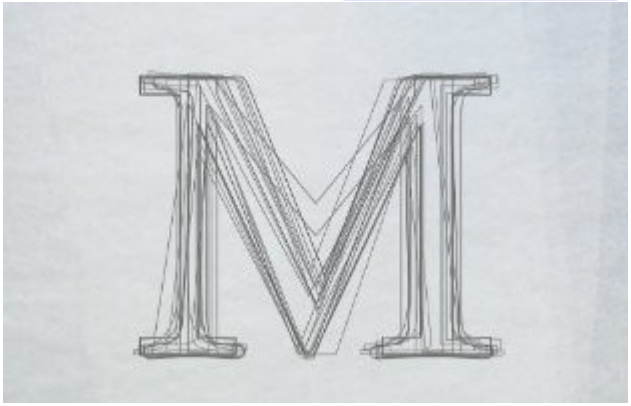
Mentors: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the January 22, 2014 issue



Daniel C. Richardson

In response to our request for essays on mentors, we received many compelling reflections. Here is a selection.

What are you doing in here? Shouldn't you be out visiting patients? asked Gerry. Gerry was one member of the chaplaincy staff that ministry students tried to steer clear of. With his barely audible greetings and rolling of the eyes, he let us know we were on his turf and in the way.

"Um, yes. Just checking up on some patients on the computer database. Leaving now."

Which was a lie. The real reason I was in the office was because I was hiding. That morning's rounds on the surgical floor hadn't gone well. Two years of divinity school taught me about Heidegger and hermeneutics, but I hadn't discovered what I actually felt about God or how to talk to God.

Just then Gerry's pager went off. "Nathan, wait. Why don't you come with me." I followed him into the hallway and past the elevators. He said we were going to the emergency room, where a pregnant woman had just miscarried and wanted a blessing for the baby.

In the emergency room a nurse took us into a room and drew a curtain around us.

“Hold your hands like this,” said Gerry, holding his hands outstretched over the blue blanket. “Just speak.” I began to hear myself pray. Did I say God? Did I grow suddenly certain that this young life was bound for heaven? Did I ask for some kind of intervention? Were my intellectual knots untied?

Hardly, but it didn’t matter. I remember saying the child’s name, declaring that this life was holy, blessing the mother, blessing the room that despite appearances was sacred space, blessing the nurses for having the courage to do their hard, tender work.

Reinhold Niebuhr says that prayer “is not about hearing voices, it is about acquiring a voice.” Gerry, wherever you are, thank you for helping me acquire mine.

Nathan Detering
Sherborn, Mass.

Gary, the youth pastor, handed me a worn folder with the information from previous mission trips. “I want you to look through this file to get an idea of how the previous trips were organized. Then we’ll meet to plan how we will approach the next one.”

I was only in my second year of working with the youth group, and Gary was asking me to organize, train and lead the weeklong mission trip for 20 youths and adults. I said yes to Gary’s request without comprehending the amount of responsibility that he placed on me.

We meet weekly to review plans and brainstorm ideas. Then we held six weeks of training meetings for all of the participants. At one training session, Gary suggested that we arrange the chairs in a circle for a more collegial atmosphere. My younger sister, who was in middle school, sat in the chair next to mine, and during the meeting we joked together in our sibling shorthand while excluding everyone else.

At my next meeting with Gary, he suggested that our bantering and laughing had been a distraction. “It doesn’t help others to see you as the leader when you’re laughing and talking with your sister,” Gary said. “It undermines your leadership.” I was embarrassed. He reassured me that it wasn’t a catastrophe, just don’t do it again.

After the trip concluded, Gary gave me his observations, insights and feedback on my work from beginning to end. He affirmed my organizing skills and my ability to lead a group of people, including my peers. He asked me for my observations and reflections and also asked me to write them down for inclusion in the file for the next mission trip.

It was only years later that I understood what an exceptional mentor Gary was. His relationship shaped me as I became a leader and mentor myself.

