skills are two sides of the same coin. The outer skill will likely not survive without the deep spiritual strength to sustain it. Yet, a deep inner life without the basic ministry skills to transport the spirituality into effective ministry will, at the least, make the ministry dramatically less effective than it otherwise might be. (p. 107)

Smith’s point is that the mentor’s role is not either being a spiritual mentor or a pastoral skills coach; instead it is a both/and. Pastoral formation bereft of spiritual formation creates a pastor without the spiritual insight to apply pastoral skills. Conversely, pastoral formation lacking pastoral skills development leaves a pastor without the basic skills necessary to respond to various ministerial situations.

Paul also understood the necessity of doing mentoring in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Williams (2005) describes a key component of that partnership: “A wise mentor looks to partner with the Holy Spirit patiently discerning the possible divine origins of [the] mentee’s passions and abilities and looks to create space for these to develop and flourish to benefit church community” (p. 95). Williams is stressing the important role of the mentor in partnership with the Holy Spirit in discerning the passions and spiritual gifts already possessed by the mentee and ones that are emergent. In partnership with the Holy Spirit Paul exhorted Timothy to not “neglect the gift that was in him” and to “continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:14, 16). In this passage Paul reminds Timothy of his divinely gifted passions and abilities, and encourages him to use them to benefit the church community in the space that Paul has created for him in the church at Corinth.

The mentor’s partnership with the Holy Spirit is also a crucial for discerning what Williams refers to as “patterns or habits that could hinder the mentee’s ministry or lead to burnout” (p. 102). Paul in exhorting Timothy “to stir up the gift of God which is in [him]” also admonished him that “God has not given

us a spirit of fear” (2 Tim. 1:6-7). Paul sees within Timothy a spirit of fear that could potentially hinder his ministry or lead to burnout. However, he does not just point out this potential hindrance to ministry, he also points to a way through it by reminding Timothy that “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7).

The role of the mentor in pointing out a mentee’s gifts and abilities for ministry and habits that could hinder ministry requires both a partnership with the Holy Spirit and courageous love. Hillman (2008) argues, “one of the marks of a good mentor is a man or woman who loves courageously” (p. 52). Foundational to courageous love is a willingness to always speak the truth to a mentee. As Hillman points out, “a mentor has the necessary perspective to look into [a mentee’s] life and ministry and to see where the gaps are and where God is at work” (p. 52). Paul always spoke the truth to Timothy whether it was affirming his gifts or admonishing him about his spirit of fear or warning him to “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). However, mentors often struggle with courageous love. Mentors are often:

Hesitant to offer [themselves] because of a sense of inadequacy . . . so they refrain from confronting the mentee . . . [they] abdicate their responsibility to spur [the mentee] on to spiritual maturity and works of service for fear that their own personal and pastoral weaknesses or failures may be exposed. (Williams, 2005, p. 78)

What interferes with a mentor’s ability to love courageously and have courageous conversations with their mentee is a mentor’s lack of authenticity and transparency. As DeLong points out, “Pastors who choose not to look at the void in their own life often feel unable to help [mentees] face the void in their life” (p. 50). Courageous conversations necessitate “the recognition that the mentor speaks as a sinner, and when receiving hard council the mentee hears as a sinner. [Thus mentor and mentee] meet each other on level ground” (Williams, 2005, p. 103). Courageous conversations are built upon a deep relationally transparent partnership between a mentor and the mentee.

It seems unlikely that Paul’s letters to Timothy were written in a vacuum. Paul was not just spouting off answers to Timothy before any questions were asked. Rather his letters grew out of attentively listening to Timothy. In fact there are indications in the letter that there was a two-way conversation going in between Paul and Timothy (see 2 Tim. 1:4). Attentive listening is another crucial characteristic of successful mentors. Mentors need to be “quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19). In fact according to Hillman (2008), “The crux of much of the mentoring relationship is listening, especially [the mentor] listening to the [mentee]” (Hillman, p. 75). Only through listening does a mentor come to really know a mentee. Therefore, mentors need to be attentive to the

reflective thoughts, the deep questions, the articulated stories and the painful confessions of their mentees (Williams, 2005, p. 117).

## Conclusion

If not for Barnabas' willingness to come alongside Paul as his pastoral mentor, Paul's story may have ended after Acts 9. He may have woken up fifteen years later in Tarsus to the realization that he was not the pastor he was called to be on the road to Damascus. Without Paul's willingness to extend the same gift of mentoring to Timothy, it is doubtful that Timothy would have become an effective young pastor in the early church. Ultimately, I know that I would have floundered in ministry if not for the gifts my pastoral mentor—Del Dunavant—gave to me of place and space and most importantly, himself. Barnabas, Paul and Del all seized the opportunity to leave a lasting legacy through those they poured their lives into for the purpose of pastoral formation.

Mentoring for pastoral formation requires this type of intentional relationship between an experienced pastoral mentor and a young pastoral mentee. Ellen G. White understood that such intentional mentoring for pastoral formation is crucial. It is crucial because who a pastor will become is determined in the first three or four years of ministry. Ultimately the question is not whether young pastors are experiencing pastoral formation—they are. The important question is who or what is guiding their formation? Are young pastors being shaped by a committed pastoral mentor or by the cultural ethos of the local congregation? The answer to this question will have a profound impact on the future of pastoral ministry and just may be a predictor of the future of the church.

This article has focused on the importance of mentoring for pastoral formation. However, the crucial role of mentoring is pertinent to vocational formation in general. Who a person will become as a teacher, business manager, health professional, etc. is also determined during their early years in their chosen vocation. Like ministerial formation the crucial question of vocational formation is who or what is guiding the formation of each individual? Perhaps the greatest legacy that anyone can leave in their chosen vocation comes from pouring their lives into the “Timothys” in their midst for the purpose of their vocational formation.

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