Distinguishing Being Pastored, Mentored, Coached or Discipled (and other Terms)

**Similar or synonymous terms:** for most pastors and leaders, it’s helpful to treat being pastored (pastoring of pastors), mentored, coached or discipled as basically synonymous. Trying to differentiate them tends to confuse people and create theoretical discussions instead of moving ahead with practice. Further down the road it can be helpful to distinguish these terms and other similar ones like counseling, spiritual direction or guidance and spiritual fathering. But generally, the simpler synonymous approach works practically.

While these terms can and should be used synonymously most of the time, for veterans who walk in these kinds of relationships for years, it can be helpful to distinguish between them. One way of doing that follows, moving from a relatively lighter and less committed relationship to a fuller and more committed relationship.

1. **The pastored life** is a life that is intentionally accompanied, equipped and enabled to experience Jesus’ pastoral care directly and indirectly through a leader and a small group committed to our lives and ministry (in that order).

Connected to this, **pastoring of pastors** is the support of pastors and their spouses, giving them spiritual covering and helping them grow personally and ministerially. This can happen through small groups meeting together regularly, providing mutual support and care, with the possibility of accountability.

1. **Mentor**. 1. Person who directs, counsels, teaches or guides in a personalized and individualized way. 2. Looking more deeply, someone who believes in another person, seeing beyond what they themselves perceive, supporting and nurturing them, challenging and enabling them to fulfill their potential within the eternal purposes of God.

This is usually one-on-one, though it can be done in trios or quartets with several people mentoring someone else. It normally involves helping another person mature in Christ and grow in ministerial or professional competency. The basic pattern is that of supporting and enabling the mentee in his growth goals. The agenda is mentee driven. He defines where he wants to grow and how he wants to grow, considering the mentor’s ideas as options. Brainstorming that leads to an action plan is a common tool. Growth is intentional, though if new topics are considered in each meeting, the apparent gains from a given meeting may disappear.

1. **Coach**: a person responsible for training another, or in other words, providing another with needed knowledge, abilities, and techniques. Originally the word comes from the sports context, but today it is often used to refer to someone who evaluates, directs, and betters the performance of corporate business executives. It is used to refer to an individualized consulting service, well-advertised in the business world.

This focuses on intentional growth both personally and ministerially (professionally) with an emphasis on the ministerial/professional. It can include specific tools such as the Intentional Growth Tool with a focus on reproducing oneself in others – one’s team, pastoral group or disciples. This tool has a table that includes the possibility of reporting on discipling/multiplication in more than one generation.

1. **Discipling**. Discipling is enabling others to more fully follow Jesus.[[1]](#footnote-1) It can be horizontal (mutual) or vertical (a discipler leading); one-on-one or in a small group.[[2]](#footnote-2) It includes the above three roles with more proactive action on the discipler’s part. Disciplers both enable and lead disciples. They listen to God in favor of the disciples. They seek to prayerfully discern where the disciples need to grow. They commonly propose an area, step or action for the disciples to do. For more mature disciples, this can include asking them to prayerfully consider and listen to God for His input. This is a step beyond brainstorming but like brainstorming isn’t imposed. Disciples are ultimately still responsible for their choices. However, if someone consistently chooses to not move in directions the discipler is indicating, God is probably not joining them together.

While mentoring and coaching are commonly more one-on-one, discipling needs to be a solid mix of small group and one-on-one. Unless there are unusual individual needs, the mix will commonly include majoring on the small group and minoring on the one-on-one. The advantages of one-on-one versus small group mentoring or discipling are discussed in another article.

Ideally, a leader will know when and how to flex their leadership style according to the disciples’ or mentees’ needs, competency and maturity.

Other words commonly used as synonymous with pastoring of pastors, mentoring, coaching and discipling are briefly commented below. They are all facets of the same diamond, each having a particular focus.

**Advisor**: a specialist in a certain field who directs others that want to work in that field or gives insight to another based on their specialty.

**Consultant**: a specialist, usually paid to enable a leader and his company or department in achieving higher productivity.

**Counselor**: a specialist, normally trained in how to understand or help people, that helps them in solving personal problems, be it of the past or present. In the business world, sometimes a counselor helps professionals in times of major change, difficult decisions, or simply anxieties common to high-level executives.

**Pastoral leader**: a leader who has a certain spiritual authority and is responsible for the well-being of others’ lives and ministries. Their authority is usually not so much organizational as informal and relational, in the Spirit, occurring through interdependence and not imposition. It can happen in the context of pastoring of pastors, leading a pastoral team, or a cell or family group in the local church.

**Spiritual director**: Someone who purposefully helps a seeker (the directed person) to be attentive to [the Lord’s personal communication](https://www.omvusa.org/blog/how-to-discern-gods-will/) to him or her. The seeker grows in their ability to listen and respond to God, their intimacy with Him, and their grace in living in keeping with God’s purposes. The seeker is committed to growing in a disciplined life of prayer and meets regularly with an experienced guide who is mature in his or her faith.

**Spiritual Father/Mother**: this is a relatively rare gift from God of a spiritual connection of deep love, commitment, and intimacy (cf. 1Co 4.15). This often flows from bringing a person to Christ or bringing them through a major trauma. The spiritual father or mother raises up and directs someone with divine grace. As a result of great affinity, the follower tends to naturally and deeply take on the spiritual father’s or mother’s vision and values without great effort.

**It can help to distinguish a pastoral leader from a ministerial leader.** The former directs the follower in the areas of his/her spiritual and family life, emotional health, and priorities. The latter is usually a specialist in a specific area of ministry. In practice, most pastors and leaders discover they need mentors in various areas, since no one is omni-competent. It can be very helpful to have both a pastoral mentor and a ministry mentor. At certain times, when wanting to grow in a specific area, it helps to find a mentor who is a specialist in that area.

In summary, the specific term that is used isn’t as important as the function of growing intentionally in Christlikeness. At the same time, each term is a facet of intentional growth. Specific facets may help growth in specific ways.

For further discussion of various aspects of definitions see the following documents in [www.pastoringpastors.org](http://www.pastoringpastors.org) clicking on the link on the upper right regarding articles, tools and resources, opening 1. Disciple-Making / 1. Decade of Disciple-Making / 0. Intro to the Decade of Disciple-Making / Definitions and Descriptions.

1. Key Disciple-Making Definitions and Descriptions
2. Discipleship vs. Disciple-Making – Bobby Harrington
3. Pastoring, Mentoring, Coaching and Discipling (and other terms) (this document).
4. Mentoring models and styles
1. A disciple is a follower of Jesus who is intentionally growing to become more like Him, extending his mission to others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ideal may be a combination of small group with one-on-one incorporated into that and a combination of a discipler proactively helping others, but doing so in ways that involve everyone helping everyone grow, including the leader. Whatever model we teach, we need to be careful to affirm the value of all four of these dimensions: one-on-one, small group, horizontal and vertical. Once we exclude or depreciate any of those dimensions we will end up with a partial rather than a full model and may exclude others who value and practice the dimension we have excluded. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)