June Mears Driedger
Lansing, Mich.

He was a former pastor selling insurance to other pastors. A serious health problem had forced him to take early retirement from ministry. We had a cup of coffee one morning at a local restaurant when he said to me, “Never abandon your children or your wife for the church. I did. And I’ve had to repair a lot of damage. I’ve written letters of apology to my children and to my wife. I’ve told them how sorry I am that I wasn’t there for them. I missed too many soccer games and dance recitals and moments with my family. It cost them dearly—and me, too.”

Across that small table in a small-town Oklahoma restaurant, his words made a deep impact on me. His strained face and wearied body spoke volumes.

He became our family’s investment counselor, and a few years later he truly retired and moved away.

I’ve used his words with younger pastors, with the promise: “Later, you won’t have to write letters of apology to your children or to your spouse.” I don’t recall his name, but I will never forget his passion. I will always be grateful for his honesty, a powerful reminder of what counts.

Thomas P. Eggebeen
Los Angeles

As a freshly scrubbed seminarian, I was attending my first required session of spiritual direction. Margaret motioned me to a chair. I caught sight of what appeared

to be a little rag doll sitting in another chair. It had long, straggly brown hair, a wisp of a beard, a simple burlap robe, and a cross around its neck. A Jesus doll?

“Let’s just sit in silence for a bit,” Margaret offered. After a few minutes, Margaret offered a short prayer. After she opened her eyes, she could see that I was still distracted by the presence of the doll in the chair next to us.

“That’s Jesus,” she said. “He’s here to remind us that this is not primarily a conversation between you and me, but a conversation between you and him. I am just a companion along the way.”

What a cheesy gimmick, I thought. And yet, curiously, over the course of my many subsequent visits with Margaret, it was this simple doll and not the other more obviously holy objects in her room – the icons, candles and crosses – that most consistently reminded me of a holy presence in our midst.

“So, how do you pray?” Margaret asked. This was a question I had feared she would ask. “The truth is,” I said, “I have trouble praying on my own.”

“So tell me what your morning is like. What helps you to start your day?”

“Well,” I said, “I love nothing more than sitting down with a good cup of coffee and just taking a moment to consider the day ahead.”

“Have you ever tried sharing your cup of coffee with Jesus?”

“What exactly do you mean?

“Well,” she said, “the next time you sit down to have your coffee in the morning, close your eyes, take a moment to feel the warmth of the cup between your hands, smell the aroma of the coffee, and then just imagine that Jesus is sitting across the kitchen table from you. And as you sit there, try to feel his presence, and listen as carefully as you can to what he might be asking you, right then and there. Whom does he see? What are his hopes for you? What do you think he loves most about you? And if you had just this one chance to say something to him from the depths of your heart, what might it be?”

Never had I imagined praying in such an unconventional way, just sitting with Jesus over a cup of coffee. And so began a practice of prayer that has stayed with me ever since.

Luther Zeigler
Cambridge, Mass.

My family moved frequently during my childhood, and we would flit in and out of churches for holidays or short periods of Sunday school until the next move. When I was 13, however, we settled in a town in Pennsylvania. A friend discovered how much I loved to sing and invited me to join the youth choir at her church, which was part of the United Church of Christ. There the Spirit awakened in me a love of liturgy, church music and a community of people caring deeply for one another.

A year later Russ came to be our interim pastor. A not-so-retired radical, Russ had marched in Washington and elsewhere for civil rights. He took over our confirmation class, a group of sullen high school students with low expectations. With passion and poetry he “opened up” the prophets. I began to see God alive and active all over our city and the world.

A few days after my 15th birthday, Russ stopped me as I was leaving the church to ask if I had ever considered going into the ministry. I had never seen a woman minister and had no idea the career was open to women. Flabbergasted and confused, I asked if that was even possible. He assured me that outside northeastern Pennsylvania the UCC was indeed ordaining women. I assured him I knew what I wanted to be (a French teacher, or perhaps a journalist), and minister was not even on the list. He smiled and said, “We’ll see.”

Russ was interim pastor for only six months, and when he left he dutifully severed contact with the congregation. When I left for college, however, he and I began a correspondence that would last until his death. He sent me poetry—often about justice issues—and letters of encouragement. When I went to seminary, he urged me on despite my fears of failure or inadequacy. During my first pastorate, he continued writing with advice, good humor, challenge and compassion. Whenever I have been tempted to give up on the church, or myself, I hear Russ’s encouragement. Whenever I have been tempted to ignore or soft-pedal issues of justice, I remember Russ’s agitation.

A few years ago, a regional minister called to ask if I would work with a group of newly ordained women clergy as a mentor. As I looked at my overflowing calendar, my first impulse was to say no. Then I heard Russ’s words again, “We’ll see,” and I

said yes.

Rochelle A. Stackhouse
Hamden, Conn.

Katherine was a professor of early childhood education at the University of California. I met her when she was in her sixties and I was 30, divorced, the mother of a two-year-old and a teacher in a public high school. The title of the class, “The Far Reaches of Human Experience,” spoke to my spiritual yearning.

Katherine did not give advice. She wondered with me. During a conversation about one of my papers, she wondered whether I might want to come to Quaker meeting for worship. Having come out of a conservative religious upbringing, I had not been part of a faith community for over ten years. I accepted her invitation. Sitting in silence with others in Quaker meeting, I knew that I had found a home.

I took other classes that Katherine taught, and for several years I went to Katherine’s house every Monday night to participate in a meditation and active imaging group. Later I met with her alone.

When I spoke of how my teaching was no longer meaningful, Katherine wondered whether I had ever thought about going to seminary. Although I had been looking at graduate programs, seminary had not occurred to me. Within a year I had taken a leave from my job and had begun classes at seminary. Like other women of my background and generation, I had married a seminary student, not aware of my own deep desire to go to seminary.

Yet another invitation from Katherine was simply: “I wonder if you’d like Pendle Hill.” I was able to create an independent study that allowed my daughter and me to live and study at that Quaker intentional community in Pennsylvania for three months.

At age 42, I was finishing seminary in Minnesota when a woman asked me, “May I come and talk to you?” That request began the work of spiritual direction that I still do. I often say to those I direct, “I wonder . . .”

Marilyn Benson
St. Paul, Minn.

I was 35 years old, six months departed from a ten-year marriage, mother of an eight-year-old, and two years past having left the denomination of my childhood. My life was messy. I had been a pastor for five years but now had no church home, and I'd recently quit my job at a bookstore. I was bunking with a buddy.

I saw an ad in the newspaper for a church administrative position. I needed a job, and I could do this one. I phoned and learned from the receptionist that the senior minister had already interviewed three candidates and was close to making a decision. "Please," I said. "If I could just speak with him, I think this might be a good match for your congregation and me." She invited me to come in that afternoon.

So, needing a job, any job, I interviewed with Gordon. After an hour of conversation, I wanted very much to work with him. I knew that I had plenty more to learn about ministry and that he had plenty to teach me.

I started the following Monday. That Friday Gordon bounded into my office waving papers and asking if he could read to me his sermon for that coming Sunday. "Tell me what you think," he said. "Tell me what's missing, what it needs." And he began to read aloud.

I was stunned. He was a well-known leader serving a big-steeple church. I was nobody. But for five years, every Friday by noontime Gordon showed up and read his sermon aloud. He invited critique, welcomed dialogue, sought a new perspective.

Five years later it was time to leave. He had helped me rediscover my best self, as well as teaching me a thing or two about ministry. Thank you, Gordon.

Janet E. Powers
West Springfield, Mass.

In my early twenties I was a member of a tiny church in western Massachusetts where ten to 20 people worshiped on Sundays. When the pastor retired, the three of us on the search committee had trouble finding any clergy interested in serving such a small congregation, in such a small town, in a part-time position.

Howard, a retired pastor and a veteran of the civil rights movement, took me aside one Sunday and asked: “Heidi, what if you became the pastor of the church?” I was totally shocked and totally delighted.

Though it seemed impossible for someone so young and with no seminary degree, I became the licensed lay pastor. I could preach, teach and offer the sacraments, but only in our church and our town. The area minister assigned me a mentor: a seasoned woman pastor who tried to be supportive. But my most influential mentors were my congregation: MaryKate, Steve S., Dick, George, Bonnie, Mary, Ray, Sally, Steve P., Judy, C. J., Susan, Tamsin, Howard and Valerie. They were with me on Sundays, they encouraged me, and they endured my fumbles.

My first funeral was for Ray, who had been pastor of the church many decades before. When he died, his family called another pastor, a friend of Ray’s. That pastor then called me out of professional courtesy. I panicked. Should I respect the family’s privacy? Or should I reach out to them? I called MaryKate and told her I didn’t know what to do. She said to me, “If you did know what to do, what would you do?”

I took a deep breath and I called the family. I can’t remember what we said to each other, but somehow I ended up at their house. Our tiny church was overflowing with people for the memorial service. I stood in front of them and felt too young and very much an outsider. But I saw Ray’s wife sitting with her family in the front pews and other church members sitting in the crowd. I didn’t have any seminary training or CPE credits, but my congregation and Ray’s family believed I could be their pastor, and so I was.

Today I serve a church in the suburbs of Chicago. A picture of that Massachusetts church hangs in my study. I still regularly ask myself MaryKate’s question: “If you did know what to do, what would you do?”

Heidi Haverkamp
Bolingbrook, Ill.

The religion I inherited from my parents felt utterly sour and doubtful. Church seemed more like a sing-along social club than a place for healing. Few would address my questions about biblical authority or theories of atonement without making me feel lost and heretical. I decided to spend a summer at a cloister. Sister

Scholastica wrote back, “OK, Brother Garrett. Come and see. We will talk.”

Sister Scholastica listened intently as I ranted and raved about how I didn’t know if I believed anymore, or if I even wanted to believe. She said, “But didn’t you come so that you might believe?” I said I didn’t know. “Brother Garrett, I think you want to believe. We all want to believe. We are glad that you came. So, what chores would you like to do?” I emphatically stated that I did not enjoy doing dishes, and yard work suited me best.

“Good, then you will do the dishes. And, Brother Garrett, when you are doing the dishes, listen to God speaking. Find God in the dishes—it’s more important than doctrine and theology, which seem to upset you.”

A month into washing dishes and regular monastic life, frustration screamed through my veins as God seemed eternally absent. I told Sister Scholastica, and she invited me to walk through the forest. “How are the dishes?” The spiritual dish washing was not working. I spoke at length before she interrupted, “Brother Garrett, you talk so very much. Do you know how to listen?” When I responded no, she led me to a cramped, dank prayer room. “Sit here, focus on God, and do not talk.”

I resolved to follow the monastery’s vow of silence, which lasts from after vespers until mass the following morning. I hoped to achieve silence most of the day, so that when Sister Scholastica told me to be silent again, I could boast proudly about my accomplishments. I resolved to prove her wrong on every point so as to justify my thoughts and actions.

The silence was not silent at all. Anger swelled in my heart toward Sister Scholastica. I hated her for telling me to be quiet and not agreeing with my standpoint.

“How is the silence?” she asked. I said it was awful, and she asked, “What are you learning?” I confessed my own selfishness and arrogance. She smiled and nodded, “Yes, I struggle with those, too.” I asked what we should do and she said, “We should continue to listen to God. Follow me.”

She led me into the cloister’s mortuary. Outside the door, she whispered, “A sister passed away last night.” I said I was sorry. “Yes, it is sad. Now, Brother Garrett, let’s not be so selfish anymore. Go pray for your sisters.” I pushed through the door and there rested a corpse with two sisters sobbing over it. I sat praying until they asked, “Would you like to know who she was?” For an afternoon, I listened to them and

prayed for them.

By the end of summer, the dish washing became tolerable and I grew accustomed to silence. On our final walk, she asked, “What is God teaching you?” I updated her: God’s teaching me to join the life of the church if I want to change it; God’s showing me to appreciate others’ views on Christ while seeking what I truly believe; God’s asking me to listen to the Bible and not others’ views on it; and God is granting me peace from my noisy, untamed heart. She smiled. “Brother Garrett, you still have much to learn, but you have done very well. Perhaps you would enjoy doing the dishes twice a day?”

Garrett Mostowski
Montrose, Colo.

He walked into my room unannounced. He was short and gruff. I thought, “Who is this guy?” Dan wanted me to do field education at his church. I’d just been turned down for a field education position at an inner-city church where I had hoped to do community organizing. Dan was offering me the opportunity to do youth ministry. Youth ministry?

I’d come to seminary to study social ethics and become a neighborhood activist. I didn’t want to do youth ministry.

But there was something alluring about the guy. Maybe it was the fact that he noticed the shiny volumes of Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in my bookcase. Or maybe it was his pithy phrases. In that first brief conversation he observed that “Niebuhr’s diagnosis is better than his prescription.” He finished his sales pitch with, “Ponder it, and let me know what you think.”

I had real doubts about becoming a pastor. And then there were the youth at the church who seemed to have fallen into the depths of that peculiar form of mental illness that sets in around seventh grade and lasts about five years.

The saving grace in the midst of it all was Dan. He knew theology, history and social ethics and made connections between his reading and the practical problems of ministry. Still more pithy phrases sprang out: “Don’t generalize from a limited sample.” “Forgiveness is not just a theological principle, it’s a practical necessity.” I

marveled at his ability to do ministry on the fly while contrasting himself with those pastors who (as he said) “really knew what they were doing.”

A crucial point in our relationship came one weekend. I was preaching that Sunday, and Dan and his wife had invited me to spend Saturday night at the parsonage. I was up late working on the sermon while Dan was watching a hockey game. Coming downstairs to make myself a cup of coffee, I told Dan that I was jealous of him because I was working hard on the sermon while he got to relax on a Saturday night in front of the television. Dan responded in typical gruff fashion: “Well, you’d better get use to it, because I think you’re going to be a pastor someday, even if you don’t think so!” His words stopped me in my tracks. I thought, “If this man whose mind I deeply respect thinks I have what it takes to be a pastor, then I’d better think very seriously about becoming one.” Two years later, Dan preached at my ordination.

Dan supervised many seminary students during his decades of ministry. I’m sure each one would say that they felt like Dan’s favorite. He had a way of being so focused on you and so accepting of you that you felt as if you were cherished like none other.

Bruce D. Ervin
Bloomington, Ind.

We started off on the wrong foot. Eric Teye-Kau, a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, was going to serve the Moravian Church of South Africa, financially sponsored by the organization for which I worked, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity. When Eric and his family arrived at the Durban airport, no one was waiting to meet them. Because of inclement weather, the MCSA welcoming committee was hours late. Disappointed and bewildered, Eric called me in Germany, thousands of miles away.

In Eric’s first weeks in South Africa, he and I telephoned almost daily. I was the first point of contact for every problem. Visa difficulties? Call Riley. Problems getting the children settled into schools? Call Riley. Tensions with the local church administration? Call Riley. Financial strains? Call Riley. It wasn’t easy for me to handle those calls. Often the connection was poor. I couldn’t help wondering if there were persons closer at hand who would be better able to help.

At the same time, there was something about those calls that I liked. I realized that Eric was indeed taking me seriously as his mentor. In his estimation, I was someone who could be of assistance in spite of the enormous differences and distance.

For several months, Eric and his family plunged from crisis to crisis. By the time I paid my first visit to Eric in South Africa, he was in conflict with the local church council and the MCSA administration. One person even read out a list of grievances. I saw little chance of the situation being resolved.

I noticed some large piles of rocks outside Eric's home. Eric was a prize-winning farmer in addition to being a minister, and he had begun preparing to plow the acreage traditionally allotted to the pastor of this South African congregation. The custom went back to the days of the Moravian missionaries of the 19th century, who were generally German. The ministers were expected to meet their living costs by the fruits of their agricultural labor. However, it had been decades since anyone had plowed those fields. Would Eric, a child of the tropics, know how to farm in a temperate climate?

I was wrong to doubt him. By my next visit a year later, the pastoral acreage was bearing corn, green peppers, tomatoes, onions, okra and potatoes. On spiritual matters, he informed me that he had expanded the liturgy to include a time in which the congregation spoke in tongues and that he had embarked upon a program of healing visitation to the sick. "Is that what the people want?" I asked, a bit doubtful. I also spoke to the person who a year before had presented the grievances. Still peeved, the person had added "faith healing" to the list of complaints. Still, I sensed that the tide was turning.

By the next year, Eric had converted the garage into an informal vegetable market, and additional produce was sold to local supermarkets. Even more impressive was the proliferation of garden plots all over town. Before this, local initiative had been lacking, the general assumption being that if you can't farm on a large scale, there's no point in farming at all. Yet Eric had proven the opposite. Worship services were now long, noisy and well attended, with the average age of the congregants dropping by the month.

Eric's contract recently came to an end, and he and his family returned to Ghana. No mentor ever received more than I received from Eric Teye-Kau.

Riley Edwards-Raudonat
Stuttgart, Germany

After I finished my first year of seminary I became the student pastor at a Disciples of Christ church in Missouri. It was a part-time position designed to have rotating responsibilities each semester, based on my coursework. Since I had just finished a course titled “Effective Hospital Ministry” it made sense to add hospital and home-bound visitations to my list of duties.

I hated it. I always felt awkward walking into a hospital room or someone’s home and trying to strike up a conversation that seemed, to me at least, to be artificial and inauthentic. It got to the point where I would conveniently “forget” to go make visits.

I shared my frustrations and difficulties with Jill, the senior pastor, and she recommended that I take a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE) sooner rather than later, because it would help me to become a better pastoral caregiver and visitor. The problem was that I didn’t want to do CPE. I had been regaled with tales of CPE supervisors belittling and tearing down students to the point of tears. On top of all of that, it would make me engage in more visits with people I didn’t even know.

In the Disciples of Christ, ordination requirements can vary from region to region. When I entered the ordination process, I was in a region that required one unit of CPE, but roughly halfway through my seminary journey I relocated to a region that did not have such a requirement. I was in the process of trying to move my ordination process to the new region.

I explained to Jill why moving my ordination process was a good thing to do. She said, “Tyler, we have a close enough relationship that I can say this to you: you have a tendency to avoid difficult things. I think that CPE is an example. You’re afraid of the hard work that you might have to do. You might be afraid of looking inside yourself. Sure, you have a lot of good excuses not to take a unit of CPE, but when it comes down to it, I think you don’t want to do it because you’re afraid it will be difficult.”

She was right. I was afraid of the hard work that would come along with the CPE. And I was afraid of reliving painful memories of sitting in an intensive-care unit waiting room wondering if my mother would survive a drug overdose. I was afraid of unfruitful, awkward conversations with sick strangers. I was afraid of being vulnerable. At the time it seemed like she was just trying to push my buttons. Looking back, I realize that she was touching on a prominent character flaw.

My first CPE unit was difficult. I cried. I wrestled with demons from my past. I had to come to terms with the fact that vulnerability and difficulty are part of ministry.

I am now working as a chaplain at a hospital—something that I swore I would never do. What happened to change me? I had a mentor who wasn’t afraid to confront me and call me out.

Tyler Whipkey
Laurens, Iowa